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AT THE BRINK**

SEPTEMBER 6, 1966

# NATIONAL REVIEW



**FINAL** **DAILY NEWS** **5¢**  
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

**PRESIDENT  
KILLED**

## **WAS THERE AN ACCOMPLICE?**

An Analysis of President John F. Kennedy's Assassination  
by the author of The Story of the Sacco-Vanzetti Case

**FRANCIS RUSSELL**

# Doubts About Dallas

FRANCIS RUSSELL

One of the minor exhibits in the Sacco-Vanzetti case was a revolver, belonging to the foreman of the jury, which was later confiscated by the court. When I was writing about the case I happened to come across this revolver in the files of the Dedham clerk of court. A few months later, I went to his office to see it again, to compare it with photographs of Vanzetti's revolver. I remembered exactly where I had first seen it, in the bottom drawer of the left-hand filing cabinet. My memory was at fault. The revolver was in an upper cabinet drawer on the opposite side of the room and had never been anywhere else. Yet so sharp was my imaginary recollection of that bottom drawer that I would have been willing to swear I had seen the exhibit there, and I should have continued to swear this was so even if a man's life had depended on it. That I, in such a slow-paced and unemotional situation, could have been so mistaken has made me doubt the trustworthiness of most witnesses who in a tense moment have glimpsed an act of violence. No two people will recall such an event in the same way and with the same details, nor do the contradictions necessarily mean that anyone is a conscious liar.

In the case of Kennedy's assassination it might only be expected that from the hundreds of persons who witnessed the occurrences before, during and after the shooting, enough conflicting stories would spring up to develop a variety of theories as to what really happened. Lee Harvey Oswald's fantastic appearance on television after the assassination, and his even more fantastic television-viewed murder by Jack Ruby were the stuff of which myths are made—and the myths were not long in coming. In spite of Oswald's checkered Communist background, the Left will-to-believe in a right-wing conspiracy was stronger than the facts. So, the expatriate Thomas Buchanan invented his Mr. X, a Texas

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*Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth*, by Edward Jay Epstein. Viking, \$5.00

*Push to Judgment*, by Mark Lane. Holt, \$5.95

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Lee Harvey Oswald

millionaire who had arranged to do away with Kennedy in order to protect that Texas bill of rights, the oil depletion allowance. Leo Sauvage in France saw the killing as a conspiracy of police, gangsters and assorted right-wingers. The German-born Joachim Joesten imagined a league of death that included the FBI, the CIA, the Army and the by-now-inevitable oil millionaires. From the other side of the "nut" spectrum the John Birch Society also saw government officials as involved in the assassination, made necessary after Kennedy showed signs of reneging on his "Communist" past. In the Birch version Secretary McNamara was already making arrangements for the funeral a week before the President was killed.

I do not pretend to be an expert on the murder events in Dallas. From

what I read in the weeks that followed, I assumed that Oswald, and Oswald alone, was guilty of the killing of Kennedy and of Patrolman Tippit. When his widow admitted that she thought so too, that really seemed proof enough. The half-crazy, half-Communist Oswald resembled the half-crazy, half-anarchist Czolgosz who shot McKinley. Such men are loners in thought and deed. As for the wretched Jack Ruby, he probably had the idea he was going to make himself a national hero by doing away with Oswald.

Though Ruby had stopped Oswald's mouth, the event itself still seemed simple. Oswald, sitting by the window on the sixth floor of the Texas School Depository Building with his mail-order rifle, had fired three shots at the Presidential car as it passed below. The first shot had hit Kennedy in the back, the second had wounded Texas Governor Connally, and the third in striking Kennedy in the back of the head had exploded his skull and killed him. Nevertheless, with such varied purveyors of weird conjecture as Buchanan, Sauvage, Joesten and the John Birch Society, it was reassuring to learn that President Johnson had created a commission to investigate and evaluate all the facts and circumstances surrounding Kennedy's murder and Oswald's death. The names of Chief Justice Warren, Allen Dulles, John McCloy and Senators Russell and Cooper seemed the guarantee of definitive answers to the questions: Was Oswald alone? Was he shot to keep him quiet? Was he the agent of some political conspiracy? Was a foreign power involved? Was there any truth to the rumor that he was really innocent?

After ten months of investigation the members of the Commission concluded that Oswald alone fired the three shots that killed President Kennedy and wounded Governor Connally. He was assisted by no one else. There was no evidence to show that he was an agent of a foreign government or was in any way encouraged by a foreign government. He acted by himself, and the clues to his motivation are apparent in his

life history. Oswald and Jack Ruby were unknown to each other, and neither man was part of any conspiracy.

For me that seemed conclusive enough. Other theories could no doubt be evolved from the involuntary contradictions of so many witnesses, but the eminent Commission had considered that too, with an attention to detail scarcely possible to a private individual. Those who did not accept the Commission's findings would be too emotionally committed to some other point of view to be accessible to reason—like those aging impassioned defenders of Sacco and Vanzetti who refuse to accept the photographic ballistics evidence that Sacco's pistol was the murder weapon.

