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DIANE REHM: Thirty years after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, many Americans mark that dreadful day as a turning point, a day after which the world as we knew it was changed forever. In fact, the early '60s were a time of massive civil rights battles and even the possibility of nuclear war. But until that moment when the President was pronounced dead, optimism had been both a word and a spirit, used freely with reference to our personal lives and the future of the nation. November 22, 1963 ushered in a new era, one characterized by suspicion, cynicism and mistrust of government institutions.

Last week Washington Post staff writers Walter Pincus and George Lardner, Jr. wrote a three-part series examining the latest documents made available from previously closed files on the assassination. These documents indicate how U.S. leaders made decisions that had the effect of deepening the suspicion that afflicts us today. They're here in the studio with me. Also, historian Michael Beschloss, author of "The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960 to 1963."

We're going to devote our entire hour to a conversation with these three gentlemen, and we'll take your calls as well. Join us on 885-8850.

Good morning to all of you....

Michael Beschloss, you wrote a recent Newsweek essay entitled "The Day That Changed America." Talk about how the assassination of John F. Kennedy specifically changed America.

MICHAEL BESCHLOSS: Well, the first thing is that people tend to think that Kennedy's assassination changed American government policy; that if Kennedy had lived, he would have taken, for instance, a very different road from Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam. We might have been spared that tragedy. And also that policy changed

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in other ways under Johnson from that it might have been had Kennedy served a second term.

Another way it changed was that 1963 was really the high solstice of American dominance in the world and American power. We've never really regained that point again. And the assassination is something of a moment when that is seen to have changed.

Also, in the years since 1963 we have a good deal of reason to be a lot more skeptical of what our government tells us. That was not true before Dallas.

And I think the final thing is that Kennedy's assassination was the kind of thing that until '63 did not really happen in America. Americans are by nature rationale people. They feel that there is a logical explanation for everything. The fact that Kennedy could be assassinated for reasons that to this day remain very murky, in a way, ushered the United States into the old world, into the old world of Europe, a world of much more suspicion than America had been.

REHM: Walter Pincus, did the manner in which the assassination itself was handled and investigated somehow contribute, then, to that whole perception?

WALTER PINCUS: Well, I think it helped a great deal, in part because the investigation was so successful in the beginning, of isolating Lee Harvey Oswald and tying him to the actual shooting. The shooting of Lee Oswald, however, was -- at that point, it became something different. And you could then never prove that he actually did it and did it alone. You probably would have had a difficult time doing it anyway. But that laid the groundwork for what then happened later. And that is that the government wanted to continue on and move on. There was a new President and the world was sort of waiting for us to act. We had to prove that there was stability. And in the interests of having stability and sort of removing doubts from the public mind and the world mind that either the Soviets or the Cubans were involved, they rather quickly tried to close things down: the FBI, the CIA, and then the Warren Commission.

REHM: But what...

PINCUS: And in that gap was left the sort of soil out of which all these conspiracy theories then grew.

REHM: George, was this rush to put it behind us and move on, as Walter has just said, to get on with the business of governing, not only this country but making our continued impact in the world, did that perhaps push us to act too quickly in regard to finding

conclusions, to reaching those conclusions and to making sure that the American public agreed with those conclusions?

GEORGE LARDNER, JR: Yes. I think it promoted the very thing that officials were trying to prevent. By rushing to close the case, they left angles unchecked and suspicions not investigated. So that in the long run they created the very doubts about the investigation, about what happened, that they were trying to cure and resolve. They took, I think, an almost "Here no evil. See no evil" attitude once Ruby killed Oswald. They said, "Okay. Let's shut it down." Because, I think, there was apprehension about what they might find, and so they didn't want to find it.

REHM: Michael, there was initial fear that the public would actually believe that the Soviets were directly involved, and there was a great deal of concern. Even though, apparently, U.S. and allied intelligence investigation said something else.

BESCHLOSS: That's right. You know, once it was revealed that Oswald was someone who had defected to the Soviet Union in 1959 and then come back -- that was something that was very unusual, needless to say, in 1963 -- that that might lead people to believe that he had assassinated Kennedy on behalf of Nikita Khrushchev, the head of the Soviet Union, or Fidel Castro, because he had ties to Cuba. And as a result, the Johnson Administration was very eager to make sure that people were calmed about this. Because if they were not calm about it, they would have demanded retaliation against Cuba or the Soviet Union.

