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Case Closed? On the John F. Kennedy Assassination: Biased Assimilation of Evidence and Attitude Polarization

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Vitriolic debate surrounds John F. Kennedy's (JFK's) death more than 30 years after the assassination. Whereas some endorse the official government conclusion that Oswald acted alone, others allege that some form of a conspiracy is responsible for Kennedy's death. The central thesis of this article is that due to the processes of biased assimilation and attitude polarization, personal theories about the perpetrator(s) of the assassination are essentially immutable, and therefore that the debate surrounding JFK's assassination will continue endlessly. Due to the process of biased assimilation, proponents of both the Oswald and conspiracy theories perceive the same body of evidence as supportive of their position. Biased assimilation leads to attitude polarization rather than to a moderation or reversal of existing attitudes. The results of the present study strongly support this line of reasoning. The study also examined the formation of assassination attitudes among subjects with no initial opinion. The majority of these subjects embraced the conspiracy theory at the conclusion of the study. However, authoritarianism was indirectly associated with the development of an Oswald theory stance via an increased endorsement of evidence consistent with the Oswald theory.

Who killed President Kennedy? More than 30 years after the assassination, no definitive answer has been provided. Of course, after the assassination a commission overseen by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren issued a report identifying Lee Harvey Oswald as the lone assassin. Shortly after the Warren report was published, however, books and articles began to appear questioning the report's investigations and conclusions and offering some alternative account of the assassination. Conspiracy theories abound, with

various authors linking the assassination to the FBI, the CIA, the Mafia, Castro, and a long list of other organizations and groups of individuals ("The Conspiracy Theories," 1993). To date, more than 2,000 volumes have been published on the JFK assassination (Posner, 1993), as well as a horde of videos and both magazine and newspaper articles (see Ward, 1993, for a review of some recent publications). The vast majority of these works have advocated some form of conspiracy theory (e.g., Garrison, 1991; Lane, 1966; Lifton, 1992), although others support the theory that Oswald acted alone (e.g., Beschloss, 1993; Posner, 1993; Thomas, 1993). The assassination's continuing ability to evoke heated debate provides some testimony to the impact this event has had on the American public. Perhaps in part because of the enormity of the crime and its impact, Americans are reluctant to believe Oswald acted alone. A recent Gallup poll indicates that 75% of Americans believe a conspiracy was responsible for JFK's death (Potok, 1993).

A recent book by Posner (1993), provocatively entitled *Case Closed*, provides exhaustive coverage of the assassination evidence and concludes that Oswald did indeed kill the president on his own. What impact might we expect Posner's work (and other pro-Oswald theory works, e.g., Beschloss, 1993; Thomas, 1993) to have on the attitudes of the largely proconspiracy public? Phenomena documented in a study by Lord, Ross, and Lepper (1979; see also Lord, Lepper, & Preston, 1984) suggest that attempts to dissuade the American populace from the validity of conspiracy theories are doomed to failure, as are attempts to change the opinions of Oswald theory advocates, and therefore that the debate surrounding JFK's death is intractable.

Lord et al. (1979) documented a pair of phenomena with implications for the assassination debate. First, the same body of evidence is differentially evaluated by those on opposite sides of an issue, a phenomenon known as *biased assimilation*. Evidence that is supportive of one's position is uncritically accepted, whereas contrary evidence is scrutinized and (subjectively) discredited. Biased assimilation is consistent with motivationally based accounts of information processing and attitude change (e.g., cognitive dissonance theory; Festinger, 1957; see also Berkowitz & Devine, 1989; Lord, 1989), and also more cognitively oriented approaches that focus on selective attention and the differential weighting and interpretation of attitude-consistent and attitude-inconsistent information (Darley & Gross, 1983; Snyder, 1984).

Second, following the consideration of a mixed body of evidence, there is a tendency to report *attitude polarization*. That is, rather than moderating or changing their viewpoints, people report that they are more in favor of their initial position (cf. Tesser, 1978, on "self-generated attitude change"). Moreover, the degree of biased assimilation is correlated with attitude

polarization, suggesting that the biased processing of evidence contributes to a subjectively experienced strengthening of one's initial position.

