

COUP D'ETAT: A RESPONSE

by
Christopher Sharrett

Ken Thompson's recent (vol. 5, #4) critique of the application of the term "coup d'etat" to the John Kennedy assassination strikes me as deeply problematical.

First, I want to say that I have no special investment in the term Thompson addresses. It may well be that Peter Dale Scott's notion of the assassination as an "internal adjustment" rather than a coup may serve us more accurately, since it seems to me that the assassination represents internecine warfare within state power, not a radical overthrow of a regime. The term "coup d'etat" has been applied rather loosely by assassination researchers over the years to suggest a strike at the state from within the state: put more simply, many researchers have concluded that the assassination of Kennedy was a state crime carried out and protected by the state. In this sense, I do not think that the term coup d'etat is misapplied and is indeed amply supported by the weight of the evidence. Thompson is obviously opposed to such a view of the assassination. Rather than support the lone-nut narratives, Thompson opts for a small-scale conspiracy involving Oswald and a few people unidentified either in their person or in the forces and interests they represent. Thompson argues that the cover-up flowed from the state's need to protect itself from embarrassment and to protect also the U.S. from conflicts with other nations. I would argue that this representation of the crime, one obviously quite similar to that advanced by G. Robert Blakey and the final report of the HSCA, is far more implausible than the view Thompson wishes to debunk.

Thompson marshals definitions of coup d'etat from a number of sources and applies them, in aggregate, more or less as a universal in dismissing the assassination as a state crime. Parenthetically, it strikes me that some of these definitions, at least as Thompson quotes them, are troublesome. His examples address chiefly Third World coups, and most of the authorities he quotes look to internal economic instability as the chief cause of Third World coups in the postwar era. This approach strikes

me as disingenuous; it overlooks the role of U.S. interventionism in the destabilizing of Third World economies and in the overthrow of governments through support of military juntas and the like. The destruction of the Allende government in Chile contains both aspects: Kissinger and the CIA wanted to "make the economy scream," then use physical force in the destruction of Allende's plurality government. Similar models can be found in the various Latin American and Asian nations to which Thompson's sources allude. My criticism of the assertions of Thompson's sources may be a bit off the point, but I think the same is true for Thompson's use of these definitions in a discussion of the Kennedy murder; many assassination researchers have long noted that the murder indeed does not correspond to conventional notions of a coup d'etat. There was no period of massive bloodletting following the assassination, and the transition in government appeared smooth, at least on the surface. A bloody, Third World style coup would have been intolerable in the postwar U.S., particularly to the state and private sector authority that worked vigorously to preserve public quiescence (a return to 30's activism was unthinkable) and acquiescence to the consumer state and Pentagon-based economic system. But the Kennedy period was far from a seamless, smooth moment that segued easily into the Johnson and Nixon years. We now know that Kennedy was involved in significant internecine conflicts. He was unwilling to back fully the Bay of Pigs operation, a plan that was designed to fail without direct U.S. military incursion. Kennedy was also very alone in his position during the Cuban Missile Crisis—almost all sectors of state power (as documented in the new book *The Kennedy Tapes*) argued for a military assault on Cuba, while Kennedy called for a blockade of the island. Thompson ignores this framework, but I suggest it provides important instruction to us regarding the essential dynamics of the Kennedy murder.

Thompson acknowledges the concept of the Kennedy assassination as a "non-traditional" coup, but dismisses it very quickly with a comment from Steven David, who asserts that..."In societies where people are mobilized, involved, and powerful, there is not much chance of a coup occurring against the wishes of the people." Here is the rub. Thompson seems to assume that such a notion applies to the American population of the early 1960's. At that time, about 60% of the eligible electorate was registered to vote for one of the two big proper-