We look at the conversations that Lyndon Johnson had privately during the first week to ten days after he took the presidency. Over and over again he's saying, "I want to get this thing," essentially, "papered over. Because I don't want to start a nuclear war that could lead to the deaths of tens of millions of people.

REHM: There's also an emphasis that both of you point out in your pieces in the Washington Post, an emphasis on Oswald as madman rather than Oswald as conspirator, George.

LARDNER: Yes. I think his early years show, you know, that he was a very unstable individual, arrogant, very preoccupied with his own importance, or sense of importance, in the world. At the same time, he was not entirely friendless. And the associations he had, I think, were pushed to the back of the bus, as far as any investigation was concerned.

REHM: But there's also a concern on the part of high government officials that Oswald appear as that madman, rather than as anything which might have implied conspiracy, be brought forward. Am I right about that, Walter?

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PINCUS: Oh, no. They isolated very quickly on Oswald, but they had a couple reasons to do it. It's not just trying to close it down quickly to satisfy the need to keep the public calm. But also, both the FBI and the CIA had vulnerabilities, themselves. Not that they were involved in the assassination per se, but that there were failures in their own activities. Either, in the case of the FBI, in being closer to understanding what Oswald was about. They had had some earlier information from the CIA on what he had done in Mexico City that should have encouraged them to have greater interest. Not that they saw him as an assassin, but they saw him as somebody that they should have paid closer attention to. They were in the process of looking into his activities. They just sort of let it drag along.

The CIA was in the process of a plot, the second of a series of plots, to kill Castro. And although today they say that they saw no connection between that plotting and the assassination, they clearly had to see it a different way.

And so those kind of cover-ups took place and they, again, helped people think something was amiss.

I think there's one other thing which I think you can't leave out, and that is that this provided -- it's a terrible word to use, in my own mind. This provided a playpen for people to raise doubts for their own personal reasons. And that is not just financial reasons, but political reasons. Some people are just on the outs and decided to take a certain view of what went on and play that up.

And with the public really, if you were there in that time, really upset about what happened and really not thinking conspiracy -- I was here at the time and covering the White House, as a young reporter, and we were not thinking conspiracy. We were not thinking anybody else but Oswald. We were thinking about this enormous loss to the country and a President coming on who was totally different than John Kennedy. John Kennedy had defeated Kefauver, Humphrey, Johnson to get the nomination, defeated Richard Nixon in the campaign. A whole new generation came here. And one of the things that happened is that, almost seriatim, we got Humphrey -- we got Johnson, we got Humphrey and we got Nixon. And it was stunning. And people were much more concerned about the politics and what had happened to the country than they were looking for a conspiracy or a plot.

BESCHLOSS: They were.

And I think the other thing is that it's become sort of a blank slate on which people project their own obsessions. You've got people who connect the Kennedy assassination to almost everything that's happened under the sun, all the way through Iran-Contra and more recent episodes. And to an extent, that really

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does show you more about the person involved, sometimes, than it does about the assassination itself.

REHM: [Reintroduction of guests]

I'd be interested in your perceptions, Mr. Lardner, as to whether you learned anything new by the most recently released documents regarding the assassination.

LARDNER: New in detail, in precision of what was known before. But in broad brush, no, nothing yet.

But you've got to remember, the production of documents under this new law that was passed in response to Oliver Stone's movie has not been very good. Only about 10 to 20 percent of the documents covered by the law have been sent over to the National Archives. It's going to take, apparently, a couple of years to get it all over there, decades more to read it. You'll get new detail. I doubt if you'll get any smoking gun. But people will keep looking.

REHM: Is there still frustration being experienced by those who are and were hoping that these documents would have been released a lot sooner? There was an article last Friday talking about the fact that there are mountains of material that have still not been released.

Why is that, Walter?

PINCUS: Well, this is part of the bureaucracy that creates the problem. The documents we read over the summer, and to some degree read in the last few months, raise real questions as to why on earth they weren't released years ago. And just the lack of production creates just another whole sort of development in this thing.

The FBI has hundreds of thousands of pages released of their investigation but now they still have more to come. Why are they holding them back? It lets people create, you know, fears or doubts that there is something that people know.