Previous studies have documented the impact of biased assimilation and attitude polarization on the perpetuation of sociopolitical attitudes (e.g., capital punishment: Lord et al., 1979; Miller, McHoskey, Bane, & Dowd, 1993; the safety of nuclear power: Plous, 1991). Our research investigated the processes of biased assimilation and attitude polarization in the context of attitudes toward the JFK assassination. We predicted that Oswald and conspiracy theory advocates would differentially evaluate the available evidence (i.e., biased assimilation), including new evidence recently presented by Posner (1993), and subsequently report a polarization of their initial position.

The influence of authoritarianism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levenson, & Sanford, 1950) on the processing of assassination evidence and assassination attitudes was also investigated in the present study. One defining feature of authoritarianism is a tendency to submit to the rules and conventions sanctioned by established authority (Altemeyer, 1981, 1988). Thus, given that the Oswald theory represents the official conclusion of the U.S. government, it was predicted that authoritarians would be more likely to endorse the Oswald theory and its supporting evidence. In addition, we employed a student sample in our study, and it was therefore reasonable to expect that some subjects would not have a defined stance toward the assassination. In this context, it was predicted that, among subjects without any initial assassination attitude, authoritarianism would be associated with an increased endorsement of the official government conclusion and associated evidence on the assassination (i.e., the Oswald theory).

Finally, although the Lord et al. (1979) study received widespread acclaim in the social cognition literature, a recent paper by Miller et al. (1993) presented a critique of their findings. Specifically, Miller et al. suggested that the reported attitude change documented by Lord et al. is conceptually distinct from attitude change assessed via a comparison of preattitude and postattitude measures. Given the conceptual uncertainty that surrounds reported attitude change, both reported and direct (i.e., postattitude minus preattitude) measures of attitude change were employed in the present study to further assess the conceptual similarities and differences between the two.

METHOD

Subjects

The participants were 253 introductory psychology students who participated for extra course credit (116 women and 137 men). All of the subjects in this sample were born after JFK was assassinated (mean age = 19.3, $s =$

3.1; see Barone & Hetter, 1993). Neither subject sex nor political party affiliation had any influence on the results.

Procedure

A procedure similar to that of Miller et al. (1993) was employed. On the basis of an initial attitude survey, subjects were identified as moderate or extreme supporters of either the conspiracy or the Oswald theory. Subjects then read and evaluated summaries of the evidence supporting each theory. In a separate booklet, they reported if their attitude had changed, and also responded again to the same assassination attitude scale in the first booklet. Some of the subjects then completed Altemeyer's (1988) right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) scale. All subjects were informed that their response would remain anonymous, and they received a written and oral debriefing at the conclusion of the study.

Initial attitude: direction and magnitude. To record their attitude, subjects responded to the following item: "Do you believe that President John F. Kennedy was killed by a lone assassin named Lee Harvey Oswald, or that there were multiple assassins, and therefore a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy?" They answered on a 101-point scale ranging from *completely certain Oswald alone killed JFK* (-50) to *completely certain a conspiracy killed JFK* (+50).

Subjects' opinions roughly mirrored the results of national polls, which indicate that a large majority favors a conspiracy theory (Potok, 1993; conspiracy theory advocates, $N = 191$, 91.4%; Oswald theory advocates, $N = 18$, 8.6%).¹ Subjects indicating an attitude between +36 and +50 were designated *extreme conspiracy*; between +1 and +35, *moderate conspiracy*; between -36 and -50, *extreme Oswald*; and between -1 and -35, *moderate Oswald*. Subjects indicating a neutral or undecided attitude ($N = 44$) were not included in the primary analyses but are addressed in a separate section below.