I must admit to having picked up these two books critical of the Commission and its findings—Edward Jay Epstein's *Inquest* and Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment*—with the irritated feeling that two dissenters were engaged in a process similar to that of challenging the Sacco ballistics evidence. I finished by absorbing certain of the authors' doubts, and certainly doubts as to the adequacy of the task performed by the Warren Commission.

As Mr. Epstein points out, the purpose of the Commission was a dual one: to determine the truth of what happened in Dallas on November 22, 1963; and to protect the national interest by settling "assassination rumors." But these two purposes could be compatible only so long as the damaging rumors were untrue. Mr. Epstein sees as "demonology" the view that the Warren Commission altered and suppressed evidence. But he does feel that the members started off with the tacit assumption of their conclusions, and that they emphasized the evidence that confirmed these conclusions and passed over evidence to the contrary.

THE KEY QUESTION for the Commission was whether Oswald had accomplices. Was it or was it not possible for him to have fired off the three shots that almost all witnesses agreed had been fired? His rifle and three spent shells were found in the hideout on the sixth floor of the Texas School Depository. Governor Connally testified before the Commission that, sitting with his wife in the collapsible jump seats just ahead of President Kennedy as they rode in

the motorcade, he heard a report that he at once recognized as a rifle shot. He turned back to look at the President, and as he did so felt something strike him in the back. A third and final shot shattered the back of Kennedy's head. The FBI in its report claimed that the first and third shots struck the President, the second the Governor. The Commission decided otherwise.

An amateur photographer, Abraham Zapruder, recorded the sequence of the assassination with his movie camera in ten seconds of color film running from just before the first shot until the fatal last one. I had them before me as I write. Kennedy is first shown smiling and waving the crowd from the rear seat. Suddenly his elbows fly up, his cheeks puff and his hands seem to clut

at his throat, while Connally just in front of him stares sedately ahead. Then Connally turns just as Kennedy's elbows begin to drop. As the President slumps forward, the Governor—now obviously himself struck—sinks sideways into his seat. Finally there is a red burst of the explosion that shattered Kennedy's head. From these stills it seems clear that the three shots took effect as stated in the FBI report. By a frame-by-frame analysis of the film sequence the FBI later concluded that the first two shots must have hit Kennedy within a period of one-and-a-half seconds. Since this would have been too short a period to fire a bolt-action rifle twice, the Commission decided that the first shot had gone through Kennedy's back, come out his throat and then gone through Connally's body. The Governor's reaction was delayed (why, more than the President's, is not explained). The

second shot struck Kennedy in the head, and the third went wild.

If the time-sequence analysis of the Zapruder film is correct, one is forced to accept one of the following two propositions: either the first bullet that struck Kennedy also struck Connally; or, if Connally was hit by a second bullet, some one other than Oswald fired it. The general counsel for the Commission stated that "to say they were hit by separate bullets is synonymous with saying that there were two assassins." So the Commission concluded that "two bullets probably caused all the wounds suffered by President Kennedy and Governor Connally."

The autopsy reports are extremely technical, but this much is clear—as Mr. Epstein points out—that the Warren Report and the FBI reports give diametrically opposite versions of the findings as to whether or not the bullet that struck Connally first passed through Kennedy's body. Photographs and x-rays of the dead President would seem to offer the only final solution of this question, but these exhibits—under the control of the

Kennedy family—were not made available. So, in spite of all the Warren Commission's labors, the doubt remains as to whether it really did do what it set out to do.

This is Mr. Epstein's most trenchant point. To it he brings a number of pertinent observations. He does not assert that there was a second assassin, but he does indicate that the in-



vestigation of the possibility was neither exhaustive nor thorough. "Quite clearly," he writes, "a serious discussion of this problem would in itself have undermined the dominant purpose of the Commission, namely the settling of doubts and suspicions. Indeed, if the Commission had made

it clear that very substantial evidence indicated the presence of a second assassin, it would have opened up a Pandora's box of doubts and suspicions."

Mark Lane in his self-appointed task of representing the dead Oswald is of course *parti pris*. Harrison Salisbury, the assistant managing editor of the *New York Times*, in his introduction to the Warren Report described Lane as a "New York attorney who has made a career of insinuating that Mr. Kennedy was the victim of a right-wing plot." Yet, whether one agrees with Mr. Salisbury and with J. Edgar Hoover that Lane is not a lawyer anyone would retain "if they were serious in trying to get down to the facts," he has presented a number of disturbing discrepancies between facts and the Warren Report. As Mr. Trevor-Roper points out in his introduction, *Rush to Judgment* does show that in the Warren Report a whole series of conclusions are based on carefully selected evidence and that the full body of the evidence does not necessarily point to those conclusions. He writes:

The writers of the Report have selected such evidence as may seem to sustain their conclusion. They have chosen to ignore a great deal of evidence which does not support but even traverses that conclusion. And in the collection and examination of evidence they have shown a remark-

able preference for certain kinds of evidence, certain types of witnesses. The pattern which they have extracted from the evidence is certainly a pattern which can be made to emerge from it; but it does not emerge naturally, or from all the evidence: it has been coaxed and forced by a process, which, had there been an advocate on the other side, might well have been totally discredited before judgment could be given. The worst that can be said of Mr. Lane is that he is the necessary advocate.