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tied parties; since the 60's, that figure is often at or under 50%. In the postwar years (1945-1965), the U.S. population was highly conformist and conservative, a perspective nurtured by television, consumerism, and a lack of alternative political activity, with increasing attacks on trade unionism and left politics from HUAC, McCarthyism, and the political culture in general. The American channels of discourse were rather few, and of a highly propagandistic, pro-business, pro-government bent. Numerous assassination researchers have entered into close analysis of the American media after their discovery of the obfuscation and outright lying by these media concerning the essential facts of the Kennedy assassination. I would argue that the American public was hardly mobilized and politically aware in the early 1960's. On the contrary, the success of the assassination cover-up resides to a large extent in the political sloth and complacency of the nation then and now. I would amplify this by suggesting that the key concern is not the success of the cover-up, which has long since collapsed in the view of most people, but rather the failure of the nation to organize itself politically around this issue. In debunking the assassination as a coup d'état, Thompson asks us to speculate on a variety of questions that we can never fully answer, but which have been intelligently addressed by a number of critics of the Warren Commission (how other gunmen entered the TSBD and other buildings in Dealey Plaza, how escape was effectuated, what back-up plans were in place). Thompson seems to be of the view that this overcomplicated assassination plot came off without a hitch, if one accepts the reasoning of the assassination researchers he criticizes. On the contrary, the plot of Nov. 22 was full of errors; other gunmen were seen, evidence contradictory of the official narrative was discovered. The issue is that discourse about this evidence has been largely foreclosed. The full exposure of the crimes of state power assumes a genuinely adversarial press and political culture, which I suggest we do not enjoy. On the other hand, we have witnessed any number of exposures and confessions, many motivated by a desire to exploit the event for commercial gain and/or muddy the waters of public knowledge.

Thompson offers the rather hoary and unwarranted assumption about the assassination plot requiring a cast of thousands. He suggests such a conspiracy would have been difficult to contain, would have posed logistical problems, would have produced confessions, etc. An

operation by the intelligence community, including and perhaps especially a large one, functions on a need-to-know basis, with each link in the chain not necessarily having any general knowledge of the overall operation. A variety of writers from Victor Marchetti to Philip Agee to Fletcher Prouty to Peter Dale Scott note that in the postwar years an intelligence apparatus was put in place to serve whatever function the state determined necessary, from providing provocateurs to infiltrate the left to assisting political murder. Guy Banister's New Orleans operations could be sufficiently tweaked that Oswald could be moved from street agitator to murder patsy without Banister fully apprehending his own role. The rightist groupings with which Oswald was affiliated were not created solely for the sake of framing Oswald; they were in-place operations set up to assist the Cold War enterprise. But instead of speculating on each and every logistical issue of the assassination that we can never fully know in detail, let us talk about what we do know, and which points strictly to the assassination as state crime.

Vincent Salandria has long observed that government complicity in the assassination was available to the public on the day of the murder (this complicity was amply documented by Fidel Castro from his reading of international cables and presented in a speech to the Cuban people the day after the assassination). Salandria watched the events of Nov. 22 unfold on television with his then brother-in-law, Harold Feldman. Salandria observed that on that day, and even for weeks thereafter, the local and national media reporting the case offered evidence of conspiracy. We were informed through our media that at least three rifles were found; that the President was fired upon from what appeared to be two vantage points; that gun smoke was smelled at ground level; that witnesses saw or heard assassins in a tall building as well behind an area framed by a picket fence; that according to Dallas doctors Gov. Connally was hit in the back while President Kennedy was hit in the throat and in the temple; that a bystander was hit; that a suspect was chased into a railroad yard; that a suspect was detained in Fort Worth; that a suspect was arrested in a Dallas suburb.

All of this evidence could have been entirely wrong. The Dallas doctors could have been too rushed or unprofessional to distinguish entry wounds from exit wounds (despite their thousands of hours of collective experience treating bullet wounds); the witnesses could have been panicked and confused; the police (even the

combat veterans among them) too rushed and inexperienced to determine the source of gunshots; the police (even the gun hobbyists among them) too careless to properly identify weapons; the media too competitive to wait before filing a story. All of this conspiratorial evidence could have been mistaken, but this is what was available to us and to our government at that moment. An honest and guiltless government would have kept its options open, Salandria has argued, and investigated the case. Instead, the authorities, at the highest level of state power, shut down their options and all debate immediately, informing us that the assassin was captured, was alone guilty, and the case closed in the face of overwhelming contradictory evidence.