Right-wing authoritarianism. A portion of the sample completed Altemeyer's (1988, pp. 22-23) RWA scale ($N = 158$). The RWA scale is a 30-item inventory that assesses individual differences in authoritarian submission, aggression, and conventionalism. Altemeyer (1981, 1988) ex-

¹The small number of Oswald advocates imposes some limitations in terms of statistical power and generalizability. Unfortunately, it was not possible to attain a larger number of Oswald theory advocates in the sample, given the low base rate of support for this position in the university (and general) population (see Potok, 1993). In order to study Oswald theory advocates in greater detail, it would be necessary to actively recruit them or to sample from a specific population with a high base rate of support for this position.

tensively documented the scale's validity and reliability and Christie (1991) identified the RWA scale as the best measure of authoritarianism currently available.²

Evidence summaries and evaluations. Evidence summaries supporting each side of the issue were written by the author.³ Each summary was about 850 words and included interpretations of the evidence supporting that position, as well as counterarguments against the interpretations of the opposing viewpoint.

The information in the conspiracy theory summary (based largely on Lifton, 1992) included: the 1979 House Select Committee's conclusion that there was evidence of a conspiracy; eyewitnesses identifying shots from the "grassy knoll"; the timing problem suggested by Zapruder's film (i.e., Oswald didn't have time to fire all the shots); the inadequacy of the "single-bullet theory"; the fact that JFK's head moved back and to the left when it was hit, suggesting a shot from the front; and inconsistencies between the Dallas and Bethesda autopsy reports suggesting a cover-up (i.e., "entrance" wounds changing to "exit" wounds).

The information in the Oswald theory summary (based largely on Posner, 1993) included: a characterization of Oswald as strongly motivated to kill JFK, eyewitnesses' statements locating Oswald at the book depository at the time of the shooting, evidence that Oswald owned the rifle that ballistics tests demonstrate was the one used to kill JFK, evidence that Oswald's fingerprints were on the gun and the sniper's nest in the book depository, recent technological enhancements of the Zapruder film demonstrating that Oswald had sufficient time to fire all the shots, and recent technologically advanced reenactments demonstrating that the "single-bullet theory" is viable.

After reading the evidence summaries, subjects rated the persuasiveness of the nine pieces of evidence presented in each summary on a 9-point scale ranging from *extremely unpersuasive* (1) to *extremely persuasive* (9). The ratings for each evidence summary were averaged to form a general persuasiveness index (conspiracy index $\alpha = .84$, Oswald index $\alpha = .80$). The order of essay presentation and evaluation was counterbalanced.

Attitude change measures. Attitude change was assessed in two ways. First, subjects were asked to report if their attitude had changed since

²Due to time constraints in some of the data collection sessions, some of the subjects were unable to complete the RWA scale. The RWA scale did not influence any of the findings for subjects with an initial attitude toward the assassination, and will not be discussed in this context. The RWA is addressed, however, in a later section on the formation of an initial attitude toward the assassination.

³Copies of the evidence summaries are available on request from John W. McHoskey.

the beginning of the study (i.e., Lord et al., 1979) with the question: "How would you compare your current attitude toward the assassination of JFK with the attitude you had at the very start of this experiment?" Subjects answered on a 17-point scale ranging from *much more in favor of theory that Oswald killed JFK alone* (-8) to *much more in favor of theory that a conspiracy killed JFK* ($+8$; $0 =$ no change in attitude). Second, to allow for the direct assessment of attitude change (i.e., postattitude minus preattitude), subjects were asked to respond again to the same attitude item they completed in the initial survey.

RESULTS

Evidence Evaluations

Subjects' persuasiveness indices for each evidence summary were analyzed in a 2 (Subject Attitude) \times 2 (Magnitude) \times 2 (Evidence Summary) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA), with repeated measures on the final factor. The biased assimilation phenomenon was clearly demonstrated. As predicted, subjects rated the evidence consistent with their own position as superior; Attitude \times Evidence interaction, $F(1, 205) = 74.9, p < .001$ (conspiracy evidence: conspiracy advocate $M = 6.7$, Oswald advocate $M = 5.1$; Oswald evidence: conspiracy advocate $M = 4.7$, Oswald advocate $M = 6.2$). Moreover, biased assimilation was accentuated in subjects with an extreme initial attitude; Attitude \times Magnitude \times Evidence, $F(1, 205) = 21.3, p < .001$. These results are presented in Figure 1.

