

Introduction

The writings of Vincent J. Salandria on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy are historic, foundational, and essential to any serious scholar interested in understanding the real dynamics of the Kennedy murder and its place as a terrible and pivotal moment of the American Century. In his 1967 book *Six Seconds in Dallas*, Josiah Thompson notes that what he terms the “second generation” of assassination researchers—including Mark Lane, Edward J. Epstein, Harold Weisberg, Raymond Marcus, Léo Sauvage, Richard Popkin—owe “a deep debt to Salandria’s pioneering and largely unsung research.”^[1] Thompson is accurate, since Salandria is in the front rank of Warren Commission critics, and the prescience of his analysis is an instruction to all interested people.

On November 22, 1963, the day of the assassination, Salandria watched the unfolding narrative on television with his then brother-in-law, the late Harold Feldman (himself an important scholar of this case and the author of the monograph “[Fifty-one Witnesses: The Grassy Knoll](#)”). Many friends of Salandria recount his responses to that day. Salandria noted at the first moments of this crime that it reeked of a governmental coup, and that the confirmation of his suspicion would be the murder of the alleged suspect while in custody. He observed that from the first hours of the case, the pronouncements of the government, as carried by the major media, contained a consciousness of guilt at the center of state power. At no time did the government entertain seriously the possibility of a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy, even as local authorities in Dallas and the mainstream media offered a steady stream of evidence pointing to conspiracy (witnesses and physicians saying Kennedy was shot from two directions; witnesses running to the grassy knoll in front of the motorcade as well as into buildings behind the motorcade; more than one rifle found; various suspects detained; gun smoke smelled at ground level; a bystander wounded). Although many of these reports could have been in error, Salandria noted that the federal authorities, if honest, would have pursued these reports rather than shut down their options and proclaim the guilt of one man, a warehouse worker named Lee Harvey Oswald.

Oswald’s guilt was indeed immediately proclaimed, and rarely with the qualifier “alleged.” Oswald’s supposed leftist political affiliations were loudly trumpeted as a means of enhancing the aura of guilt around a man declared the murderer—and the only murderer—[even before he was officially charged with the crime](#). It should be noted that the labeling by the government of Oswald as a leftist—and hence a homicidal madman—effectively stilled the dissent of and terrified much of the American progressive community, particularly with the publication of the *Warren Report*. The voice of Vincent Salandria, who never wavered from progressive values,

was not so stilled.

On Nov. 2, 1964, Salandria published an article in *The Legal Intelligencer*, the oldest law publication in the United States. The piece, [reproduced herein](#), is the first sustained criticism of the Warren Commission's conclusions on the forensic evidence in the assassination. It represents a courageous and articulate dissent from within the American legal profession that, sadly, has rarely been replicated. To those who today argue that the government's initial response to the assassination flowed from a concern merely to protect national security, Salandria's article, written in 1964, is a crucial response. It shows that the authorities were utterly disingenuous about the smallest detail of the forensic evidence of the crime, and none of the official conduct augured well for confidence in the government's motivations, then or now, in telling us about the assassination.

The circumstances of this article's publication are as remarkable and historic as its content. The Philadelphia Bar Association had just finished celebrating the work for the Warren Commission of Arlen Specter, a native son who would soon be elected the city's district attorney. Salandria, a practicing lawyer in Philadelphia, was unimpressed by his colleague's new status in the profession. Theodore Voorhees, then Chancellor of the Bar, felt that Salandria's dissent was too important for the *Intelligencer* to ignore, despite the paper's positive appraisal both of the *Warren Report* and the service provided to the Warren Commission by its legal staff.

Salandria's article, like his subsequent essays for the New Left journal *Liberation* [published in [January](#) and [March](#) 1965], contains a discourse now very familiar to assassination researchers, although it is doubtful if many know where the discourse originated. With a painstaking, methodical approach, Salandria showed how the government's own evidence completely undermined its conclusions. His argument was bolstered many times over in his *Liberation* pieces, written after the Commission had issued its [twenty-six evidentiary and hearings volumes](#). While critics have repeated *ad nauseam* the particulars of Salandria's argument (the conflicting medical exhibits; the timing of the shots; the impossible trajectories; the ammunition; the ignoring of testimony), few, it seems to me, have apprehended Salandria's perspective and sensibility as he studied these data.