We also know other information. We know that Oswald was a low-level intelligence functionary under almost constant intelligence supervision. We know that the shooting feat imputed to him was well-nigh physically impossible. We know that virtually all the physical evidence used against Oswald (subsequent to his murder while in custody) is of questionable provenance. We know that a substantial part of the forensic record of the crime was destroyed—this record was in the hands of state power. And we know, thanks to investigators such as Jim Garrison and Gaeton Fonzi, that there was no legitimate forensic investigation and that CIA officials participated in the assassination. Fonzi's revelations about the role of David Atlee Phillips in the framing of Oswald seem to me incontrovertible. David Atlee Phillips was not a lone ranger participating in a "renegade" plan against the head of state. Phillips was a high-ranking officer in a government organization. If he was involved in a renegade plot disapproved by his superiors, it is difficult to explain his promotion to Director of Western Hemisphere Operations for CIA, a position from which he would continue to authorize state violence.

Thompson argues that the immediate closing of the case was based on governmental embarrassment and the need to guard against world war (both?). One of his sources is the highly questionable Jack Anderson, and not an Anderson column at that but a rather grubby Anderson syndicated TV show. Thompson quotes Anderson: "President Johnson felt, rightly or wrongly, that the American people could not be told this [Johnson's alleged suspicion that Castro killed Kennedy]. They would demand retaliation against Cuba which.. .could have meant WWII."

I suggest that such a rationale, in the 60's and in the 90's, is patently absurd. This narrative has become the chief fallback argument of the post-Oliver Stone years, when there is no longer much enthusiasm for the "Mafia Did It" verdict.

We now know that there was not one shred of evidence linking Cuba or the Soviet Union to the assassination, and U.S. authorities knew this rather promptly. On the contrary, both Cuba and the Soviet Union evidenced considerable apprehension over the events of Dallas. More important, exactly how and why would the American people "demand retaliation" for the assassination, thus incinerating the planet over the death of a President? As shocked as the public was by the assassination, Kennedy was at that moment not especially high in opinion polls (due in part to the scuttlebutt about Kennedy's equivocation on Cold War policy), and there was evidence only of public paralysis, not of any public mobilization. For over twelve years enormous sectors of the population would petition government to end the Vietnam incursion: for the most part this petitioning would fall on deaf ears, even as the nation divided itself in a manner not witnessed since the Civil War. And yet somehow the public was seen at the time of the assassination as able to ask for and get instant "retaliation" from its government against a foreign power, even after this same public lived through the terror of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Perhaps the rulers of this nation for a time wanted to attack Cuba, using the assassination as an excuse, until attention was diverted elsewhere, viz. the huge corporate boondoggle that was the war on Southeast Asia. But the idea of the assassination coverup as in the interests of the American people is less condescending than it is merely risible. We are asked to accept the notion that the burning of the initial autopsy protocol, the rigorous eschewing of adversarial process, the leading and intimidation of witnesses in non-public proceedings, and the use of the mass media to make the various contradictory assassination narratives cohere, were all done in our best interest. The arrogance of this logic would make Orwell pop-eyed.

The small-scale conspiracy that Thompson supports (Oswald and some like-minded person; Oswald and sectors of the Mob; Oswald and some Cuban exiles) would have caused no problem for state power and would have been revealed rather quickly. An exposure of such a conspiracy would have only helped to relegitimate state power by offering a conspiracy por-

trayed as an unfortunate aberration unrepresentative of American interests and goals. Such a small-scale scenario has indeed been hinted at but never developed in any detail. As mentioned, it was used by state power (Blakey and HSCA) at a time post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, when the state was in serious need of re-legitimation. The scenario was not developed because there is nothing to develop. There was enthusiasm for such a narrative only insofar as it temporarily assisted state interest by giving the public what it seemed to want while obscuring the fact that the execution of Kennedy was contiguous within rather than aberrant to state interest.

Thompson remarks that an execution by gunfire strikes him as a "clanky and clamorous" way to proceed with a sophisticated governmental plot. But gunplay has been the preferred mode of discourse of this country since its inception, very much so for its state authority; and a lone-nut gun-fancying Communist seems to me more plausible as an official explanation of political murder than, say, a lone-nut pastry chef in the White House (Thompson at one point asks why Kennedy wasn't simply dispatched by poison).