Separate ANOVAs on the persuasiveness index for each evidence summary revealed both a main effect for attitude, $F_s(1, 205) \geq 38.4, p_s < .001$, and also a significant Attitude \times Magnitude interaction, $F_s(1, 205) \geq 8.4, p_s < .005$. Moreover, the evidence simple main effect was significant for three of the four groups (extreme and moderate conspiracy and extreme Oswald $F_s \geq 13.9, p_s < .01$; moderate Oswald $F < 1.0, ns$).

Although much of the evidence presented to subjects has been widely debated for some time, subjects were also asked to evaluate new evidence, recently presented by Posner (1993), that supports the Oswald theory. This evidence included the following: Enhancements of the Zapruder film demonstrate that Oswald had sufficient time to fire all the shots, and computer simulations demonstrate that the "single-bullet theory" is viable.

Persuasiveness ratings for this evidence were averaged and subjected to a separate ANOVA. Although this evidence was quickly embraced by Oswald advocates ($M = 6.4$), the conspiracy advocates did not consider this evidence persuasive ($M = 4.4$), $F(1, 205) = 24.1, p < .001$. Evaluations of this new evidence were also accentuated in subjects with an extreme initial position, Attitude \times Magnitude $F(1, 205) = 9.4, p < .005$. (Extreme

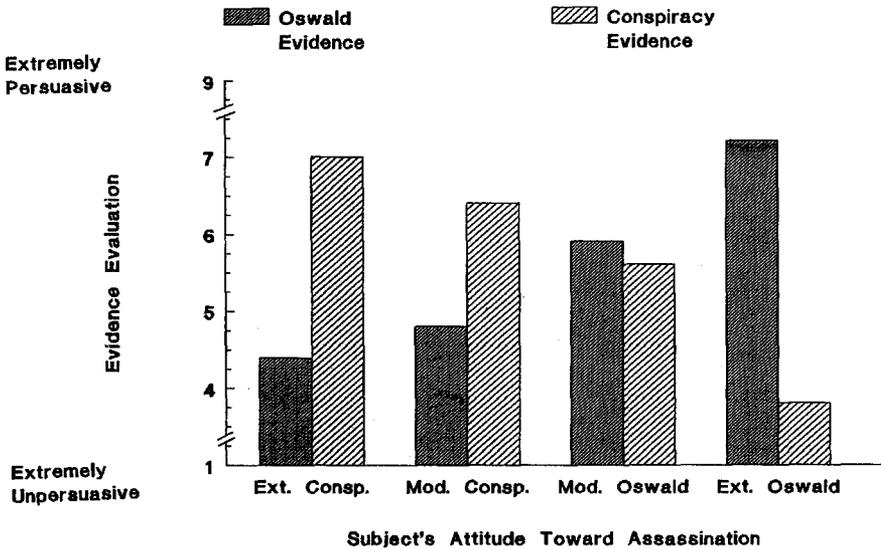


FIGURE 1 Mean evaluations of Oswald and conspiracy theory evidence as a function of initial subject attitude and attitude extremity.

conspiracy $M = 4.1$, moderate conspiracy $M = 4.7$, extreme Oswald $M = 8.4$, moderate Oswald $M = 5.7$). The attitude simple main effect was significant for both the extreme and moderate groups, $F(1, 102) = 19.2, p < .001$, and $F(1, 105) = 3.5, p = .06$, respectively. In addition, the magnitude simple main effect was significant for both the conspiracy and Oswald theory advocates, $F(1, 190) = 4.0, p < .05$, and $F(1, 17) = 9.2, p < .01$, respectively.

