

## Roger Feinman's informal introduction to his book

A legend returns.

Much-rumored, much requested, banned on CompuServe, extensively excerpted in Livingstone's *Killing The Truth* by special arrangement with Carroll & Graf, now available in its original form and in its entirety for the first time in six years, and for the first time ever on the Internet and World Wide Web.

*Between The Signal and the Noise: The Best Evidence Hoax and David Lifton's War Against the Critics of the Warren Commission.*

An electronic book (equivalent of 200+ pages) first released in 1993, tracing the passage of David Lifton from the guy with the blow-up photographs to professional raconteur. The man who gave us:

- + The Little Men in the Woods (a.k.a. the "Men in Trees") theory
- + Musical Caskets
- + Body Alteration
- + "Kellerman" & "Greer" Were Imposters
- + The Zapruder Film as kind of a George Lucas production
- + The Autopsy Photos were Faked Too
- + The Man with Two Brains (in association with Douglas Horne of the ARRB staff)

BTS&TN relies upon David Lifton's own writings—dating back to the earliest days of his involvement with the subject of JFK's assassination—for its conclusion that "Best Evidence" was a literary deceit. Unedited, unrevised, unrepentant, not updated (ignore personal contact information), but exactly as it was when David Lifton complained to both CompuServe and Hood College in an effort to suppress both his own history and the most damning critique of his work ever written.

THE BOOK THAT PROBABLY PERSUADED GERALD POSNER HE COULD ACTUALLY WORK WITH A GUY LIKE DAVID LIFTON.

Minimum System Requirements: Any Windows or DOS computer (or a Mac running a DOS session), WinZip or PKUnzip to extract the authenticated archived text file. Suggested Experience: "Chant: The Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos" (Angel Records)

<http://www.boston.quik.com/amarsh/etcetera.htm>

To download directly from within this posting without leaving your newsgroup session:

<http://www.boston.quik.com/amarsh/Bts&tn.zip>

This is the only web site currently authorized to make BTS&TN available to the public.

(PSG482G is now the second—KAR)

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## BETWEEN THE SIGNAL AND THE NOISE

The *Best Evidence* Hoax and David Lifton's War Against the Critics of the Warren Commission

By Roger Bruce Feinman

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"Of course, having written a best selling book (*Best Evidence* is now with its fourth publisher and has had about 30 printings), and being the producer of a best selling video, I suppose I am a public figure, and criticism comes with the territory..."

—David Lifton in a letter to Jacqueline Liebergott, President of Emerson College, December 8, 1992

"We cannot speak of falsehood until there is this awareness of the existence of a reality within oneself and external to oneself."

—Marcel Eck, Lies & Truth

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

On April 3, 1993, I appeared in a panel debate on the medical evidence in the John F. Kennedy assassination at the Midwest Symposium on Assassination Politics in Chicago. Speaking for the critics of the official medical findings were Dr. Cyril H. Wecht, Wallace Milam, David Lifton, and I. An opposing panel defending the government's case consisted of Dr. George Lundberg, editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Dr. John K. Lattimer, Dr. Michael West, and Dr. Marc Micozzi.

This direct confrontation between critics and defenders afforded me a rare opportunity to make two points that have been nagging at me for quite some time: First, after nearly 30 years, we still do not have a full and honest official account of what occurred on the night of November 22, 1963, at the autopsy of Kennedy's remains at Bethesda Naval Hospital, or of how the autopsy pathologists reached their ultimate findings. Second, without fact, theories just don't work.

I am neither a well-known critic nor a professional public speaker (perhaps an odd apology coming from a trial attorney, but I find it rather nerve-wracking to prepare for and then face larger audiences), nor do I have any burning desire for celebrity in connection with this case. I tried to persuade all of my co-panelists on the critics' side beforehand to avoid discussion of theories, to attack the government's case on the narrowest and least vulnerable grounds, and to stick to the evidence. In all but one case, my persuasion was either unnecessary or successful. The exception was David Lifton, the author of *Best Evidence*.