Throughout his analysis of the Warren Commission evidence, Salandria posed to himself and to his reader questions that were at their heart philosophical and moral as well as political. He noted that the authorities, from the beginning, asked us to suspend not only the rule of law and basic physical laws, but also laws of logic and reason. We were asked by the Warren Commission to accept the Orwellian notion that two plus two equals five. We were asked to accept as sensible and professional conduct under our system of law the Chief Justice and his

staff accepting into evidence crude anatomical sketches of President Kennedy's wounds, drawn by a Navy corpsman at the direction of his superior, rather than primary autopsy data. Salandria asked himself and his readers if one could accept, as reasonable professional conduct of adult men, the Bethesda military doctors who performed Kennedy's autopsy not immediately contacting the medical personnel in Dallas who first treated him, but instead contacting these personnel only as an afterthought the morning after the autopsy was completed and the body sent on for burial. These questions are still pertinent at the end of the twentieth century, since the federal government has yet to provide to the American public a clear, firmly supported account of how many times President Kennedy was shot, from which direction(s), and on which parts of his body he was wounded. Each time an accounting of the wounds is offered (the Clark Panel in 1968; the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1979; the Journal of the American Medical Association in 1992), the narrative changes, usually to accommodate to some degree the skepticism of the public.

As Salandria continued his research into the assassination, he observed that the media's representations of the crime shifted regularly to meet the needs of the authorities in possession of the evidence. In this recognition, Salandria was especially prescient. Today, such writers as Jerry Policoff, Michael Parenti, Noam Chomsky, and many others have proven that ours is hardly an independent media, but rather a set of (dis)information organs, constructed as corporations, wholly answerable to state and private power. This was never more evident than in Salandria's early scrutiny of the media's coverage of the Kennedy assassination.

Less than two weeks after the assassination, *Life* magazine published a Memorial Issue containing an article that attempted to put to rest "nagging rumors" about the assassination.[2] The piece informed us that while President Kennedy was indeed shot in the throat from the front, this could be explained by examination of an 8mm film taken by a bystander that was at the moment of publication *Life's* exclusive property (the famous Zapruder film). The author of the essay informed us that the film shows Kennedy turning far around, exposing thereby his throat to Oswald's sniper's lair six stories above the presidential motorcade. It would be ten years before the general public would learn that no such turn took place as it finally saw the Zapruder film on national television. Few would know the history of media mendacity on this issue, but Salandria was keeping careful notes.

Life's uncritical support of the Warren Commission at times bordered on the hysterical. When the *Warren Report* was issued in the fall of 1964, *Life* was so enamored of it that [the magazine published not one but three versions of a single issue](#). The issue contained an account of the Warren findings written not by a *Life* journalist, but by Gerald Ford, the future President who served (at the suggestion of his friend Richard Nixon) on the Commission. Salandria remarked that it was highly unusual, in an era before computer-based publishing, for a magazine to

publish three versions of a single issue. The reason for this strange enterprise became clear as Salandria scanned the three versions. Each text contained refinements that bolstered the Commission's lone-nut thesis, and attempted to clear up (but in the process only complicated) the contradictions related to a broad range of subjects—from the direction of the President's body under the impact of the fatal shot to the timing of the Tippit shooting to the internal dissent on the Warren Commission. Salandria wrote to *Life* editor Ed Kern about the peculiar phenomenon of three versions of the same issue. [Kern replied](#) that indeed such an occurrence was highly unusual—and very costly—but could not figure out who authorized the changes nor how it was done.

In 1967-69 Salandria supported the efforts of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison in reopening the assassination probe. This work is not represented here, but is mentioned in other locations, including Garrison's *A Heritage of Stone* and *On the Trail of the Assassins*. Suffice it to say that Salandria's contribution to Garrison's effort was significant; Garrison sent an early printing of *On the Trail of the Assassins* to Salandria with the inscription: "To my intellectual mentor and friend." Garrison's discussion of "models of explanation" in *A Heritage of Stone* owes much to Salandria, whose examination of the elementary data convinced Garrison that he was looking not at a plot of right-wing fringe groups, but a coup at the center of the American power structure.

In the early 1970s, Salandria refined his model of explanation of the assassination in a speech before the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. The speech was published in the unlikely venue *Computers and Automation*, a Boston-based science journal created by Edmund Berkeley and Richard Sprague, two computer systems analysts committed to the truth of the assassination and issues of social justice. In this transitional article, [reprinted here](#), Salandria parted company with the school of assassination research—a school he helped to found—focused on Dealey Plaza, in order to examine the why of the assassination and its implications for America. At this stage of his work he determined that the continued ransacking of the Dealey Plaza microdata was a way of prolonging a false debate and instilling a pointless doubt and doublethink in the public, a theme that has been dominant in Salandria's work to this day.