I mean the polls show that only 10 percent of the people think Oswald acted alone and 80 percent of the people think the government is hiding something from them. And the government is keeping things. But generally it's their own mistakes, or they have this -- particularly the intelligence and the investigative field think that they have rules, that if they allow this kind of information out it's going to be used to make them release information about other activities that have nothing to do with the assassination. But it creates a problem and an opening for people to question whether the government is honest or not.

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REHM: Michael, as a historian, you must be frustrated by that kind of withholding.

BESCHLOSS: Yes. Every scholar would like to see everything that is actually possible to be released. And it's very hard to see how the government can argue that very many of these things are left that can damage national security.

But you know, this business with the documents is so strange. I can remember when I was a child, when the assassination occurred, and reading about the fact that the autopsy photographs of John Kennedy would not be released until his two living descendants were no longer alive. And I can remember at the age of eight thinking of that as sort of one definition of something I will never see, since his children were younger than I was, and therefore it probably would be released after I died, myself. And these autopsy photographs were smuggled out and put on national television in 1988. I think it's still not known exactly how that happened.

But it gives you a little bit of a sense of the atmosphere, which is that, as well as scholars who are eager to get this for perhaps, you know, more elevated reasons, there is an entire industry that is pulling and hauling and generating great pressure for this kind of openness.

REHM: As far as you are concerned, is the sort of obsessiveness about Kennedy's assassination justified, considering what we know and don't know? I mean some people have said, "Why not just forget this? Why not put it behind us?" And as I said earlier, I think, as a population, we're divided into those who think, "Let it alone. Forget it. Put it behind us," and those who want to continue to investigate year after year.

Michael?

BESCHLOSS: In general, my instinct is that, overall, it's a sign of health. I mean in a democracy, to be healthy, you have to have a lot of people who are willing to speak truth to power and be critical of what they're told by their government, especially because in the last 30 years, Lord knows, they've been given so many reasons to mistrust what they hear.

So, in that large sense, I think it's a good thing.

I think where it begins to get a little bit counterproductive is when you have people, as Walter suggested earlier, who are doing this for motives that are perhaps not of the highest and who play on these national doubts and exploit this kind of thing for their own political or, in some cases, financial purposes. And that's where there's a very difficult dividing line between those who believe that there are legitimate and troubling questions raised by

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the assassination and by the associations of Oswald and Ruby. Those can't be denied.

But then, on the other hand, to take the rather ambiguous evidence of all that and escalate it into a theory that the Cubans killed Kennedy through Oswald, or there were three marksmen in Dealy Plaza, and the like.

REHM: George and Walter, did you begin with similar views, different views, differing views? Where'd you begin, where'd you end up?

George?

LARDNER: Well, I began with a longstanding belief that Oswald had killed Kennedy, but longstanding doubts or uncertainty about whether he acted alone. I think that's still an open question and one that probably will never be answered, because Ruby did it to us. He closed the door.

And I guess that's still where I come out.

REHM: And you, Walter?

PINCUS: That's one reason why we had an interesting time writing it. I sort of believed the Warren Commission and still do. I think Oswald did it alone and I don't think there is any real evidence that there was a plot.

What's interesting about it is that -- and I had never really studied it very much until this last four or five month period. The reason you can keep it going as long as you can is because, in fact, there's more information out there about it than anybody could ever really read by himself. The idea that not everything is out yet. I mean they just released 130,000-some-odd pages of CIA documents. It took George and I two weeks to read 23,000 pages that were released last year and that nobody had really looked at. And now -- and the first day the 100-some-odd thousand were released, the press was all over it, a lot of cameras, photographs. There've been stories about how there's nothing new. And nobody could say whether there's, quote, nothing new in it because nobody's read it all. And there's more to come.

So, as George says, it'll go on and on.

But there's more information about this than, I think, about almost any other thing that's happened in government.

REHM: I thought it was interesting to learn, as I did reading your pieces, that there was great reluctance on the part of Earl Warren to even serve as part of that commission, much less to chair it.

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Michael, was that something that clearly made a difference, as far as the formulation of that group to look at the evidence?

BESCHLOSS: I am a great admirer of Earl Warren's career, and I think his judgment was generally impeccable. And his judgment in that he should not get involved with this was probably pretty impeccable too, in retrospect. Because he, as a canny politician -- he had been Governor of California, had run for Vice President with Thomas Dewey in 1948 -- he was rather astute and he knew that Lyndon Johnson wanted to bring him in not merely as the head of an impartial investigation that could follow every path wherever it may lead. Johnson was very clear when he brought Warren into his office. He said, "I want you to lead this investigation, not because I'm seeking the truth but because the American people have to be calmed down. We're in danger of a nuclear war. Only you, Mr. Chief Justice, can do that."

