Lyndon B. Johnson: The Assassination Of President John F. Kennedy

As new evidence emerges on widely debated topics over time, contestability arises; leaving room for more interpretations and theories. Such is the case with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Over the past few decades, many historians have put forth their interpretations on who orchestrated the assassination. American author and professor of history from Wesleyan University, William Manchester in 1963 suggested that Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson orchestrated the assassination for political gain and power. More recently, former Diplomat, author, and historian from the University of Glasgow contested Manchester by suggesting that three KGB agents were behind the assassination. These two historians' interpretations are clear examples of contestability in this debate as they span a large period of time, allowing variation between their personal contexts, therefore influencing their interpretations.

American author of 'The Death of a President' (1963), and professor of history from Wesleyan University, William Manchester contests the main conclusions of the assassination; stating that JFK's Vice President, Lyndon B. Johnson had Kennedy assassinated for political gain and power. According to Manchester, Johnson had asked the President to continue doing part of his old job as Texas Senator, meaning LBJ was "bored and emasculated" (Manchester, 1963) by the ostentatious office of Vice President as opposed to the actual power he held while being the majority leader of the senate. Manchester writes that Johnson and Kennedy argued the day before the assassination regarding Johnson's lack of control over Texas; an important swing state for Kennedy's reelection. Johnson's right hand man, Walter Jenkins had been warned by a high profile Texas lawyer named Byron Skelton that the political climate in Dallas was not safe, and that he feared for the Presidents safety, but Johnson had chosen not to inform the President. Although this information was also received by other officials close to Kennedy, such as that of his brother Robert Kennedy, one incident that proponents of this theory point to involves a woman named Madeleine Brown who allegedly had an affair with Johnson. She claimed to have attended a party with Johnson, Richard Nixon, and J. Edgar Hoover the night prior to the assassination. Brown stated that LBJ had whispered into her ear, "after tomorrow, those Kennedy's will never embarrass me again. That's no threat, that's a promise." (Manchester, 1963) Brown additionally claimed that on New Year's Eve 1963, she met with Johnson and that he confirmed the conspiracy to kill Kennedy, insisting that "Texas oil and...renegade intelligence bastards in Washington" (Brown, 1997) had been responsible. As Manchester also covers, Brown alleged that Johnson did not attempt to stop the assassination because he had an intense desire to be President. However this interpretation has been contested over the years due to the fact that although there is a clear motive, there is no tangible evidence to suggest that Johnson organised for the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Retired Diplomat, historian from the University of Glasgow and author of 'A Spy Like No Other' (2012), Robert Holmes has been another one of the many contributors to the debate surrounding the Kennedy Assassination. In his work, Holmes concludes that three Russian KGB officers used Oswald to assassinate Kennedy. Whilst speculation regarding Russian conspiracy are generally disregarded, due to the fact that having the President's blood on Soviet hands would have led to nuclear conflict in the midst of the Cold War, Holmes gives a straightforward

answer to this conundrum. “Militant Stalinist elements within the KGB had taken it upon themselves to take the ultimate revenge for what they saw as the humiliation of Khruschev’s climb-down over nuclear weapons in Cuba.” (Holmes, 2012). Throughout his interpretation, Oswald’s actions are generally associated with the Soviet Union as Oswald was “a self confessed communist [and spent] nearly three years in Minsk under KGB control.” (Holmes, 2012). Ivan Serov, Yuri Andropov, and Vladimir Kryuchkov were high-ranking KGB officers, who held indisputable credentials for their high risk militant action in support of Stalinism. Amid Kennedy’s death, Andropov and Kryuchkov had powers to control the work of the KGB as they held senior positions in the Secretariat of the Communist Central Party Committee; Kryuchkov had responsibility for Oswald. Holmes additionally believes that the Soviet Union had been seeking revenge for the West’s “victory” during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and sent officers to meet Oswald in the months before the murder which would explain Oswald’s visit to the Soviet Embassy in Mexico in September 1963. Holmes concludes that Serov, Andropov, and Kryuchkov acted without central authority to use Oswald to assassinate Kennedy. As Holmes’ work was also published more recently, it contests the older work of William Manchester as new evidence had arisen in the 49 years between the two works, including that of information surrounding Oswald’s trip to Mexico.

Thus, both Manchester and Holmes’ interpretations on the assassination of John F. Kennedy show contestability as they evidently fit into the criteria; both are esteemed academics and professionals in their respective fields who span a large period of time, leaving variation between their interpretations, each influenced by their personal contexts. Additionally, as they are both academics, it suggests they are reliable sources. Finally, the main point incontestability is in their contradictory explanations; with Manchester suggesting LBJ orchestrated the assassination and Holmes proposing it was the Soviet Union.