Attitude Change

Reported attitude change. Subjects' degree of reported attitude change was analyzed in a 2 (Attitude) \times 2 (Magnitude) ANOVA. The mean reported attitude change scores for extreme and moderate subjects on each side of the issue are presented in Table 1. A main effect was observed for attitude, $F(1, 205) = 8.1, p < .005$. Attitude polarization was reported by the conspiracy advocates (i.e., significantly different from zero), $M = 1.7, t(190) = 9.1, p < .001$, but not the Oswald advocates, $M = .05, t(17) = -.1, ns$.⁴ Although the Attitude \times Magnitude interaction did not reach a

⁴The relative frequencies of reported attitude polarization, no change, and depolarization were similar for Oswald and conspiracy theory advocates. However, due to the small number of Oswald theory advocates, the presence of four strong reversals (i.e., movement to conspiracy advocacy) in this group nullified any overall polarization effect.

TABLE 1
Attitude Change Assessed by Self-Report and Direct Assessment

Subject Attitude	N	Self-Reported Attitude Change		Directly Assessed Attitude Change (Binary Index)	
		M	s	M	s
Extreme conspiracy	98	2.0**	2.8	.22**	.41
Moderate conspiracy	93	1.5**	2.4	.58**	.50
Moderate Oswald	13	0.5	3.0	.38*	.50
Extreme Oswald	5	-1.2	2.7	0.0	0.0

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

conventional level of significance, $F(1, 205) = 2.4$, $p < .12$, the means reflect a trend toward greater reported attitude polarization in the extreme groups (see Table 1).

Directly assessed attitude change. The binary index employed in the self-generated attitude change literature was utilized as an indicator of direct attitude change (see Tesser, 1978). Responses reflecting a more extreme attitude in the direction of the subject's initial position were scored as 1, and all other responses were scored as zero. The mean binary index scores for each of the groups are presented in Table 1.⁵ Significant attitude polarization was demonstrated by both the conspiracy and Oswald advocates on the binary index (i.e., different from zero): conspiracy $M = .40$, $t(190) = 11.2$, $p < .001$; Oswald $M = .28$, $t(17) = 2.6$, $p < .05$. Moreover, the mean binary index score was significantly different from zero for all of the groups except the extreme Oswald advocates ($t = 0$, ns; all other $ps < .02$; see Table 1).⁶

⁵Another index of direct attitude change, known as the *trinary index*, is also frequently employed in the self-generated attitude change literature. The binary index was employed in the present study due to the small size of the Oswald advocate sample. The binary index is more sensitive to the presence of attitude polarization than the trinary index or algebraic (i.e., postattitude minus preattitude) difference scores (see Tesser, 1978, for a discussion of the merits of these various measures).

⁶The actual preattitude and postattitude scores were also analyzed in a 2 (Attitude) \times 2 (magnitude) \times 2 (Time: Preattitude vs. Postattitude) ANOVA, with repeated measures on the final factor. The Attitude \times Time and Attitude \times Magnitude \times Time interactions were both nonsignificant, $F(1, 205) = 1.8$, $p > .18$, ns, and $F(1, 205) < 1$, ns, respectively. On the trinary index, significant polarization was demonstrated by the conspiracy advocates ($M = .17$, $t(190) = 3.0$, $p < .005$), but not the Oswald advocates ($M = 0.0$). The frequencies of directly measured polarization, no change, and depolarization responses did not differ significantly between the two groups. However, due to the small size of the Oswald advocate sample ($N = 18$), the presence of a few depolarizers and reversals exerted a powerful influence on the trinary index.

Mediational Analyses: Biased Assimilation and Reported Attitude Change

A biased assimilation index was formed by subtracting each subject's average persuasiveness rating of the opposing evidence from that of the evidence consistent with their viewpoint (i.e., higher scores indicate greater biased assimilation). The tendency to differentially evaluate the assassination evidence was positively associated with reported attitude polarization ($r = .20, p < .005$). Multiple regression was employed to examine the mediating role of biased assimilation in the attitude polarization process (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Effects coding was utilized to represent the attitude (*Oswald* = -1, *conspiracy* = 1) and magnitude (*moderate* = -1, *extreme* = 1) variables, and their interaction was represented by the product of these vectors.

