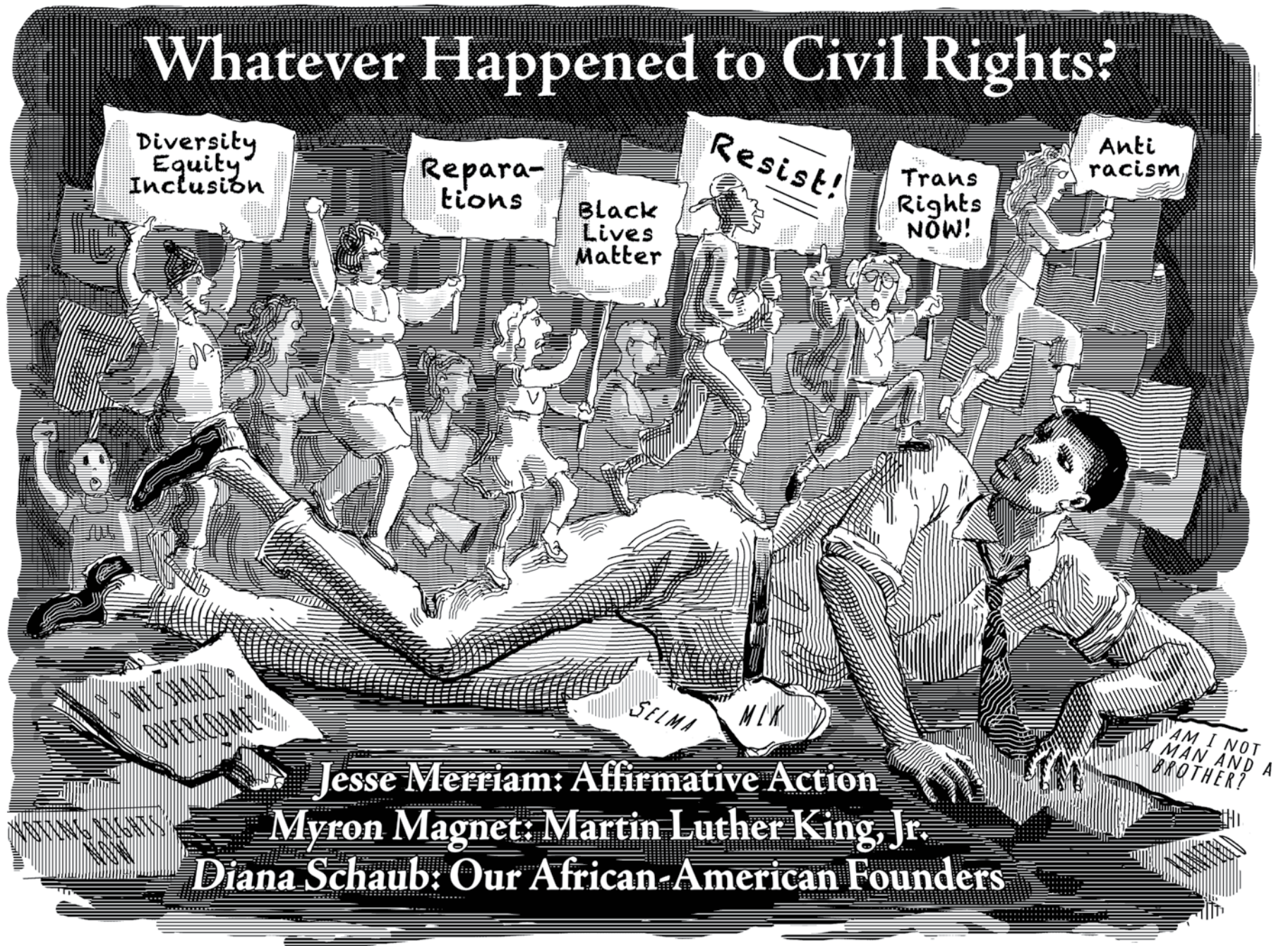


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LITTLE MAN OF HISTORY

The Oswalds: An Untold Account of Marina and Lee, by Paul R. Gregory.
Diversions Books, 304 pages, \$28.99

EVEN AFTER MORE THAN 60 YEARS, the assassination of John F. Kennedy looms large in America's public consciousness. As Paul Gregory notes in his new book, *The Oswalds: An Untold Account of Marina and Lee*, no event in American political history has been the subject of more books and articles.

But Gregory, a fellow at the Hoover Institution and a distinguished scholar of the Soviet and Russian economies, has a unique perspective on the assassin Lee Harvey Oswald and his wife, Marina. By a remarkable series of coincidences, Gregory became Oswald's and Marina's closest (and arguably only) friend in the summer and fall of 1962, when Gregory was a college student and Oswald had just arrived back in Texas from his failed defection to the Soviet Union. As such, this book combines the analytical capability of a serious scholar with the credibility of a firsthand witness to history—an unusual pairing, especially in the Kennedy corpus.

