

ROBERT MACNEIL AND THE THREE CALM MEN

by

William Weston

It was less than three months after the death of President Kennedy, that William Manchester had taken on the project of writing a book about the assassination. A widely respected, well-established author, Manchester had no intention of departing from the no-conspiracy conclusions of the government. He soon realized that his task was not going to be easy. Lee Oswald, the accused assassin, was a complex enigma, who often defied rational analysis. One of the most difficult challenges the author had to face was explaining Oswald's escape from the Texas School Book Depository. According to carefully tested calculations, Oswald was still in the Book Depository about two or three minutes after the shooting ended. Eight minutes later he was riding on a bus, seven blocks away. The Warren Commission firmly maintained that Oswald simply walked those seven blocks. But it had no way of proving it. Among the thousands of pedestrians and motorists who filled the streets of Dallas that day, not one apparently noticed this purposeful young man striding rapidly along the sidewalks of Elm Street. Whereas multitudes of people were advancing into the chaotic vortex of Dealey Plaza, Oswald was presumably going against the flow in his efforts to get away. This lack of eyewitness confirmation would not have been a serious problem had it not been for the persistence of at least one credible eyewitness who was sure that Oswald left in a Nash Rambler. Contravening details like these threatened to unravel the whole lone-assassin scenario.

A turning point in Manchester's research came when he discovered a highly significant document in the files of the FBI. It was a written statement by a news reporter named Robert MacNeil, who worked for NBC News Radio. After studying this report, Manchester was convinced that he had found a witness who could give solid support to the official reconstruction of Oswald's escape. He picked up the phone and called MacNeil at his office in New York. Although the latter remembered the incident, he was unable to recall any more details than what he had already given to the FBI. Even more disappointing was his inability to say for certain that the man he spoke to was Oswald. [1] Yet this was not an insurmountable difficulty. Manchester believed that he had enough corroborating evidence to make a positive identification un-

necessary. In his mind, the encounter between Oswald and MacNeil was an important event, which filled a major gap in his narrative of the assassination.

Manchester was not carefully reading his sources. A close examination of the evidence shows that the eminent historian had relied on an incident that was entirely fictitious. Prior to Oswald's arrest, there was never a time when the news reporter or the accused assassin had ever seen each other face to face.

Yet Manchester was right about one thing. MacNeil's statement is indeed a very important document—not for what it says about Oswald, but rather for what it reveals concerning the conspiracy that resulted in the death of a president. Especially illuminating is the description of three men, calm and relaxed, on the ground floor of the Book Depository. The strange tableau of the three calm men, so unnatural in comparison to the panic and alarm outside, is a clear indication that these men were actively involved in the plot to murder our country's chief executive. This article will explore the conspiratorial implications of MacNeil's story—not only as it pertains to the Book Depository but also to the grassy knoll.

WHERE DID MACNEIL SAY THE SHOTS CAME FROM?

Robert MacNeil was a reporter on the White House staff, accompanying the President on his five-city tour of Texas. When the motorcade left Love Field in Dallas, MacNeil was riding with other reporters in a press bus about eight cars behind the presidential limousine. [2] As the bus was moving down Houston Street, the reporters heard a loud noise which some people interpreted as coming from a firecracker. MacNeil thought it was a shot. Other reporters said "no" or were not sure. A few seconds later, two more explosive noises resounded through the bus. MacNeil stood up and said, "They were shots! Stop the bus! Stop the bus!"

The bus was by then turning the corner from Houston Street onto Elm. The driver opened the door and MacNeil jumped out. No one else followed him. Although the presidential limousine was no longer in sight, MacNeil quickly realized that there had been a shooting. The air was filled with screams and cries; people on both sides of the street had thrown themselves onto the grass to avoid getting hit. Several police officers and spectators were running up a grassy slope toward a tree-lined wooden fence, apparently in pursuit of a gunman. MacNeil followed them, and ended up at a spot where the wooden fence joined the railroad overpass.

There is a photograph of MacNeil standing among the

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cluster of people, looking over the fence toward the railroad tracks. [3] At the instant the picture was taken, MacNeil was no longer looking over the fence. Instead, he had turned his head to look over his left shoulder. He was undoubtedly scanning the area for some place that might have a phone. He quickly decided to try the building nearest him, which happened to be the Texas School Book Depository.

