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Warren Probe Revisited

The continuing fascination with the paralyzing sequence of events in Dallas, Tex., on Nov. 22, 1963, erupts from time to time with individual interpretations of how and why President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

The Madison area has been exposed recently to numerous replays of the amateur film taken of the President at the time of the shooting by Abraham Zapruder.

Opinions that run contrary to findings of the Warren Commission are stated with vehement conviction. They can be persuasive.

The challenges to the Warren Commission's report are many: Was the fatal bullet or bullets fired from in front of the presidential cavalcade instead of from behind, as the commission concluded? Could the slayer have fired three shots from the bolt-action rifle found on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository building? And so on.

The Warren Commission report is questioned and seldom defended. This has happened because the surviving members of the commission (Chairman Earl Warren, the former chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, is dead) feel secure in their findings after a massive investigation.

Without attempting an analysis of the charges, for which I'm not equipped, it is instructive to read again the Warren Commission report that was released on Sept. 27, 1964, as a reminder of just how detailed were its methodology and its conclusions.

The commission findings are listed, then supported with a precise account of how they were reached.

The commission began with a review of a five-volume report by the Federal Bureau of Investigation submitted on Dec. 9, 1963, on its investigation immediately following the assassination, along with similar reports from the Secret Service and the Department of State.

Later, the commission directed requests to 16 major departments of the federal government, 11 of its independent agencies and four congressional committees, asking for relevant information.

The FBI assigned 81 agents to the investigation exclusively. They conducted 25,600 interviews. The search was conducted on 5-12-68

At its hearings, the commission reported hearing testimony of 552 witnesses.

From all this, the commission concluded that President Kennedy was killed by shots fired by Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, from the sixth floor of the Depository Building.

There is not space here to reproduce supporting data. Those who want their memories refreshed can find copies of the Warren Commission report in hometown libraries.

However, here is a quick rundown of how the commission concluded that the fatal shots were fired from the Depository building after the presidential cavalcade had passed it.

The autopsy: Lt. Col. Pierre A. Finck, chief of wound ballistics in the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, concluded that the President was struck by two bullets, one in the skull and one in the neck.

Reporting on the wound at the back of President Kennedy's skull, Dr. Finck testified that it "is a wound of entrance." Comdr. James J. Hines, senior pathologist at Bethesda Naval Hospital, acting as chief autopsy surgeon, concurred. So did Comdr. J. Thornton Boswell, chief of pathology at Bethesda, who assisted.

They also found that the bullet inflicting the neck wound had entered from the rear and "exited from the front of the neck."

Ballistics: Two firearms identification experts, reporting on independent investigations, testified the nearly whole bullet taken from President Kennedy's stretcher and two large bullet fragments found in the presidential limousine were fired from the C706 Mannlicher-Carcano rifle found on the sixth floor of the Depository building "to the exclusion of all other weapons."

Based on eyewitness reports, a mass of supporting evidence, the commission concluded the rifle was "owned by" Oswald and had been carried into the Depository building the morning of Nov. 22, 1963.

Oswald's firearms expertise: Field tests, an examination of Oswald's Marine firearms training and abilities, and analysis of films

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of the assassination led the commission to conclude that "a rifleman of Lee Harvey Oswald's capabilities could have fired the shots from the rifle used in the assassination within the elapsed time of the shooting." The findings of the firearms experts were that it would take 2.3 seconds "at minimum" between shots; they said this was within Oswald's capabilities, given his known firearms proficiency.

Windshield: The commission said the windshield in the presidential limousine was struck by a bullet fragment "on the inside surface of the glass, but (it) was not penetrated."

Finally, what about Zapruder's movie? Those showing the film note that the President's head seems to snap back about the time he was hit, indicating to them, at least, that the fatal shots had been fired from the front?

Actually, three amateur movies were taken.

The movie-taking spectators were Zapruder, Orville O. Nix and Mary Muchmore.

The commission report states: "Substantial light has been shed on the assassination sequence by viewing these motion pictures, particularly the Zapruder film, which was the most complete.

The other two films were valuable for cross-reference, as this excerpt from the Warren Commission report indicates:

"After a bullet penetrated President Kennedy's neck, a subsequent shot entered the back of his head. . . . The Zapruder, Nix and Muchmore films show the instant in the sequence when the bullet struck.

"The impact was evident from the explosion of the President's brain tissues from the right side of his head. The immediately preceding frame from the Zapruder film shows the President slumped to his left, clutching at his throat, with his chin close to his chest and his head tilted forward at an angle.