Gregory argues that Oswald acted entirely on his own. He rejects the innumerable alternative theories that continue to proliferate, as satirized a few years back in a headline from *The Onion*: "Kennedy Slain by CIA, Mafia, Castro, LBJ, Teamsters, Freemasons." More recently, the former Fox broadcaster Tucker Carlson claimed to have been in contact with a person who has access to the relevant classified documents and believes the CIA played a role in the killing.

But as Gregory told his FBI interviewer just a day after the assassination, "If I were planning a conspiracy, Lee Harvey Oswald would be the last person I'd bring in on it." This is congruent with Marina's early testimony, in which she described her husband as "a loner with no one to conspire." Though Gregory could not have predicted the assassination in advance, he knew Oswald was a temperamental Marxist with visions of grandeur—perfectly capable of political violence given the right opportunity.

Gregory's father, Peter, was a native Russian who would translate for Marina in her initial interrogation after the assassination. Paul, who was taking Russian lessons from Marina, introduced Lee to the small but close-knit Russian community in Dallas. One

member of that community got Lee a job at the Texas School Book Depository along the route JFK would eventually take during the fateful parade.

THE OUTSIZED SIGNIFICANCE OF SUCH coincidences leads Gregory to profound reflections on the nature of chance and fate. The "Great Man" theory—the idea that exceptional individuals can move the pivot of history—is very out of fashion these days. But Gregory offers a "little man" theory: he proposes that one single seemingly insignificant person can dramatically alter the course of world-historical events.

Resistance to this notion might explain why so many people cannot accept the overwhelming evidence that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, killed President John F. Kennedy in 1963. There are 27 volumes of testimony to that effect from President Lyndon Johnson's commission, led by Chief Justice Earl Warren and corroborated by separate investigations from the FBI, the Secret Service, the Dallas Police Department, and a House Select Committee on Assassinations. But the idea of a "nonentity" making such an explosive impact on world affairs just doesn't fit with fashionable philosophy. As Kennedy's widow, Jackie, remarked just hours afterward: "He didn't even have the satisfaction of being killed for civil rights. It's—it had to be some silly little Communist."

The significance of Oswald's Communism furnishes the book's second, more implicit theme. Here was an assassin conjured from the fever dreams of Senator Joseph McCarthy. He was exactly the sort of enemy those crazy reactionaries in Dallas warned us about. And the liberal establishment could not let a Communist be the real villain of the Kennedy assassination. Only the "radical Right" could serve that role.

Never mind that Oswald had already tried to kill far-right leader General Edwin Walker. Indeed, as his wife described it in her Warren Commission testimony, Oswald sounded like a member of today's Antifa as he plotted to kill General Walker. "He said this was a very bad man. This was a fascist and he was the leader of a fascist organization." He later said that having the chance to kill Kennedy

was like having the chance to kill Hitler early in his life.

AS GREGORY POINTS OUT, THE SOVIETS pushed theories about collusion by the Mafia and right-wing extremists within days of the assassination. They were unwittingly aided by credulous elites such as Earl Warren himself, who blamed the assassination in its immediate aftermath on "the hatred and bitterness that has been injected into the life of our nation by bigots." Others, like *New York Times* columnist James Reston, would blame "the violence of the extremists on the right." This narrative reached its apotheosis in Oliver Stone's 1991 film, *JFK*, which placed the blame fully on a shadowy right-wing conspiracy.

"I was supposedly an integral part of this conspiracy," writes Gregory, with evident frustration. He wants to emphasize that real history defies neat academic formulas: "Politics, and the attempt to control it through statecraft, is ultimately an art, and a fallible art, not as leftist academics would have you believe, a science."

Of course Gregory cannot definitively solve the Kennedy mystery or disprove every conspiracy theory. But he does argue persuasively that behind all the theories, coincidences, shadowy figures, and documents on the Kennedy assassination, there is a simple unwillingness to believe that one angry, obscure young man could change the course of history with a single rifle shot. The triumph of narrative over truth, the emergence of fake news, the birth of conspiracy politics—so much of our modern world is prefigured in Kennedy's death.

Gregory's book is ultimately not just about Kennedy but about the inherent unpredictability of human events and the relentless progressive quest to obscure or overcome it. Despite all these efforts, history defies comprehensive analysis. Chance and coincidences can be as powerful as broad social forces or sweeping social control. Kennedy is long dead. But the forces that his death unleashed, and the dynamics it revealed, are very much alive today.

Jeremy Carl is a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute.

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