He ran in that direction. By the time he reached the front entrance, about four minutes had elapsed since the shooting ended. He managed to find an unused phone in the building and immediately contacted NBC News in New York. His report clearly demonstrates where MacNeil thought the shots came from:

Shots were fired as President Kennedy's motorcade passed through downtown Dallas. People screamed and lay down on the grass as three shots rang out. Police chased an unknown gunman up a grassy hill. It is not known if the shots were directed at the President. Repeat. It is not known if the shots were directed at the President. This is Robert MacNeil, NBC News in Dallas. [4]

Coming from an experienced and reputable newsman, this report adds more weight to the evidence that a gunman was shooting at the President from a front-facing position. Almost twenty years later MacNeil made the following comment concerning his initial impressions: "You follow your instincts and mine led me up the grassy knoll. It is one of the personal reasons I have for paying serious attention to those who claim there were shots from there as well as from the Book Depository." [5]

After finishing his report, he immediately went outside and made inquiries. He quickly learned that the President had been hit in the shooting and was taken to the emergency room of Parkland Hospital. Realizing that he was stuck in Dealey Plaza, while the story was developing at the hospital, MacNeil tried to think of some ready means of transportation. No cab was in sight, but there were cars moving through the plaza via Main Street. MacNeil ran out to that street and stopped the first car that came along. After explaining his situation to the driver, he offered him five dollars to take him to the hospital. The driver accepted the offer, and MacNeil got into the car. At the newsman's urging, the driver broke speed limits racing to the hospital. Arriving just ahead of the bus that dropped him off at Dealey Plaza, MacNeil paid the driver five dollars and rushed inside. He managed to find an unused pay phone and kept NBC apprised of up-to-date developments. After the departure of Mrs. Kennedy with her entourage and the casket, MacNeil spent the rest of the afternoon keeping up with the

news by watching TV with his colleagues. When a picture of Oswald was broadcast, MacNeil had no flash of recognition. [6] Later that night, he observed Oswald as he was being led down the corridor of police headquarters. Looking into his face, MacNeil saw "a strange, frightened smirk." [7] It never occurred to MacNeil that he might have seen this face several hours earlier on the steps of the Book Depository—not until a year and a half later, when he received a phone call from Manchester.

DID MACNEIL SEE OSWALD AS HE WAS LEAVING THE BOOK DEPOSITORY?

Considering the importance of the MacNeil-Oswald encounter to the thesis of Manchester's work, it is indeed remarkable that the only mention of it occurs in the chronological section of his book: "12:33 p.m. - [Oswald] Leaves Depository by front entrance, pausing to tell NBC's Robert MacNeil he can find a phone inside; thinks MacNeil is a Secret Service man." [8]

The above notation treats the encounter as if it were a settled fact; yet behind the facade of historical accuracy is a multitude of uncertainties. MacNeil has never positively stated that he saw Oswald; Oswald never mentioned speaking to a reporter at the Book Depository. What grounds did Manchester have for including that brief chronological entry?

In order to understand how Manchester discovered this incident, it is essential to realize that his source is actually a composite of two statements. Both MacNeil and Oswald described an incident in which the central feature was a request for directions to the nearest telephone. Because the time and place of each account were virtually congruent, it is therefore not unreasonable for Manchester to suppose that both men were talking about the same thing. To see how this is possible, let us first examine what MacNeil had to say in his book *The Way We Were*, copyrighted 1988:

I ran to the right and into the first building I came to that looked as though it might have a phone. It was the Texas School Book Depository. As I ran up the steps and through the door, a young man in shirt sleeves was coming out. In great agitation I asked him where there was a phone. He pointed inside to an open space where another man was talking on the phone situated near a pillar and said "Better ask him." I was inside and asked the second man, who pointed to an office at one side. I found a telephone on the desk. Two of the Lucite buttons were lit up. I punched another, got long distance and was through to the NBC News Radio desk in about ten seconds. [9]

To identify the young man as Oswald, Manchester had to

compare the details in MacNeil's story to some remarks made by Oswald to a member of the Secret Service, Thomas Kelley. The following is an extract from Kelley's report:

At the time he [Oswald] asked me whether I was an FBI Agent and I said that I was not that I was a member of the Secret Service. He said when he was standing in front of the Textbook Building and about to leave it, a young, crew-cut man rushed up to him and said that he was from Secret Service, showed a book of identification, and asked him where the phone was. Oswald said that he pointed toward the pay phone in the building and that he saw the man actually go to the phone before he left. [10]

The circumstantial similarities that appear in both statements seem to justify the notion that MacNeil and Oswald were indeed together for a brief conversation. These similarities are: (1) MacNeil asked a man on the front steps of the Book Depository where he could find a phone. Oswald was in front of the same building when a man came up to him and asked for the location of a phone. (2) The man whom MacNeil spoke to was young and wearing a shirt. Oswald was 24-years-old and had on a shirt. (3) Oswald spoke to a man who must have been wearing a suit and tie as befits a Secret Service agent; MacNeil was wearing a suit and tie.

