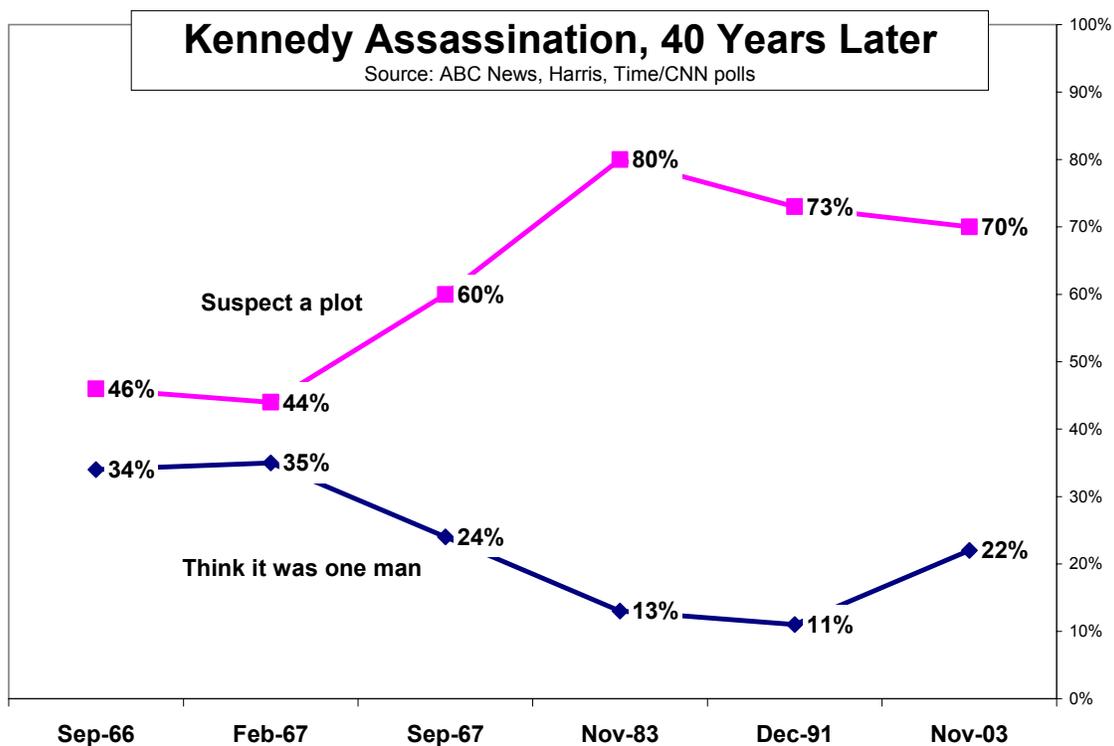


John F. Kennedy’s Assassination Leaves a Legacy of Suspicion

Forty years later, suspicions of a conspiracy endure: Seven in 10 Americans think the assassination of John F. Kennedy was the result of a plot, not the act of a lone killer – and a bare majority thinks that plot included a second shooter on Dealey Plaza.

Just 32 percent accept the Warren Commission’s 1964 finding that Lee Harvey Oswald alone shot Kennedy as his motorcade passed through downtown Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. Fifty-one percent think there was a second gunman, and seven percent go so far as to think Oswald wasn’t involved at all.

More broadly, in addition to the 70 percent of Americans who think there was some sort of plot behind the killings, 68 percent think there was “an official cover-up” to hide the truth about the assassination from the public, and about as many, 65 percent, think that “important unanswered questions” remain, four decades after Kennedy’s death.



While such suspicions are well-documented – and well-stoked by conspiracy theorists – for many people they’re guesses, not convictions. In a new follow-up question, fewer

than half of Americans, four in 10, say they're "pretty sure" there was a plot; another three in 10 say it's just a hunch. Similarly, half of those who suspect a second shooter say this, too, is just their hunch.

Official conclusions have varied. While the Warren Commission found no conspiracy, the House Select Committee on Assassinations reported in 1979 that Kennedy "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy" and that acoustical evidence demonstrated a "high probability" that a second gunman was involved. The panel said it was "unable to identify the other gunman or the extent of the conspiracy."

This ABC News poll was done in conjunction with a two-hour ABC News special, "Peter Jennings Reporting: The Kennedy Assassination – Beyond Conspiracy," airing 9-11 p.m. (EST) Thursday, Nov. 20. The program includes a computer-generated reconstruction of the shooting that confirms that Oswald was the lone gunman. And it finds no persuasive evidence of a conspiracy to kill the president.

TREND – Suspicion has been long-running; as far back as 1966, a Harris poll found that 46 percent of Americans thought there was a "broader plot" in the assassination. This jumped to 60 percent in 1967, after New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison filed charges alleging a conspiracy (the man he charged, Clay Shaw, was acquitted in 1969).