For Salandria, the endless probing of the evidentiary minutiae proceeds from the assumption that the case for conspiracy isn't proven (and perhaps can never be proven), and that we should give the authorities the benefit of the doubt as we continue obsessional and debilitating detective work. For Salandria this reasoning, which invites the authorities to continue in their prevarication, is absurd and intellectually dishonest, since a consciousness of guilt was manifest in state power from the moment the assassination occurred. The micro-fixated critical orientation to this case forestalls an understanding of the assassination as a political act

requiring mass mobilization, and an analysis of the murder attentive to its political-economic context.

In the mid-70s, Salandria developed these concerns further with the assistance of his friend, Professor Thomas Katen. In a piece called [“The Design of the Warren Report, to Fall to Pieces,”](#) perhaps Salandria’s most controversial article, he posited something many critics—including Sylvia Meagher and Harold Weisberg—had long intuited about the *Warren Report*. To read the Report is to disbelieve it. The reasoning of the Report is absurd, yet unreasonable or irrational men didn’t write it. Salandria argued that the Report was designed to *appear* incredible, and thereby signal to the people of America that faith in constituency-based government was obsolete, as state power and the capitalist system it represents consolidated their authority over America. Salandria scholars (there are more than a few) debate this piece, arguing that the evidence is insufficient to judge the intent of the *Warren Report* authors to the level of Salandria’s assertions. Intentionality is indeed a tough call, but it is useful to consider the *effect* of the *Warren Report* alongside Salandria’s argument with the hindsight of thirty-six years.

Today the Kennedy assassination has entered cyberspace and the domain of pop culture. JFK assassination experts are everywhere, and although most think a conspiracy was “likely,” few seem able or interested in seeing how it was precipitated by basic assumptions of our government and economic system. Even fewer people seem interested in the crime’s relationship to subsequent history and our current moment as the case is consigned to the culture of postmodernity and *The X Files*. Looking at the current situation, we might reflect on Salandria’s most explosive contentions in [“The Design of the Warren Report,”](#) and an earlier piece, [“The Promotion of Domestic Discord.”](#) Is much of our supposedly adversarial culture, in large part produced by a culture industry, a means of coopting and diluting genuinely adversarial energies? The Huxleyan vision of the future Salandria spoke of in “The Design of the Warren Report” seems too close for comfort as wars become video games, and as we seek solace from the VCR and prescription tranquilizers.

The essay entitled [“A False Mystery Concealing State Crimes”](#) is Salandria’s speech before the Coalition on Political Assassination’s 1998 conference, and is a summary statement of his work. It exhorts the reader not to participate in the false, debilitating debate that refuses to say President Kennedy was the victim of a state-sanctioned coup. Salandria asks that we use this murder as an instruction for our times, a lesson concerning the bankruptcy of our way of life, as we engage in the difficult task of building a more just society. The speech, which took Salandria nearly two hours to deliver at COPA, received a prolonged standing ovation, heartening him greatly after a long period of believing assassination research had become an intellectual hobby horse and taken a disastrously pointless turn. The next evening, COPA gave

Salandria a long-overdue lifetime achievement award.

Vincent Salandria has never wanted a public profile, and consistently rejected offers to write a book. Occasionally he has accepted invitations from the Philadelphia media to speak on the subject of the assassination. He has also accepted invitations from civic groups to debate Arlen Specter; Specter has always refused, claiming he has “already” debated Salandria (presumably because he once answered questions about Salandria’s work). A speech by Salandria, although rare, is always pregnant with import that either misses most of the audience or is treated with derision. In a 1967 lecture attended by author Joe McGinniss, Salandria stated that RFK would most likely be assassinated, and that LBJ would step down from office. McGinniss, a chronicler of the 60s and 70s, thought it “sad” that Salandria should believe such things.[3]