Yet here the similarities end. The differences in the other details bring intractable difficulties upon any attempt to reconcile them into a single incident: (1) The man whom Oswald spoke to had a crew-cut; MacNeil's hair was long enough to comb down; (2) Oswald spoke to a young man; MacNeil at the age of thirty-two was older than Oswald by eight years. It is not likely that Oswald would refer to MacNeil as "a young man." (3) MacNeil was wearing a press badge, whereas the man whom Oswald spoke to was not wearing a badge; instead he had a "book of identification" which he had to pull out of a pocket, most likely the inside pocket of his suit coat. (4) The man made a declaration to Oswald that he was a member of the Secret Service; his credentials must have also indicated that he was Secret Service. This one fact alone should dispel any speculation that Oswald spoke to MacNeil. *

Although superficially similar, the statements of MacNeil and Oswald are actually two separate and distinct descriptions of two entirely different episodes. Under normal circumstances, it would have been a remarkable coincidence to find two very similar incidents occurring at nearly the same time at virtually the same location. But the assassination was an event that completely shattered the ordinary routines of daily life. All of a sudden the need to communicate became overwhelmingly urgent, putting a huge demand on every available

telephone in the area. There must have been quite a few people criss-crossing through Dealey Plaza in the search for telephones. The Book Depository would naturally have been one of the most obvious places to look. It should not be surprising to find one phone search incident at the Book Depository closely followed by another.

DID OSWALD GET ON A BUS AT 12:40?

According to the Warren Commission, Oswald was seen at 12:32 by Mrs. Reid on the second floor of the Book Depository. At 12:40 he boarded Cecil McWatters' bus and was recognized by a fellow passenger named Mrs. Bledsoe, who used to be his landlady. The Warren Commission reasoned that he went out the front door at 12:33 and walked—at a rapid pace—to Murphy Street where he boarded the bus. No witnesses have come forward to confirm this mode and direction of escape. Manchester's dubious attempt to strengthen the official version by manufacturing an encounter between MacNeil and Oswald only served to emphasize its weakness.

Even more damaging to the government's reconstruction of Oswald's movements is Sylvia Meagher's carefully reasoned analysis of the contradictory statements of the witnesses who supposedly saw Oswald on the bus. [11] While a recapitulation of her analysis is beyond the limits of this article, it is sufficient to say that Meagher came to believe that neither Oswald nor Bledsoe rode on McWatters' bus that day. The accumulating weight of evidence demonstrates without a doubt that Oswald neither took a hike down Elm Street, nor did he get on a bus at Murphy Street; it also reinforces the credibility of Deputy Roger Craig, who insisted that Oswald got away in a car driven by a dark-skinned man.

WHO WAS THE MAN WHO GAVE MACNEIL DIRECTIONS TO A PHONE?

Having thus established that MacNeil did not see Oswald on the front steps of the Book Depository, we can now return to their statements to see what direction they take us in our quest to discover the truth of the assassination. To supplement the details of the MacNeil story quoted earlier, I am providing below the complete text of the written statement that he submitted to the FBI:

Just before the shooting of the President in Dallas on November 22, I was riding in the first press bus of the motorcade, some seven or eight cars behind the President. On hearing the shots I got out of the bus immediately and followed some police officers who were running up the grass slope to the right of the road and which the President was shot. We climbed a fence and I followed the police who appeared to be chasing someone, or under the impression they were chasing

* *... of the whole thing to his wife ... NO SS-man in dealing with ... minutes later. (All right to it was ...)*

someone, across the railroad tracks. Wanting to phone news of the shooting, I left there and went to the nearest place that looked like an office. It was the Texas School Book Depository. I believe I entered the front door about four minutes after the shooting. I went immediately into the clear space on the ground floor and asked where there was a phone. There were, as I recall, three men there, all I think in shirt sleeves. What, on recollection, strikes me as possibly significant is that all three seemed to be exceedingly calm and relaxed, compared to the pandemonium which existed right outside their front door. I did not pay attention to this at the time. I asked the first man I saw—a man who was telephoning from a phone by a pillar in the middle of the room—where I could call from. He directed me to another man nearer the door, who pointed to an office. When I got to the phone, two of the lines were lit up. I made my call and left. I do not believe any police officers entered the building before me or until I left. I was in too much of a hurry to remember what the three men looked like. But their manner was very relaxed. My New York news desk has since placed the time of my call at 12:36 Dallas time.

