



Lee Harvey Oswald's Malign Legacy

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What's wrong with American liberalism? What happened to the self-assured, optimistic, and practical Democratic Party of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and John F. Kennedy? Why has Joe Lieberman, their closest contemporary incarnation, been run out of the party? How did anti-Americanism infect schools, the media, and Hollywood? And whence comes the liberal rage that conservatives like [Ann Coulter](#), [Jeff Jacoby](#), [Michelle Malkin](#), and the [Media Research Center](#) have extensively documented?

In a tour de force, James Piereson of the Manhattan Institute offers an historical explanation both novel and convincing. His book, [Camelot and the Cultural Revolution: How the Assassination of John F. Kennedy Shattered American Liberalism](#) (Encounter), traces liberalism's slide into

anti-Americanism back to the seemingly minor fact that Lee Harvey Oswald was neither a segregationist nor a cold warrior but a communist.

Here's what Piereson argues:

During the roughly forty years preceding the Kennedy assassination on November 22, 1963, progressivism/liberalism was the reigning and nearly only public philosophy; Kennedy, a realistic centrist, came out of an effective tradition that aimed, and succeeded, in expanding democracy and the welfare state.

In contrast, Republicans like Dwight Eisenhower lacked an intellectual alternative to liberalism and so merely slowed it down. The conservative "remnant" led by William F. Buckley, Jr. had virtually no impact on policy. The radical right, embod-

ied by the John Birch Society, spe-
wed illogical and ineffectual fanati-
cism.

Kennedy's assassination profoundly
affected liberalism, Piereson ex-
plains, because Oswald, a New Left-
style communist, murdered Ken-
nedy to protect Fidel Castro's rule in
Cuba from the president who, dur-
ing the Cuban missile crisis of 1962,
brandished America's military card.
Kennedy, in brief, died because he
was so *tough* in the cold war. Liber-
als resisted this fact because it con-
tradicted their belief system and,
instead, presented Kennedy as a
victim of the radical right and a
martyr for liberal causes.

This political phantasm required
two audacious steps. The first ap-
plied to Oswald:

- Ignoring his communist outlook
by characterizing him as an ex-
treme rightist. Thus, New Or-
leans district attorney [Jim Garri-
son](#) asserted that "Oswald would
have been more at home with
Mein Kampf than *Das Kapital*."
- Reducing his role to insignifi-
cance by (1) theorizing about
some sixteen other assassins or
(2) spinning a giant conspiracy in
which Oswald was a dupe of the
mafia, the Ku Klux Klan, anti-
Castro Cubans, White Russians,
Texas oil millionaires, interna-
tional bankers, the CIA, the FBI,
the military-industrial complex,
the generals, or Kennedy's suc-
cessor, Lyndon Johnson.

With Oswald nearly deleted from
the narrative, or even turned into a
scapegoat, the ruling establishment
– Johnson, Jacqueline Kennedy, J.
Edgar Hoover, and many others –
proceeded to take a second, aston-
ishing step. They blamed the assas-
sination not on Oswald the commu-
nist but on the American people,
and the radical right in particular,
accusing them of killing Kennedy
for his being too soft in the cold war
or too accommodating to civil rights
for American blacks. Here are just
four of the examples Piereson cites
documenting that wild distortion:

- Chief Justice [Earl Warren](#) de-
cried the supposed "hatred and
bitterness that has been injected
into the life of our nation by big-
ots."
- Senate majority leader [Mike
Mansfield](#) raged against "the
bigotry, the hatred, prejudice
and the arrogance which con-
verged in that moment of horror
to strike him down."
- Congressman Adam Clayton
Powell advised, "Weep not for
Jack Kennedy, but weep for
America."
- A [New York Times editorial](#) la-
mented "The shame all America
must bear for the spirit of mad-
ness and hate that struck down
President John F. Kennedy."

In this "denial or disregard" of Os-
wald's motives and guilt, Piereson
locates the rank origins of American
liberalism's turn toward anti-
American pessimism. "The reformist

emphasis of American liberalism, which had been pragmatic and forward-looking, was overtaken by a spirit of national self-condemnation."

Viewing the United States as crass, violent, racist, and militarist shifted liberalism's focus from economics to cultural issues (racism, feminism, sexual freedom, gay rights). This change helped spawn the counter-cultural movement of the late 1960s;

more lastingly, it fed a "residue of ambivalence" about the worth of traditional American institutions and the validity of deploying U.S. military power that 44 years later remains liberalism's general outlook.

Thus does Oswald's malign legacy live on in 2007, yet harming and perverting liberalism, still polluting the national debate.