Mr. Lifton, who spoke before I did at his insistence, reviewed the tape-recorded interview he did with Dr. James J. Humes, the chief autopsy pathologist, in 1966. He apparently wanted to demonstrate that Dr. Humes conceded the possibility that President Kennedy's body was altered before it was delivered to Bethesda for autopsy. No one in the audience with whom I later conferred believed the tape anywhere near conclusive of this question; some believed that the very suggestion (which was novel and unpublished in 1966) startled Dr. Humes, but that Mr. Lifton was reading way too much into Humes' remarks, especially his omission to flatly deny the alteration theory.

Mr. Lifton also propounded a series of rhetorical questions concerned with his theory that the bullet wound in President Kennedy's back was artificially inflicted after the assassination.



Mr. Lifton did not directly address the two articles that had recently been published by JAMA, featuring interviews with the autopsy pathologists. It was my understanding that this was the purpose of the debate. I believe that Mr. Lifton's use of this occasion amounted to little more than self-promotion.

When my turn came, I stated for the record that I do not subscribe to the *Best Evidence* theory. I refuted Mr. Lifton's suggestion that there was no back wound with some new information given to me just days earlier. I encouraged the audience to focus on what occurred at the autopsy, instead of looking for ghost conspirators who allegedly intercepted and mutilated the President's corpse. These remarks, however, constituted a small fraction of my presentation, which I mainly devoted to examining the autopsy pathologists' self-contradictory statements about the autopsy.

I felt (and still do) that my remarks were appropriate, well guided, and necessary. Advance flyers promoting the Symposium advertised the critics' panel as a "team" serving as counterpoint to JAMA's panel. JAMA had a unified position, i.e., the Warren Report was correct. The critics are not unified in their beliefs, although the news media tends to lump them together. Mr. Lifton's theory is highly controversial and yet unproved, although it has been widely adopted and thoroughly publicized. He and I have diametrically and irreconcilably opposing viewpoints on the subject of the autopsy. The convener of the debate planned to disseminate a tape to the public. I wanted it clearly established that not all critics agree with Lifton; that my points should be answered separately; and that our views of what constitutes the heart of the problem are very different. My dual goals were to prod the audience into thought both about the credibility of the pathologists, an issue that Mr. Lifton concedes as a given, and, frankly, about the value of his thesis.

As I returned to my seat, Mr. Lifton said to me, "You're despicable." It was evident that my remarks upset him, even though I had credited him with an important evidentiary find, a witness who had conversed with White House Physician Adm. George Burkley that night. During an interchange before the audience, Mr. Lifton took out of his portfolio and read from a printout of an E-mail message I had sent him as a follow-up to a recent telephone conversation in preparation for the debate. Although the entire thrust of the message had been tactics and strategy for the debate, Mr. Lifton attempted to use a portion of it to portray my approach to the case as equivocal.

Most of the audience reaction that I received afterward was highly complimentary. I recall that the audience was generous in its response, and I believe that the tape of the event will prove that statement correct.

On the Compuserve Information Service, some discussion ensued among Symposium attendees about the episode. To explain my stand on Mr. Lifton's work, I uploaded a computer file containing an informal critique to one of the forum software libraries. One forum member, a fan of *Best Evidence* who has contributed research to Mr. Lifton, objected to its tone and disagreed with its content, whereupon a discussion of Mr. Lifton's work followed.

Approximately two weeks later, two separate essays by Lifton were filed in response to mine. One replied to my suggestion that the semi-autobiographical nature of his book was questionable in that Mr. Lifton did not appear to have much of a theory, or much evidence to support his theory, until after the House Select Committee on Assassinations completed its work in December 1978, and still had nothing to show for his years of labor. Mr. Lifton purported to trace the development of his work in arguing that I was incorrect.