The Epstein book was begun as a master's thesis, based on an examination of the Warren Report. Lane's is not so much thesis work as field work, and he has devoted much time to interviewing the witness passed over by the Commission. Yet the basic conclusion of the two men is the same: that the members of the Commission, in their commitment to corroborate an already formed point of view, disregarded—Lane would have it "suppressed"—evidence to the contrary.

EVEN GRANTED the self-deceptive quality of witnesses' recollections, the discrepancies between the facts and the report cannot be passed over. Mr. Lane has amassed an impressive number of such discrepancies. For example, of the 90 assassination witnesses who were asked from where they thought the shots came, 58 said from the grassy knoll ahead of the Presidential car rather than from the Book Depository. Half a dozen thought they saw a puff of smoke on the knoll.

A bullet, found in the corridor of the Parkland Hospital where the President was brought, was first said to have fallen from Kennedy's stretcher, then Connally's. This bullet and the fragments of bullets found in the Presidential limousine were definitely established as having been fired from a rifle found on the sixth floor of the Book Depository. This bullet the Commission has assumed to have hit Kennedy in the back, emerged from his neck, penetrated Connally's back, smashed his rib, fractured his wrist and entered his thigh—while scarcely losing shape in the traverse. Possible; but impossible that it would have lost only 1.4 to 2.4 grains of metal, while over three grains were present just in Connally's wrist. The doctors who examined Kennedy at the hospital all testified that the neck wound was an entrance wound. If

so, it could not have been fired from the angle of the Book Depository. Later, Secret Service agents arrived at the hospital to lay down to the doctors that all wounds had been inflicted from the rear. And the doctor who conducted the autopsy at the military hospital was ordered not to discuss the matter.

Still other questions intrude. Why was Oswald wanted by the police at least half an hour before Tippit was shot? The Commission's explanation is vague, and indeed erroneous in claiming that Oswald was the only person working in the building who was outside just after the assassination. In fact two-thirds of those who worked there were outside for the lunch hour and to see the President. Then there is the matter of Jack Ruby and his intimacy with the police, so muted by the Commission. Whatever he may be, there is still the possibility that he could reveal vital information. He offered to tell the truth if he could tell it outside Texas and away from the Dallas police. The Commission refused him this opportunity.

In the chapter, "Four Episodes," Lane examines the following questions, to all of which the Commission gave negative answers. Did Oswald bring a rifle to a sporting goods shop in Irving early in November 1963? Did he attempt to buy a car during that time? Did he practice firing at rifle ranges in Dallas and Irving? Did he meet with an anti-Castro group in September 1963? There is evidence that he did all these things. An employee of the Irving Sports Shop stated that two weeks before the assassination he marked the name "Oswald" on the repair tag of a rifle. A salesman for the Downtown Lincoln Mercury agency in Dallas demonstrated a hardtop to a man on November 9 who drove the car rather recklessly and gave his name as Leon Oswald. The salesman later wrote the name on the back of a business card, and his story is corroborated both by the sales manager and by a polygraph lie detector test. Half a dozen workers said they saw Oswald firing on a rifle range several days before the assassination. An anti-Castro émigré of good reputation, Sylvia Odio, testified to a lawyer of the Commission that in September 1963 Oswald and two Mexicans or Cubans visited her. Oswald gave his name as Leon Oswald and remarked

that "President Kennedy should have been assassinated after the Bay of Pigs."

Oswald did not drive a car, and he was in New Orleans when he is alleged to have visited Mrs. Odio. Yet there is strong evidence from honest people that he did both these things. Mr. Lane offers the hypothesis that others have since taken up. There were, he suggests, two Oswalds, the false Oswald being engaged before the assassination in trying to "frame" the real one.

In many such examples, including the mystery of the photographs made of the Depository sixth-floor window at the very moment of the crime, it seems to me that Lane has proved his point against the Commission. It just did not do its job properly. Senator

ator Ted Kennedy was interviewed after the Epstein book appeared. He said he had not read the Warren Report but he was convinced from other sources that Oswald alone and without other assistance was his brother's killer. Certainly the resources of the Kennedy family are large enough for them to have investigated amply on their own, and no doubt they have done so. I think Senator Kennedy is right. The contradictions and apparent enigmas can be resolved. There is probably a rational explanation for the throat wound, for the time sequence shown by the Zapruder film, for the pseudo-Oswald and other questions raised by Mr. Lane. What is needed now is a commission to investigate the Warren Commission and its findings.

*EW*