And Warren at first refused. Johnson used his famous powers of persuasion and said, "I saw you put on a uniform in World War I and you did not refuse to serve your country, and how can you refuse now?"

By now I assume that Johnson's nose was perhaps a half an inch from Warren's. And Warren finally consented.

In retrospect, historically -- tragically for Warren -- he will probably be remembered by the American people, more than anything else, for the fact that he led this very flawed commission in this very flawed investigation.

REHM: George?

LARDNER: That reminds me of a little incident where Bill Alexander, who had been the prosecutor in Dallas -- he would have prosecuted Oswald and he ended up prosecuting Ruby. He came up to the Warren Commission -- I think this was in early '64 -- and he was telling Warren how he had seen this "Impeach Earl Warren" poster on the way to the airport, or something like that, and then hastily realized he shouldn't be telling Warren this. So he said, "It was just a very small sign, Mr. Chief Justice."

And Warren replied, "Well, it may be small to you but it's the biggest sign I've ever seen."

REHM: And, of course, one of the people who was very influential in bringing in the idea of a commission to immediately study the assassination was Deputy Attorney General Nick Katzenbach.

I guess one of the things that sort of distressed me the most was the memorandum, perhaps that a lot of other people had already seen but it was the first time I had seen it, a memorandum from

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Katzenbach, in the files, that says, quote, "The public must be satisfied that Oswald was the assassin, that he did not have confederates who are still at large, and that the evidence was such that he would have been convicted at trial. Speculation about Oswald's motives ought to be cut off. We should have some basis for rebutting the thought that this was a Communist conspiracy. Or, as the Iron Curtain press is saying, a right-wing conspiracy to blame it on the Communists."

In other words, while I certainly understand the concern about the public's fear of war or the public fears of the Communists somehow doing this and taking over the world in the process, doesn't that sort of direct the way the investigation is going to go, when it comes from the Deputy Attorney General, Mr. Pincus?

PINCUS: Well, I think at that point -- and that was only three days after the assassination but the day after Oswald had been shot, himself. In fact, Nick Katzenbach had been thinking along those lines almost from the day of the assassination and that he pretty well had formulated that in his mind and began a campaign to convince the President, Lyndon Johnson, that they had to do this.

The question that arises is his motive and the motive of a whole group of people in government around him who felt exactly the same way. And I think they were operating the way the Establishment -- quote, Establishment -- always does operate. Which is, they make up their own mind, based on what they think is the best evidence that they have, and then they think, in this case, and I'm sure in the case of Nick Katzenbach, "What's the best thing for the country?" And in this case, his judgment was, I think, flawed. But he had used language similar to that the day before.

The head of the FBI was totally convinced, and convinced the President, and I'm sure convinced Katzenbach, that Oswald was the man. They had intelligence that eliminated the notion of foreign powers being directly involved. And the question that's so prevalent now about the Mafia was really not totally on their mind. The people around Robert Kennedy at first considered maybe the Teamsters, but quickly set that one aside.

And as I said before, they were interested in, first and foremost, getting the country running.

REHM: Michael?

BESCHLOSS: And that, oddly enough, was not entirely uncharacteristic of the Kennedy Administration. And in this, Katzenbach was really a product of that period. Because so often during those 2 1/2 years, the Kennedy Administration, especially in foreign policy, had made efforts to conceal certain effects from

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American public opinion in order to keep from exciting Americans and causing them to pressure the Administration to do certain things in the world that it didn't want to do.

Berlin was a very good example. Kennedy very carefully leaned over backwards to keep from getting Americans to demand that the Berlin Wall be torn down when it went up. The settlement of the Cuban Missile Crisis involved, we now know, a secret aspect that, if revealed at the time, would have probably generated great demands that the American government invade Cuba. And even Vietnam. Those partisans of John Kennedy who argue that he would not have done what Johnson did in Vietnam after 1964 argue that Kennedy in '63 was playing something of a double game: in public saying he was committed to the survival of the regime in Saigon, and privately saying "After '64 I'll simply pull out American troops."