In the past thirty-five years Salandria has, in pop psychology terms, “empowered” any number of people interested in the truth of the Kennedy murder. A few people who have benefited from his thought: Harold Feldman, Gaeton Fonzi, Ray Marcus, Jim Garrison, Sylvia Meagher, Jim DiEugenio, and incidentally myself. In the early 1990s, Salandria assembled a circle of correspondents who engage in a round-robin exchange concerning the Kennedy assassination, its legacy, and the shape of our current world. Among those who have participated in this very prolific circle are E. Martin Schotz, Michael Morrissey, Robert Dean, Fletcher Prouty, Steve Jones, Gaeton Fonzi, Barbara LaMonica, Jim Douglass, Dick Levy, Donald Gibson, William Pepper, Joan Mellen, Ben Schotz, and many others. I have been privileged to be in their number. In time, some of this correspondence may be offered for publication, an event that I think would be significant in enhancing public discussion of the JFK assassination. The thinking of this group has already found its way into Fonzi’s *The Last Investigation* and Schotz’s *History Will Not Absolve Us*. Both Fonzi and Schotz have been close friends to Salandria for over thirty years. Fonzi produced groundbreaking research for the House Select Committee on Assassinations. Schotz, who speaks with Salandria almost every day, has been his intellectual gadfly, a contributor of such magnitude to our understanding of this case it is appropriate that this compendium includes his essay “[The Waters of Knowledge](#),” also presented at the 1998 COPA meeting.

Schotz, a Boston psychiatrist, long ago suggested to Salandria that the public was encased in denial concerning the Kennedy assassination. Schotz observed that public discourse seemed to permit the notion that a conspiracy was “possible” or “likely.” A common statement on the subject is that one “feels” or “believes” that there was official misconduct and obfuscation in the crime. Like the addict or alcoholic unable to confront the seriousness of the disease, the American public would prefer not to *know* the truth and say it, but to remain locked in psychic and political paralysis rather than state outright that Kennedy was removed by official power, and thereby confront the monstrosity of our political-economic system. I have suggested to

Schotz that he extend his penetrating insight a bit further, since to live in America, it seems to me, means to live in some state of denial, because a sensitive person could not live here, aware of the nation's history, its murderous past, its cruel and inequitable present, without hiding in a carapace of denial. It is the hope of Schotz, Salandria, and this writer that we may all confront truth, shed denial, and build a better world.

I have many fond personal memories of Vince Salandria. I was still living in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, in 1973 when I screwed up the courage to drop a letter to this formidable, yet quiet, founder of the JFK assassination research community. My adolescent shyness was still obvious in those years, and I disliked imposing myself. My friend Robert Cutler, a flinty and outspoken Bostonian who did major work on the Dealey Plaza trajectory evidence, scoffed at my inhibition. He admonished me with the remark: "Do you know who he *is*?" I couldn't muster a reply. "He's the first damn researcher!" I wrote to Salandria, we had a brief exchange of letters, I invited him to lunch, he accepted.

At the time, I was completing my first graduate degree at Villanova University, and often took a train into center city Philadelphia before making a very long trek to Villanova in the Philadelphia "main line." My stopover in the city would frequently be the occasion to meet Salandria at his office, or at his old address on Delancey Place. We would have lunch (he bristled if I offered to pay) and walk through town. Salandria would tell me about the case, his experiences, his concern for America. I often felt like the companion to M. Dupin in one of Poe's detective stories. Suffice it to say that Salandria's original and penetrating mind made a lasting impression. He fast became one of the few thinkers whose sense of the world stayed with me. I soon began to chide him for his self-effacing tendencies; he still refers to himself as "a poor Italian peasant." He always knew he packed the gear, and my refusal to accept his modesty has fueled the humor in our relationship.

We appeared together once on the radio station of the University of Pennsylvania, Salandria's *alma mater*, and undertook a couple of minor projects before my graduate education and career took me far away from Philadelphia. I began lecturing on the assassination in 1975, recounting to college groups, churches, libraries, and high schools my experience as a researcher, my brief work for the House Select Committee on Assassinations, and my view of the case. I always brought up the name Salandria. In 1991, just prior to the release of Oliver Stone's film *JFK*, I realized that it had been almost five years since I last spoke to Vince Salandria. Among other things for which I must thank Stone's historic film is the prompt to get in touch again with a man who has been so transformational to my political and historical worldview. And I have benefited at least some, I think, from his enormous humanity and generosity.

I am grateful to John Kelin for creating this tribute to Vincent Salandria, and hope these

articles will inspire new enthusiasms in the young now with us, and in future generations.

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Notes

1. Josiah Thompson, *Six Seconds in Dallas: A Microstudy of the Kennedy Assassination* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1967), p. ix. [[↔](#)]
2. Paul Mandel, "[First Answers to the Nagging Rumors: What Lay Behind Six Crucial Seconds](#)" *Life*, Dec. 11, 1963. [[↔](#)]
3. Joe McGinniss, "The Fine Edge of Believability," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan. 6, 1967, p. 21. [[↔](#)]