The addition of biased assimilation to the attitude, magnitude, and attitude \times magnitude vectors in the regression for reported attitude polarization resulted in a significant increase in R^2 , F increment (1, 204) = 6.58, $p < .05$, R^2 increment = .03. Moreover, biased assimilation remains as the only significant predictor of reported polarization in the simultaneous regression ($B = .23, p < .05$; all other $ps > .15$, ns). This result provides strong evidence for the mediating role of biased assimilation in the polarization of reported attitudes.

Biased Assimilation and Directly Measured Attitude Change

There was no significant association between scores on the biased assimilation and binary indices ($r = .03, N = 209, p > .60$, ns). However, a regression of the algebraic attitude change scores (i.e., postattitude minus preattitude) on biased assimilation scores was significant, $F(1, 207) = 14.6, p < .001, R^2 = .07$, and the addition of a quadratic term significantly improved the regression, F increment (1, 206) = 11.7, $p < .01, R^2$ increment = .05 (biased assimilation $B = 4.0$, biased assimilation² $B = -0.49$, both $ps < .001$, intercept = -3.6). The significance of the quadratic term reflects the presence of a ceiling effect, with attitude polarization leveling off despite increasing levels of biased assimilation. This finding provides some justification for Lord et al.'s (1979) original decision to use the reported attitude change measure with subjects holding extreme initial attitudes. In the present study, extreme subjects demonstrated more biased assimilation than moderate subjects (see Figure 1) but less directly assessed attitude polarization (see Table 1).

Relation of Reported and Directly Assessed Attitude Change

The results of Miller et al. (1993) indicated that the reported and direct attitude change measures assess different constructs, and in the present context, directly assessed attitude change was only modestly associated with reported attitude change: binary, $r = .14, p > .05$; algebraic, $r = .33, p < .001$. Moreover, although polarization was detected with both measures, there was a considerable degree of individual differences observed in our study.

Table 2 presents a cross-tabular presentation of the frequencies of reported and directly assessed attitude change. In relation to assassination attitudes, the results clearly indicate that, following a review of the evidence, a polarization or stabilization of attitude is the modal response, regardless of the measure employed. However, the results also indicate that subjects are not responding uniformly to these measures, as only half of the subjects (105 of 209) recorded the same response for both measures. Omitting the subjects with an initial attitude of -50 or $+50$ who could not polarize on the direct assessment measure does not substantively change these results (see Table 2). This finding is consistent with the results of Miller et al. (1993), and indicates that the reported and direct assessment attitude change measures assess overlapping but distinct constructs.

Formation of Assassination Attitudes

Several subjects entered the study without an assassination attitude ($N = 44$). An index of their evaluations of the assassination evidence was formed by subtracting their average Oswald evidence rating from their average conspiracy evidence rating (i.e., higher scores indicate an increased endorse

TABLE 2
Frequency of Directly Assessed Attitude Change as a Function of
Self-Reported Attitude Change

<i>Reported Attitude Change</i>	<i>Directly Assessed Attitude Change</i>			<i>Row Totals</i>
	<i>Depolarization</i>	<i>No Change</i>	<i>Polarization</i>	
Depolarization	10 (10)	0 (0)	5 (5)	15 (15)
No change	15 (8)	48 (36)	29 (29)	92 (73)
Polarization	24 (20)	31 (24)	47 (47)	102 (91)
Column totals	49 (38)	79 (60)	81 (81)	209 (179)

Note. The frequencies obtained after deleting subjects with an initial attitude of -50 or $+50$ are presented in parentheses.

ment of proconspiracy evidence). Most of these subjects felt the proconspiracy evidence was superior (M difference = .60, $t(43) = 2.6$, $p < .02$). This finding cannot be attributed to the superior quality of the proconspiracy evidence, given the biased assimilation findings presented above.