REHM: George, you said earlier that you felt that we're probably never going to know who or all the facts involved in this. Does that mean that as you look through all the varieties of theories about who did it, that nothing stands out in your mind as being somehow weight to one theory as opposed to another? You continue to come back to Oswald as the lone gunman and Ruby as his assassin?

LARDNER: Well, I come back to Oswald as the gunman. I'm not sure, as I say, that he was alone or was uninfluenced by anyone. But you can name your flavor when it comes to who else might have been involved with him. That's what we would never know, even if you convince yourself that he had help. He had his foot in so many different places. He wanted to go to Cuba. He, according to one account, offered to kill Kennedy at the Cuban Consulate in Mexico City. He pulled out a gun at the Russian Embassy because he wanted to go back to Moscow. He had been a defector. He had grown up in New Orleans, and people have written all sorts of things about his associations there and suspicions that he might have had ties to organized crime there.

So that you can just name your poison, as far as the theories go.

REHM: Are all of you sort of of the belief that 30 years from now, 60 years from now, these same questions will in fact be on the minds of people, much as there is still a lot of question about Lincoln's assassination?

PINCUS: The reason we did the series is because -- I hate to admit the Oliver Stone movie had such an impact on a generation that wasn't alive when the assassination happened -- we thought it was very important to try to give them some perspective. Because it's clear the movie had a tremendous effect.

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My instincts are, and certainly my hope is, that this thing will die down. It will never be settled. It can't be settled. You have to settle it in your own mind and come to grips with it yourself, if it's important to you. And I think to our generation -- in other words, my generation -- that was here in the '50s and '60s, it is important.

REHM: George?

LARDNER: I think Walter is exactly right. And I'm brought to remember a line from Bob Blakey which parallels something Michael said, too. Bob Blakey was the chief counsel for the House Assassinations Committee, and he said the problem with the assassination is that when you look at it's like a Rorschach test. It tells you more about yourself than it does about the ink blot.

REHM: Michael?

BESCHLOSS: I think the questions will linger, probably, 30 and 50 years from now. But I think the controversy will not be as hot. Twenty or 30 years after Pearl Harbor, for instance, you could get a very sulphurous argument among many in this country over whether Franklin Roosevelt knew about Pearl Harbor in advance and encouraged or was glad about the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor because it allowed him to do what he wanted to do and bring the United States into World War II. The controversy exists today but there are not the same emotions, largely because many of the people who lived at the time of Pearl Harbor are no longer alive now.

That, I think, will be true with the Kennedy assassination as well.

REHM: All right. We have a number of callers....

Good morning, Betty. You're on the air.

BETTY: I would like to simplify things somewhat by making this statement and asking two questions.

One, how can we prevent a similar thing from happening again?

And two, there is just passing reference to Kennedy's brain. That, to me, is unbelievable. Why can't we find out what happened and trace this very important bit of evidence?

And the third thing is, all the papers that are released and everything else have been in the hands of people for years. They can be changed or they can -- portions of it could have been removed. Why can't we just repeat the exact sequence of things that happened on that day physically? I mean physics would dictate

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where a bullet would go if fired at a certain spot into something of certain density.

REHM: All right, Betty. I'll stop you right there.

What about the question of prevention? The notion not only of the Secret Service, with all its might and all its efforts, not being able to protect John F. Kennedy, but also several years later Ronald Reagan?

PINCUS: Well, I think the cold fact is that all the protection in the world cannot stop an individual acting by himself, probably, from assassinating almost any government leader. It's a terrible fact. But this is a democracy. Our leaders appear in public. You have to believe in your society and that people are not going out to do such things.

REHM: And, George, what about the question regarding the President's brain? There have been a lot of theories about that.

LARDNER: Yes, there have been. I'm a little dubious about how much it would show if it appeared. I don't know that it's that important a piece of evidence anymore. There was a lot that was, unfortunately, left in Dallas when he got shot.

BESCHLOSS: And the other part of this is that, as was argued in both the Newsweek and Washington Post pieces, there was an effort by a lot of people, for their own reasons, to inhibit the investigation, beginning with the autopsy. Robert Kennedy, entirely understandably, did not want his brother's brain, other aspects of this crime to be displayed in a museum case somewhere, especially during his children's lifetimes. One theory is that he had the brain disposed of in another way so that this would not happen.