"Based upon information provided by the doctors who conducted the autopsy, an artist's drawing depicted the path of the bullet

through the President's head.

"By using the Zapruder, Nix and Muchmore motion pictures, the President's location at the time the bullet penetrated his head was fixed with reasonable precision. A careful analysis of the Nix and Muchmore films led to fixing the exact location of these cameramen. The point of impact of the bullet on the President's head was apparent in all of the movies.

"The President's location, established through the Nix and Muchmore films, was confirmed by comparing his position on the Zapruder film.

"The location had hitherto only been approximated, since there were no landmarks in the background of the Zapruder frame for alignment purposes other than a portion of a painted line on the curb.

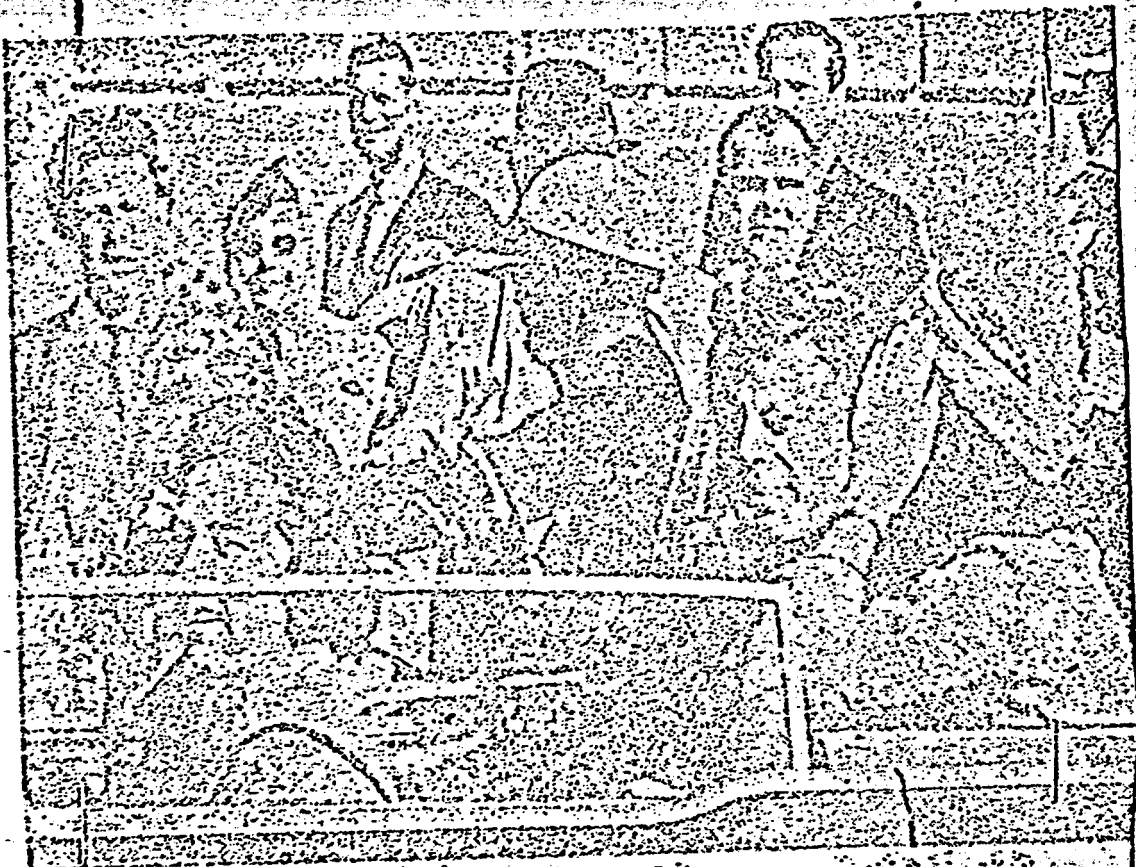
This is only a fraction of the exhaustive Warren Commission report.

It is presented as a reminder that the report was compiled by a commission and staff of able people who went to great lengths to try to answer as many questions as possible about President Kennedy's assassination.

The investigation was conducted by a chairman of unquestioned integrity — the late Earl Warren, chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

This doesn't rule out questions and contrary opinions; nevertheless, in judging any new theories, it is only fair to test them against the painstaking Warren Commission report.

Robert W. Spiegel



Presidential party in Dallas, Nov. 22, 1963