Belief in a broader plot peaked at 80 percent in a 1983 ABC News poll; it's since eased a bit, to today's 70 percent. Similarly, the number of people who think there was an official cover-up has moved back from its peak, 81 percent in 1993, to 68 percent now.

THE FILM – The director Oliver Stone reinvigorated the debate with the December 1991 release of "JFK," his film based on Garrison's investigation. The movie today is widely known – four in 10 Americans say they've seen it, and nearly as many have heard or read about it. But its impact on public opinion is debatable.

Twenty percent of Americans say the film made them more likely to think there was a conspiracy behind the assassination. But many of them may have held that view even without the film's influence. The overall number who suspect a conspiracy is the same now as it was in a poll leading up to the movie's release, before many people had a chance to see it. And as noted, suspicions of a plot peaked in 1983, long before the film was made.

The movie in any case has attracted a conspiracy-minded crowd. Suspicion of a plot peaks at 81 percent of those who've seen it, compared to about six in 10 of those who've only heard or read about it, or don't know about it at all. Similarly, 63 percent of viewers suspect there was a second gunman; that declines to 43 percent of those who haven't seen the film. And 78 percent of viewers suspect a cover-up, compared to 61 percent of non-viewers. But this doesn't necessarily mean that seeing the movie creates suspicion; it could be instead that suspicious people have been drawn to the film.

GROUPS – Older Americans – those who were adults at the time of the assassination – are less likely than others to suspect a plot or cover-up, or to say important facts remain unanswered. And suspicions of a second gunman, in particular, peak among those who hadn't been born yet.

Among people aged 65 and older, 39 percent think there was a second gunman; this jumps to 53 percent of those younger than 65 (and a high of 58 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds). Fifty-nine percent of older adults suspect a broader plot, compared to 72 percent of those younger than 65; and 56 percent of those 65 and older think there was an official cover-up; among those under than 65, this rises to 70 percent.

	Age 18-64	Age 65+
Think unanswered questions remain	68%	50
Suspect a conspiracy	72	59
Suspect a second gunman	53	39
Suspect a cover-up	70	56

In another difference between groups, nonwhites are more apt than white Americans to suspect a broader plot, a second gunman and a cover-up, and to say important questions about the Kennedy assassination remain unanswered.

METHODOLOGY – This ABC News poll was conducted by telephone Nov. 5-9, 2003, among a random national sample of 1,031 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet at:

<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/PollVault/PollVault.html>

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Results follow.

*= less than 0.5 percent

1. As you may know, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963, 40 years ago this month. From what you know about it, do you think (the important facts about the assassination have been reported) or do you think (there are still important unanswered questions about the assassination?)

	Been reported	Still unanswered	No opin.
11/9/03	29	65	7
11/7/83	18	76	6

2. Do you feel the Kennedy assassination was the work of one man, or was it part of a broader plot? Do you feel pretty sure about that, or is that just your hunch?

-----One man-----			--Broader plot--			No
NET	Sure	Hunch	NET	Sure	Hunch	opin.

11/9/03	22	14	8	70	39	31	8
12/22/91*	11	NA	NA	73	NA	NA	16
11/7/83	13	NA	NA	80	NA	NA	7
9/67**	24	NA	NA	60	NA	NA	16
2/67**	35	NA	NA	44	NA	NA	21
9/66**	34	NA	NA	46	NA	NA	20

*Time/CNN; wording: Do you think that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the Kennedy assassination or do you think that there was a conspiracy that included other people?

**Harris Poll

3. Do you think Lee Harvey Oswald was the only gunman in the Kennedy assassination, do you think there was another gunman in addition to Oswald there that day, or do you think Oswald was not involved in the assassination at all? Do you feel pretty sure about that, or is that just your hunch?

	---Only Oswald---			--Another gunman--			----Not Oswald---			No
	NET	Sure	Hunch	NET	Sure	Hunch	NET	Sure	Hunch	opin.
11/9/03	32	21	11	51	27	24	7	4	3	10

4. Do you think there was or was not an official cover-up to keep the public from learning the truth about the Kennedy assassination?

	Was	Was not	No opin.
11/9/03	68	24	8
11/17/98*	74	13	13
5/07/98	68	18	14
10/7/93	81	12	7
1/25/92	75	13	12
10/10/88	61	17	22

*1998 and 1993, CBS; 1992 and 1988, CBS/New York Times.

5. Do you remember seeing, or hearing or reading, about a 1991 movie about the Kennedy assassination from the director Oliver Stone, called JFK, or not?

	----Saw/Heard/Read----				
	NET	Saw	Heard/Read	Didn't	No opin.
11/9/03	77	41	37	22	1

6. (IF SAW/HEARD READ, Q5) Did that movie make you more likely or less likely to think there was a conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination, or didn't it change your opinion much?

	More	Less	No change	No opin.
11/9/03	26	2	64	8

5/6 NET ALL RESPONDENTS

	-----Saw/Hear/Read-----						
	NET	More	Less	No change	DK	Didn't	No opin.
11/9/03	77	20	2	50	6	22	1

END