The other Lifton essay was a vehement personal attack in the manner of a long-distance psychological profile by someone who admitted that he did not know me well.

Mr. Lifton complained to Compuserve authorities that I had libeled him, a misconception on his part but one that temporarily intimidated the forum operators into removing my essay from their software library. It was restored only at my insistence that readers ought to see what had aroused Lifton's ire. The forum operators, nonlawyers who were clearly swayed by the protestations of Lifton supporters and also apparently afforded Mr. Lifton the presumption of legitimacy that sometimes attaches to well-known and impressively backed celebrities, struggled to find a coherent rationale for their actions. Mr. Lifton apparently decided to help them. He subsequently joined Compuserve as a member to claim the protection of the service's rule against abusive personal insults by members against each other, a rule that appears to encompass matters falling far short of the legal definition of libel.

Mr. Lifton maintains, in effect, that to attack his book is to attack his life as he claims to have lived it, thus blurring the distinction between, on the one hand, legitimate criticism of either his book or the general trend of his work on the assassination, and on the other, personal criticism of him. Even as the sysops have permitted Mr. Lifton to promote both



himself and his book through his appearances on CompuServe, they have effectively stifled any serious criticism, literary or otherwise, of his work in a forum ironically entitled "Conspiracy Theories." Instead of frankly admitting to their fear of being sued by Lifton for permitting such discussion, however, they have explicitly agreed with his position that to attack his book is to attack him personally, and have relied upon this tortuous construction of the membership rules to justify naked censorship.

Mr. Lifton has also circulated his essays privately through the mail under separate covering letters critical of my actions, personality, and mental stability. He has also made known his displeasure through phone calls to a number of well-known critics, including those with whom I have associated for many years.

The sophistry of the former essay, and both the method and pervasive inaccuracies of the latter essay persuaded me that, instead of immediately objecting to his personal attack and demanding its removal and retraction, I ought to let it stand in public view, at least until I received the opportunity to reply. Mr. Lifton's own rope is sufficient to hang him. Regrettably, however, CompuServe authorities made their own decision to permit Mr. Lifton's personal attack to remain on view, even as they denied me the opportunity to defend myself and my substantive views with a rejoinder. The system operators ("sysops" in computerese) have persistently refused to offer any justification for this favoritism. Privately, several members of the forum have expressed deep misgivings about the level, intensity and sincerity of the sysops' commitment to the free exchange of ideas and information, as well as their sense of responsibility. In challenging the prevalence of Mr. Lifton's thirteen-year promotional campaign for his book and his theory, I find myself in an uncomfortably ironic position not too dissimilar from that of the early critics who confronted the Warren Report.

These two Lifton essays represent the written work of a celebrity author who is widely recognized as a spokesman of critical scholarship in the assassination. They contain illustrations of his use of alleged fact; his precision and accuracy; his employment of quotations as evidence in argument; his version of the early history of the critical studies movement; his appraisal of other critics, including Sylvia Meagher and Harold Weisberg; and his version of certain episodes that occurred during his research and writing of "Best Evidence." In every sense, they illustrate those aspects of a professional writer and speaker's craft that, as applied in his book, merit the same critical evaluation and objective scrutiny of his readers.

In the interests of comprehensiveness and understanding, I have incorporated both the sense and the substance of my original essay into this greatly expanded consideration of Mr. Lifton's very public role in the assassination controversy and the merits of his book. I also reply directly to his personal denunciation, inasmuch as it is highly relevant to those factors just mentioned.

