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 John F. Kennedy

Legacy of Suspicion  
Decades After, Few Accept the Official  
Explanation for JFK Assassination

*Analysis*  
By Gary Langer

 ABCNEWS will air a two-hour special, *Peter Jennings Reporting: The Kennedy Assassination — Beyond Conspiracy*, on Thursday, Nov. 20. (ABCNEWS.com)

Nov. 16— 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.

ABCNEWS has completed a poll in conjunction with a two-hour ABCNEWS 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.

Just 32 percent accept the Warren Commission's 1964 finding that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone when he 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.

Sixty-eight percent of Americans also 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.

#### 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

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District Attorney Jim Garrison filed charges alleging a conspiracy (the man he charged, Clay Shaw, was acquitted in 1969).

## Kennedy Assassination, 40 Years Later

Time	Suspect a Plot	Think it Was One Man
Sep. 66	46%	34
Feb. 67	44	35
Sep. 67	60	24
Nov. 83	80	13
Dec. 91	73	11
Nov. 03	70	22

Belief in a broader plot peaked at 80 percent in a 1983 ABCNEWS 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.

## JFK Beliefs

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

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