Also, at the time of the autopsy, Robert Kennedy was very worried that there would be revealed John Kennedy's Addison's disease, which was not known at the time. John Kennedy himself and his aides had flatly said in public that he didn't have it. Robert Kennedy was not terribly eager to have his brother demonstrated to have not told the truth during the 48 hours after his assassination. And, understandably, at the time of the autopsy he caused the autopsy, the people who were doing it to sort of stay away from that aspect of things.

REHM: Michael, what about our caller's concern regarding alteration of documents?

BESCHLOSS: Alteration of documents. I think there are a lot of reasons to distrust the investigations, plural, into the Kennedy assassination over the last 30 years. I think alteration of documents is probably one of the least reasons. There has been

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some talk about the documents that were generated by the autopsy and in some other cases. But among all the reasons to be skeptical of the investigations, I would put alteration of documents at about number 452.

REHM: And finally, the other question that has taken up a lot of print and airtime, the whole question of ballistics and the motion of bullets. And she's asking why can't the whole thing be somehow reenacted in such a sequence as to give us a definitive answer as to how many bullets we're talking about.

Walter?

PINCUS: Well, I think it's been reenacted at least three or four times already. And there was unanimity until the very end of the House Assassination Committee investigation, when some of their people came up with the idea that there somehow was a fourth shot. George and I sort of disagree about that.

But what happens is you generally make up your mind, and people have done it ever since.

REHM: When you say you and George disagree about that, where you on that?

And where are you, Walter?

LARDNER: Well, I tend to think that the acoustics experts for the House Assassinations Committee did a good job. There was a subsequent panel of the National Academy of Sciences that disagreed. But as I've said before, I think the acoustics experts for the House Committee had a more plausible argument. They found, or said, that there was a fourth shot from the grassy knoll, that it missed, by their tracing of the echoes and so forth. And I thought their work was quite well done.

REHM: And Walter?

PINCUS: You pick your own panel. I sort of stick with the panel that looked into that. And there's a certain practicality to it all. A shot from the grassy knoll. You really have to be a miserable shot to have missed everything, because that's a broadside shot. It's much closer. So it's just very difficult for me to believe that.

REHM: Barbara, you're on the air.

BARBARA: I wanted to make a point about the long-term consequences of the assassination on the country. William Greider interviewed the President and did a big interview in Rolling Stone, at the end of which the President exploded in anger, apparently, about "Why am I not getting the credit I deserve for all the

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results I produced in the first year of my Administration?" And I'm an ardent supporter of both of the Clintons and I'm wondering the same thing.

And I just was wondering what your panelists would think about the idea of the country being unable to get behind another Kennedyesque-like figure, such as Clinton, and support him openly. It's almost like happens to a child when they lose, you know, a beloved parent. They can't trust again, they can't believe again, etcetera.

REHM: All right, Barbara. Thanks for your call.

Michael?

BESCHLOSS: I think, actually, Bill Clinton has basically benefited from the parallels that he's drawn between himself and both John and Robert Kennedy and the very great impact that that has had on both of his -- both his life and his career.

But I think the caller is absolutely right in the sense that we are now very skeptical and critical of every single leader. I don't think it's an accident that we've had awfully few Presidents elected to a second term since 1963. I think that's going to continue. And I think one reason is that before 1963 we tended to trust Presidents and governments unless given reason to do otherwise, and now it's basically the opposite.

REHM: And it is very much the press's role, or the press sees itself now as doing far more probing investigations of whatever is going on with the President than perhaps was done during JFK's term in office.

BESCHLOSS: And the U.S. Government did that to itself. The Warren Commission did this by not doing as good an investigation as it should have. Johnson officials did it by not being as frank on Vietnam as they should have been with the American people. Richard Nixon did this in Watergate, Reagan and Bush on Iran-Contra.

Every time you have a President who, for short-term political reasons of self-protectiveness, begins to shade the truth in speaking to the American public, it may serve him in the short run but it really is damaging American democracy over the long run. Each time this has happened it has, very rationally and logically, caused the American media to be more and more skeptical of what they hear.

Bill Clinton is, to some extent, the unhappy beneficiary and victim.

REHM: Exactly. Exactly.

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Jane, you're on the air.