/s/ Robert MacNeil

NBC New Correspondent

New York

November 30, 1963 [12]

This account is basically consistent with the recent version, except for one conflicting detail. In the 1988 version, MacNeil addressed his query concerning the location of a phone to a man on the front steps, who "pointed inside to an open space where another man was talking on the phone situated near a pillar." In the 1963 version, MacNeil "asked the first man he saw—a man who was telephoning from a pillar"—where he could call from. The man paused long enough to direct him to a second man who was standing nearby. It is a small, but important point. If the man who said "Better ask him" was on his way out, then it is possible that the man was indeed leaving the building at 12:33. On the other hand if the man who said "Better ask him" was himself on a telephone, then he could not have been leaving until after he finished his call, or sometime after 12:33. The main effect of of the inconsistency in the 1988 version is to make MacNeil's story more compatible with the official version. Perhaps the best way of explaining this discrepancy is to consider the effects of an aging memory which oftentimes distorts a man's recollections. In any case, we should adopt the standard practice of historians, who select the earliest versions as the most reliable. *Just like!*

The most striking detail in the early version is the eerie calmness of the three men he found inside the building.

MacNeil's amazement at this strange placidity is indicated by the way he repeated this observation for emphasis. As a group, the three men must have been united by a common purpose. Whatever that purpose might have been, it must have had something to do with the assassination. Any other purpose—whether it be business-related or personal—would have been swept aside by the crescendo of chaos just outside the front entrance. These men not only had prior knowledge of the assassination plot, but also they were performing some indispensable part in it. Their inexcitable demeanor is a distinctive trademark of disciplined agents trained to carry out a special mission. *John S. ...*

We can rule out Oswald as one of the three men for a couple of reasons. For one thing MacNeil did not later recall seeing Oswald before, when he saw him that same night at the police station. Since MacNeil was close enough to the three men to interact with two of them, MacNeil would most likely have remembered Oswald if he were one of the three. Furthermore Oswald was on the second floor at least until 12:32 or 12:33. He would not have been able to go down the stairs and lounge around with two companions by the time MacNeil came in at 12:34. When taken together with the previously mentioned considerations, it is quite certain that Oswald was not one of the three men who helped MacNeil find a phone.

WHO WAS THE MAN THAT OSWALD SPOKE TO?

According to the Warren Report, all Secret Service agents "remained at their posts during the race to the hospital. None stayed at the scene of the shooting, and none entered the Texas School Book Depository at or immediately after the shooting." [13] The first agent to arrive in the area came about 20 to 25 minutes after the shooting.

There is however a lot of evidence indicating that unknown men were impersonating Secret Service agents. When Sergeant D.V. Harkness went to the rear of the Book Depository building at 12:36, he found some agents already there. "I didn't get them identified. They told me they were Secret Service agents." Police officer J.M. Smith found a suspicious man in the parking lot behind the grassy knoll, who claimed he was a Secret Service agent and even displayed his credentials. [14] Roger Craig talked to a man on the front steps of the Book Depository who also claimed he was with the Secret Service. [15]

Officially there were no agents in the area at the time when Oswald came out of the building. Yet the man whom he encountered said he was one, and even took out a book of identification. Evidently, the man was a conspirator, posing as an agent. *False: but only if OJ was telling*

13 *with. No corroborating evidence (one way or the other - except maybe McNeil.)*