Several times in his essay Thompson uses the term "high cabal." He imputes this term to researchers who believe the Kennedy assassination was a governmental crime. "High cabal" gives the assassination conspiracy a fantastical and arcane aspect, which may be Thompson's strategy in using this language.

There have indeed been a number of arcane events in recent history. In 1942, in a suburb of Berlin a group of Nazi state officials met around a large conference table in perfect James Bond fashion. Over drinks and a buffet lunch, they finalized plans for the extermination of the Jews of Europe. To this day there are those who argue that such plans never happened. Only the activism of the Jewish population and other people of good will has brought the full dimension of the Holocaust to light. I suggest that with the Holocaust and the understanding of state authority that its lessons afford us, the execution of one politician by his own kind is rather small potatoes. With the Holocaust, all bets are off for humanity.

But the murder of Kennedy was no more arcane or cabalistic than the U.S. government's "Indian removal" policies of the last century, its various Red Scares and persecution of dissidents, its marginalization and murder of racial minorities in our cities, and its murder of more than 15 million in colonialist, imperialist wars since

1945.

The context of the Kennedy execution is illuminated in two articles recently reprinted in a monograph by Raymond Marcus. One article, written by Arthur Krock for the New York Times not quite two months (Oct. 3, 1963) before the assassination of Kennedy, speaks of an "intra-administration war" during the Kennedy period. Krock quotes a governmental source who informs him that the CIA's growth was "likened to a malignancy." The source says that "twice the CIA flatly refused to carry out instructions from Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge." Most alarmingly, the source says that "if the U.S. ever experiences a coup to overthrow the government, it will come from the CIA and not the Pentagon," and that "the agency represents total power and unaccountability to anyone."

The second article is by Harry Truman. It was printed in one edition only of The Washington Post on Dec. 22, 1963, exactly one month after the assassination. To my knowledge, no Truman scholar has ever alluded to the piece. In this article Truman says "For some time I have been disturbed by the way CIA has been diverted from its original assignment. It has become an operational and at times a policy-making arm of the government." Throughout much of the piece, Truman's language remains obscure, but he is clearly deeply troubled. no doubt in part because he signed the CIA into existence with the National Security Act of 1947.

The Kennedy assassination flows from the internal state bickering actually discussed for a moment in our mainstream press. It is about the ongoing state and private sector conflicts that are the nature of the gangsterism of the political-economic order under which we live. The attempt by concerned people to educate others on the dynamics of the Kennedy murder as a way of building a more equitable society is not served by narratives that try to portray the assassination as a bizarre, marginal aberration unrepresentative of American state ideology.

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JOHNSON AND HOOVER TALKED

by

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Did Lyndon B. Johnson and J. Edgar Hoover believe that John F. Kennedy was shot at by someone other than Lee Harvey Oswald?

The official story of the Dealey Plaza ambush impressed on the public from Day One was that, Oswald shot Kennedy from behind from the "sniper's nest" on an upper floor of the Texas State Book Depository. Of course, medical personnel at Dallas' Parkland hospital saw what they thought were Kennedy's frontal wounds and a blowout in the back of his head; and attending physicians certified the cause of death as a shot to the left temple. Initial news reports from Parkland reflected these findings. But, hard on the heels of the announcement of the President's death, the news media was flooded with information implicating Oswald and the book depository; the initial medical findings were repudiated by the official investigation; and the official story line was swallowed hook, line and sinker by the news media. Dissidents were disparaged or otherwise disciplined by the authorities and their allies.

But the official account of the assassination does not tell us what top officials believed about the case. Evidence that the official line diverged from what President Johnson and FBI Director Hoover themselves believed is captured on the White House tapes recording some of President Johnson's conversations. This evidence is now readily accessible in the compilation of the 1963-1964 tape transcripts edited with commentary by Michael J. Beschloss. (1)

Consider Johnson and Hoover's discussion of the shooting in Dealey Plaza as recorded on the afternoon of Nov. 29, 1963, one week after the assassination. The discussion opens with a review of candidates for the presidential commission on the assassination but turns to the assassination itself when Johnson asks about the number of shots and whether any were aimed at him.

Interestingly, both Johnson and Hoover refer to the shooter(s) as "they." However, their use of the plural pronoun could be in the colloquial sense of individual(s) indefinite in gender and number. Nevertheless, their

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