JANE: I've been studying the assassination for over 15 years and I have about 20 books on it in my library. And I just recently acquired one by Charles Crenshaw, M.D., who apparently was one of the surgeons in the trauma room when they brought both Kennedy and Oswald in. I won't go into all the details of what he says. Just to summarize, one quotation: "I have wanted to shout to the world that the wounds to Kennedy's head and throat that I examined were caused by bullets that struck him from the front, not the back, as the public has been led to believe."

Crenshaw goes on to describe how Lyndon Johnson personally called Parkland Hospital at the moment that Oswald was dying and demanded to speak to one of the surgeons. And Crenshaw happened to be the one he spoke to. And Johnson insisted that, one way or another, they should extract a deathbed confession out of Oswald.

So I would suggest that, you know, along with Nicholas Katzenbach, the motive force to pin responsibility for the assassination entirely on Oswald came right from the top, from LBJ.

REHM: All right, Jane. Thanks for your call.

George?

LARDNER: Well, I think that the record will show that Dr. Crenshaw never got any such call. There's no evidence that Johnson called Parkland, as Dr. Crenshaw states. My memory is -- and I may be wrong on this -- is that Dr. Crenshaw was not one of the surgeons but was a second-year resident, or something like that, in the room; and also that a number of the other doctors who were there dispute Dr. Crenshaw's statements.

PINCUS: This is also, I think, part of the problem. And that is that since the Warren Commission, and even before the Warren Commission, the only literature that has poured out for almost 30 years has been literature questioning, raising questions, and in some cases just going off the deep end, of people writing all sorts of things.

I mean right after the movie -- and the movie is outrageous in terms of what it makes up. The movie, in effect, pins the blame on the CIA and President Johnson for what took place and has made up language and avoids a lot of the evidence. And a lot of the books have done the same thing. So you have a whole generation -- if you had been studying this and reading the literature that's come out in the past 30 years, you are going to be a conspiracy believer.

REHM: Sharon in Olney. You're on the air.

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SHARON: Speaking of books which have come out in the past 30 years, there was a very interesting one which I read last year by Robert Morrow. It was called "Firsthand Knowledge: How I Participated in the CIA/Mafia Murder of President Kennedy."

I wondered if your guests have heard of that book or have tried to contact Robert Morrow.

And a second comment I have is, in light of various facts which have come out about J. Edgar Hoover, do you think he had any role at all, if there was an assassination plot?

REHM: All right. Thanks for your call?

LARDNER: I don't think Hoover had any role in any assassination plot. Hoover's main interest, I think, throughout this whole investigation, as throughout his whole life, was in protecting the reputation of the Bureau. And that is what drove Hoover and that is what preoccupied him throughout the assassination investigation. He didn't want the Bureau to look bad. And when it ended up being criticized in the Warren Report, he took punitive action against people down the line, as he was wont to do.

I haven't read the Morrow book. I've heard of him. I, to be short about it, do not regard him as particularly credible.

REHM: Any other comments?

All right. Let's take a call in the District.

Norman, you're on the air.

NORMAN: I'd just like to say that even if the President didn't know that the CIA was trying to eliminate Castro, he was certainly chargeable with knowledge of what the CIA was trying to do. And that could easily have led to the Missile Crisis. After all, Castro could argue that he had a right to defend himself in any way possible. And the missile placement was one way.

REHM: Any comments on that? Michael?

BESCHLOSS: Yes, that's absolutely true. And one -- I mean to connect that to the Kennedy assassination, one argument is that Operation Mongoose, which our caller is referring to, which was the Kennedy Administration's secret effort to undermine and overthrow Castro, involved assassination attempts that might have caused Castro to retaliate by trying to have Kennedy killed. And indeed, in September of 1963, Castro went to the Brazilian Embassy in Havana and said, essentially, "If there are plots against me, I will do the same thing against the plotters." That has increased the suspicion today.

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REHM: Isn't there also some speculation about a so-called false Oswald, Walter?

LARDNER: Well, that's among the many theories that people have raised because of -- in fact, because of intercepts that we had of phone conversations that took place in Mexico City when Oswald was there in September or October, a month and a half before the assassination.

But it also has to be said that there was concern in the White House for the first week to ten days about what may have gone on in Mexico City. And at one point somebody walked into the embassy and claimed to have seen Oswald take money in the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City. And it was investigated, and this particular individual eventually was given a lie-detector test, failed it, and finally sort of confessed he had made it up.