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

When the shooting occurred at 12:30, a news photographer named James Altgens took a picture of the presidential limousine under fire. In the background, standing on the front steps, was Billy Lovelady. At 12:31, two women, Victoria Adams and a fellow worker, came down the stairs in the back corner of the building. They saw two men near the two freight elevators. They knew them as Billy Lovelady and William Shelley. [16] At 12:32 Police Officer Marion Baker and Warehouse Manager, Roy Truly, came rushing in. Baker wanted to search the rooftop for a sniper. Before going up the stairs, Truly paused to tell Shelley to guard the stairs and elevators to make sure no one else used them. [17] At 12:33 a brown suit coat man, who was previously seen by Carolyn Walther on the fifth floor standing next to a gunman, was seen by James Worrell rushing out the back door. He was seen by another witness named Richard Carr getting into a Nash Rambler driven by a dark-skinned man. [18] In order to get out of the building, he must have used the west freight elevator and passed in front of Shelley and Lovelady. At 12:34 or 12:35 MacNeil came in looking for a telephone. He saw three calm men by the pay phone, one of whom showed him to an office phone. Soon after this Oswald came down from the second floor. According to an FBI report of an interrogation session at Dallas police headquarters, Oswald said that he went outside where he talked with Shelley for five or ten minutes. Based upon some remarks that Shelley made concerning the disruption of business, Oswald thought he was free to go home. [19] The time when Oswald ended his conversation with Shelley and departed from the scene coincides with the time when Roger Craig saw Oswald getting into a Nash Rambler at 12:40 or 12:45. [20] Linking Oswald to the conspiratorial activities of the brown coat man is the fact that both men left in the same kind of car driven by a male driver with dark skin. *Except that no body would have spent more than 2 min in Nash??*

The following is a chronology of events [21] which puts the MacNeil and the Oswald incidents within the context of what was happening in the Texas School Book Depository (some of the following times are approximations):

- 12:25 Electrical power goes out (6H395, Geneva Hine). The two freight elevators are stuck on the fifth floor.
- 12:29 The brown coat man is seen standing next to a gunman on the fifth floor.
- 12:30 Lovelady is photographed by an AP photographer at the front entrance, viewing the assassination. *any test that would show scene was? (ie. Gray, Worrell?)*
- 12:31 Lovelady and Shelley are seen near the freight elevators by Adams and a fellow worker.

12:32 Shelley receives instructions from Truly to guard the elevator. Truly and Baker go up the stairs to search the rooftop.

12:33 Electrical power restored. Brown coat man comes down from fifth floor using west elevator. He leaves by the back door. He is next seen by Richard Carr entering a Nash Rambler. *(How many in car, according to Carr?)*

12:34 MacNeil enters the building looking for a phone. He sees three calm men.

12:35 Oswald comes down from the second floor; goes outside, where he talks with Shelley for five or ten minutes. On his way out he pauses to help a Secret Service man (?) find a telephone. *What happened to meeting Truly + Baker??*

12:45 Oswald is seen leaving in a Nash Rambler.

The observations of people like Hine, Walther, Adams, Truly, Baker, Worrell, Carr, MacNeil, and Craig are like snapshots of suspicious activities in progress. Looking at any one of these snapshots in isolation does not tell us very much, and in some instances are totally baffling in what they are said to be depicting. Yet when these snapshots are lined up in their proper chronological sequence, they reveal a distinct pattern of conspiracy and how it unfolded at the Book Depository. That concatenation of snapshots leads not to Cecil McWatter's bus; but rather it leads to a Nash Rambler driven by a dark-skinned man.

Notes

1. Robert MacNeil, The Right Place at the Right Time (Little, Brown and Co.: Boston-Toronto, 1982), p. 213.
2. MacNeil, Right Place, pp. 198-212.
3. Robert MacNeil, The Way We Were (Carroll & Graf: New York, 1988), p. 195.
4. MacNeil, Right Place, p. 208.
5. MacNeil, Right Place, p. 214. MacNeil's views on the assassination have not been consistent. In 1980 he endorsed the book of pro-conspiracy author, Anthony Summers. In 1988, he was on a talk show supporting the findings of the Warren Commission. See the article "Disinformation: Fun with Bob, Dick, and Larry" by Jan R. Stevens in the March 1989 issue of The Third Decade.
6. MacNeil, Right Place, p. 213.
7. MacNeil, Right Place, p. 214.
8. William Manchester, The Death of a President (Harper and Row: New York 1967), p. 279. Pierce Allman, who was a reporter for WFAA-TV in Dallas, told the Secret Service that he went into the Book Depository in search of a phone. He

Shelley

Secret Service

22

?

** If so, then Baker's own testimony is wrong: we tried to extend time of look E. to get to and P.C. + B. demurred (said it took less than 90 sec) above scenario needs McN. @ TSBDO before Baker.*