Most of these subjects advocated a conspiracy theory at the conclusion of the study (reported: 59%, $M = 2.0$, $t(43) = 5.0$, $p < .001$; direct assessment: 61%, $M = 10.0$, $t(43) = 3.3$, $p < .005$). Thus, these results indicate that the future vitality of conspiracy theories is secure. Subjects without any initial assassination attitude were drawn to conspiracy theories, as opposed to the belief that Oswald acted alone, in disproportionate numbers. Attitude change for these subjects was highly correlated with their differential evaluation of the evidence (reported attitude change: $r = .60$, $p < .001$; direct assessment: $r = .64$, $p < .001$).

The evidence evaluation index was negatively correlated with RWA scores ($r = -.30$, $N = 33$, $p < .05$). As predicted, among subjects with no initial assassination attitude, authoritarianism was associated with an increased endorsement of the Oswald theory evidence. However, RWA scores were not directly associated with attitude change (reported attitude change: $r = -.07$, ns; direct assessment: $r = -.08$, ns). This suggests that authoritarianism is indirectly associated with the development of an Oswald theory attitude via an increased endorsement of evidence consistent with this position.

DISCUSSION

Debate continues to surround the events culminating in JFK's assassination, and, unlike other sociopolitical debates that are perhaps ultimately reducible to competing moral assumptions (e.g., abortion, capital punishment), there is ultimately a correct conclusion. Our results illustrate some of the factors underlying the debate's longevity and suggest that, in the absence of new and incontrovertible evidence, the debate will continue endlessly. A strong biased assimilation effect was observed in relation to both long-standing and new evidence. People on both sides feel that the same body of evidence supports their position. Thus, subjects' position on the assassination serves as a strong guiding hypothesis in their processing of the available evidence. This result is consistent with previous research indicating that people demonstrate systematic biases in their processing of information that reflects both cognitive (e.g., hypothesis confirmation; Snyder, 1984) and motivational (e.g., dissonance reduction; Festinger, 1957) processes.

Significant attitude polarization was also observed on both the self-report and direct assessment measures, and polarization on both measures was

associated with subjects' biased processing of the evidence. Thus, reviewing the evidence on the assassination—a body of evidence that is filled with uncertainties and inconsistencies—did not shake subjects' confidence in their initial viewpoint. The modal response was clearly a polarization or stabilization of attitude.

There appears to be a resurgence of support for the Oswald theory in the popular media. However, contrary to the strong charge in favor of the Oswald theory recently presented by Posner (1993), and others (Beschloss, 1993; Glauber & Rather, 1993; Thomas, 1993), subjects overwhelmingly endorsed the conspiracy theory in our study. Subjects who initially embraced the conspiracy theory overwhelmingly polarized or maintained their position. Moreover, subjects who initially favored the Oswald theory, and also subjects with no initial attitude on the assassination, were also drawn to the conspiracy viewpoint in disproportionate numbers.

An extreme initial attitude was associated with a relatively greater degree of biased assimilation and also greater reported polarization for the conspiracy advocates. This finding replicates and extends those of Miller et al. (1993) and is also relevant to an understanding of the assassination debate's longevity. For example, there is a group of hard-core conspiracy buffs who deal in the dissemination of conspiracy evidence. Conspiracy theories are, in short, big business. New books that reexamine the evidence for the presence of a conspiracy and set forth new conspiracy theories are published regularly (see Ward, 1993). Conspiracy buffs even have their own national conference, with all the trappings and merchandising that this entails (see Potok, 1993). Thus, it appears that both viewpoints on the assassination are durable. The conspiracy theory is durable because it has a large contingency of popular support and because many of these proponents passionately embrace the position. The Oswald theory is durable because it essentially represents the official government conclusion on the assassination, and, perhaps partly for this reason, the Oswald theory has its own ardent supporters.

Gallup polls indicate that a strong majority of Americans believe a conspiracy was responsible for JFK's death (75%; Potok, 1993). Our results indicate that, at the individual level, the strong support for conspiracy theories that already exists will simply self-propagate over time. However, there are probably several factors operating to maintain an allegiance to conspiracy theories. For example, at the group level, group polarization processes (Myers & Lamm, 1976) may further the proliferation of conspiracy theories by exerting conformity pressure and by leading to the lopsided presentation of proconspiracy evidence (the vast majority of publications on the assassination are proconspiracy; Posner, 1993). The well-publicized criticisms of the official government conclusion on the assassination (i.e., the Warren Report) also feed into the suspicions of a populace that views its leaders and governmental agencies as untrustworthy (see Kanter & Mirvis, 1989).