But again, the Administration at the time took solace in the fact that they had intercepted phone conversations, they'd intercepted calls between Moscow and Havana in which Castro, the Castro government, the President of Cuba, all were showing both surprise and fear that this had taken place and that somehow there'd be retaliation against them.

REHM: Marie, you're on the air.

MARIE: I was interested in the comment about people not trusting the President, and the press has had a large role in this. I worked from the Truman Administration, and the press was on his back all the time. He couldn't do anything right. And when he left office, his favorability rating was 27. And it's taken 40 years for him to recover from -- his reputation to recover from the pounding that the press gave him.

So, I wouldn't say that it began with Nixon or LBJ. People have not trusted the President simply because the press sees to it that only negative information is reported.

REHM: Michael?

BESCHLOSS: I guess I would disagree. I think the press -- the press certainly was very critical, you're absolutely right, of Harry Truman, as it was of Lincoln and Jefferson and everyone else.

REHM: And it wasn't until almost the McCullough biography that Truman...

BESCHLOSS: That Truman really began to come up again. Yes. Which came out in 1992.

I think the difference is that Harry Truman was criticized in the press, above all, for two things. One is ideological. A lot

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of people just did not like the things that Truman stood for in foreign policy and domestic affairs. And also competence. There were a lot of journalists and columnists, especially, of the time who felt that Truman was, as an accidental President, not someone who really was of the stature that should have occupied the Oval Office.

What you didn't have and what you tend to have nowadays is skepticism of the President's truthfulness, and also skepticism about the President's motives. There were very few people, even among Truman's critics, who would have said that Truman was an untruthful person or verged on deceiving the American people or that he had underhanded motives that were not what they appeared to be in public.

Those two threads are what you see very much in the writing about American Presidents, contemporary writing, since 1963. And I think that's the difference.

REHM: Gordon, you're on the air.

GORDON: One of your panelists almost answered my question regarding the effect of the Oliver Stone movie. It seems to have added to the whole conspiracy theory. And is that helpful? I mean here we have the silver screen, which is far more influential than books.

I'd be interested in your other panelists' thoughts on that.

REHM: George?

LARDNER: Well, Stone produced this movie a couple of years ago in a \$40 million budget, and it's easy to get attention that way. I think you're absolutely right. His film will probably endure much longer than many of these conspiracy books. But I think it was an absolutely irresponsible movie, and it's been shown to be that. He made up things. He had conversations, conspiratorial conversations taking place and admissions being made that never happened.

REHM: Michael?

BESCHLOSS: George is right. People don't tend to listen to historians and books all that much, especially when you compare it to Hollywood.

REHM: Dean in Reston. You're on the air.

DEAN: I hope I can do this properly and efficiently. I've never talked on the air before.

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I was in the Marine Corps about the same time Lee Harvey Oswald was. In fact, I went in a month and a day after he did. I went through the same boot camp that he went through and I was in the same battalion. Of course, I didn't know him. In the Marine Corps you didn't know people outside of your own platoon in boot camp. I fired the same rifle he fired, the same type, on the same rifle course that he fired on. And I tend to get very upset about claims that Oswald was a poor marksman. He fired a sharpshooter, which is a 210 score. That's an 84 percent score on the A course, where the closest you get to the target is 200 yards. You fire 10 rounds or 20 rounds at 200 yards, 30 rounds at 300 yards, and 10 rounds at 500 yards.

I believe, although maybe your guests can verify this, that the range from Oswald to the President was like 135 yards. The rifle you fire in the Marine Corps has an open sight. Oswald was using a rifle with a telescopic sight, which is much different.

In the latest book about the assassination, which I have but can't find, the author, in the latter part of the book where he shows charts and pictures and diagrams, says that Oswald had an efficiency up to 200 yards.

Again, that was as close as he got to the target. And 200 yards is a long way. Five hundred yards is a much longer way.

I would be very, very unwilling to stand in front of somebody at 135 or 200 yards that had a 74 percent accurate range, which included firing from 500 yards, with somebody with a telescopic sight.

REHM: All right, Dean. I'm sorry, we're out of time. And I do want to thank you for your contribution to this morning's conversation. I think it sort of leaves us where we began, with doubts that continue.

I appreciate the work that all of you have done, not only in the writing that you've done but in the thinking that you've done on this. And I want to thank you all so much for being here.

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