One salient aspect of the student sample employed is their relative naiveté about the assassination. All of the subjects were born, on the average, over 10 years after JFK was assassinated. However, one might expect the biased assimilation and polarization findings to be stronger in an older sample. Research on self-generated attitude change indicates that attitude polarization is pronounced by, and reliant upon, the existence of a well-developed knowledge structure about the attitude topic (Chaiken & Yates, 1985). If one assumes that older Americans do indeed have more well-developed knowledge about the assassination, then one would expect a greater degree of biased assimilation and polarization in a sample drawn from this population.

One advantage of this student sample was the relatively large number of subjects who had no assassination attitude at the beginning of the study, and the resultant opportunity to study the formation of assassination attitudes. In general, subjects with no prior attitude felt that the proconspiracy evidence was superior, and the majority expressed advocacy of a conspiracy theory at the conclusion of the study. Given the strong link between these subjects' evidence evaluations and subsequent attitude formation, a critical issue in understanding the formation of assassination attitudes is determining the factors that influence initial evaluations of the assassination evidence. Some preliminary evidence in our study suggests that authoritarians are more likely to develop a pro-Oswald theory stance indirectly via their tendency to more favorably evaluate evidence consistent with this position.⁷

One limitation of the present study was the low number of Oswald theory advocates ($N = 18$, 9% of the sample). Thus, it is difficult to make strong generalizations about Oswald advocates on the basis of the present results. However, despite their small numbers, the Oswald advocates clearly demonstrated the biased assimilation phenomenon and polarization on the direct assessment measure. Although there is no a priori reason to expect that those advocating the Oswald theory would be any less likely to demonstrate reported attitude polarization than their proconspiracy counterparts, a larger sample of Oswald advocates would be required to further investigate this issue.⁸

Measures of both reported and direct attitude change were employed in

⁷Authoritarianism was not associated with subjects' initial attitude toward the assassination in the present study. However, due to the small number of Oswald theory advocates, the nonsignificance of this correlation may be the result of range restriction. This issue must await future investigation.

⁸Attitude polarization studies employing the Lord et al. (1979) methodology typically have found significant polarization from subjects on both sides of the issue (Lord et al., 1979, 1984; Miller et al., 1993; Plous, 1991). Moreover, research focusing on the direct assessment of attitude change (e.g., the self-generated attitude change literature) typically ignores the opponent versus proponent distinction and analyzes the responses of both groups simultaneously (see Chaiken & Yates, 1985; Leone, 1989).

the present study. Although the two measures are associated with different research traditions, it seems reasonable to expect convergence between the two measures in relation to attitude polarization. However, Miller et al. (1993) presented evidence suggesting that the two measures tap different constructs, and our results are consistent with these findings. Although, in terms of group means, a significant degree of attitude polarization was demonstrated on both measures, at the individual level, subjects are not responding consistently to these measures (shared variance = 11%). This may simply represent a methodological difficulty, but it is also possible that subjects' different responses to these measures are of some theoretical importance. The results of our study, in conjunction with those of Miller et al. (1993), suggest that the investigation of individual differences in relation to the two measures is warranted.

The present results provide some indication of why the debate surrounding the JFK assassination has continued unabated for three decades. The existing body of evidence, filled with contradictions and ambiguities, is susceptible to differing interpretations. Moreover, the interpretations that people generate are driven by the initial hypothesis that they hold about the assassination. The tendency to embrace hypothesis-consistent information and derogate dissonant information leads, in turn, to attitude polarization. Although the eventual release of a mass of classified files about the assassination would seem to hold the hope of eventually resolving the debate, it is perhaps more likely that any new information will simply provide additional information to be assimilated in a biased fashion, allowing the debate surrounding the JFK assassination to continue endlessly.

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