Besides our divergent substantive approaches to the Kennedy assassination, it is the main thesis of this book that Mr. Lifton's *Best Evidence* is a literary deceit in multiple dimensions. As Mr. Lifton explains in the preface to his work, he was unable to obtain a publisher until his agent persuaded him to rewrite his first attempt at a manuscript as an account of his personal history in researching the assassination of President Kennedy. The motif of *Best Evidence* thereby became Mr. Lifton's reconstructed ruminations over the medical evidence during a period of fifteen years, ranging from his earliest exposure to the subject, to an inspiration in late October 1966, through seemingly laborious and detailed investigations, and finally to a new synthesis purporting to explain how the assassination was accomplished. As the following chapters reveal, however, where Mr. Lifton tells his readers what he was thinking at certain points in his odyssey, source materials that were in his files as he wrote his book, i.e., his formal and informal contemporary writings, prove beyond doubt that the views he professed then were precisely the opposite. Furthermore, he garnered the chief evidence that allegedly supports his assassination theory only while he was in the final stages of writing the manuscript that Macmillan Publishing Company eventually published.

The first dimension of deceit, therefore, is Mr. Lifton's fabrication of a legend that appears to lend weight and substance to his conspiracy theory.

If autobiographical revisionism was merely ornamentation on the structure of *Best Evidence*, no matter how lamentable, it might be forgiven as taking literary license to the extreme in a work promoted as non-fiction. Unfortunately, the pattern of the author's dissimulation attenuates to obscure his long-standing predilection for bizarre hypotheses to explain the assassination, as well as the crude political philosophy that drove him, at least during his formative years as an assassination researcher, to erect the type of convoluted rationalizations of the evidence that are the bedrock of his book. The second dimension of literary deceit, then, is the deliberate concealment of a past that is prologue to the present and future.



Ostensibly, *Best Evidence* is the story of one of the true originals among all the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorists. Underlying the edifice of his book, nevertheless, one discovers an unsettling theme of derision and disparagement regarding the early critics of the Warren Commission. Mr. Lifton's exposition of this theme turns on both their substantive philosophies and their personal traits. This substructure of his book thus comprises ridicule of the species with which he is most closely identified. Moreover, I shall point to disturbing evidence that Mr. Lifton usurped theories suggested to him by others, claiming that he considered them, only to point to their alleged faults. Viewed in isolation, Mr. Lifton's attacks upon the critics might be interpreted superficially as feathering his own nest. There is, however, an equally distressing parallel to this theme running throughout Mr. Lifton's body of work. Specifically, it is his affirmative exoneration of the Warren Commission, its staff attorneys, and several key participants in the events surrounding the assassination from any intent to deceive or conceal, notwithstanding abundant evidence to the contrary, as Mr. Lifton himself asserted before the promises of literary fame and fortune were held out to him. Here is the third dimension to the artifice of *Best Evidence*: a subtle, though repeated assault against those with whom its author is supposedly in sympathy, coupled with absolution for their adversaries.

Finally, there is Mr. Lifton's central theory of body-snatching and the artificial creation or alteration of President Kennedy's wounds. Through the selective use and misuse of the evidence, and with his autobiographical interludes serving to distract his readers from the development of his argument, Mr. Lifton almost succeeds in making the impossible seem credible. At bottom, however, his theory is not only absurd, but also redolent of the worst caricatures of Warren Report critics drawn by apologists for the official fiction.

It is in the obvious self-interest of Mr. Lifton and his true believers to portray my dissent from his work as a personality clash, and to characterize my criticisms as ill-motivated. There can be no truly persuasive response to such *ad hominem* retorts, as they appeal to emotion rather than logic, and to prejudice rather than fact. The bone of contention between Mr. Lifton and this author is not a conflict between personalities, however, but the struggle over an idea: How should we, as private citizens or public figures, approach the problem of getting close to the truth about the Kennedy assassination? I believe that Mr. Lifton's work seriously distracts us from this effort and is otherwise deficient. My bias is that the role of the critic is to raise questions for the government to answer, not to pose theories for the government to refute. For those reasons, I believe that, absent his renunciation of *Best Evidence* (which we cannot realistically expect of him), the critics themselves must thoroughly discredit and renounce Mr. Lifton's work before the government seizes the opportunity to do so in the guise of responding to further public demands for disclosure. The cause of learning the truth about President Kennedy's assassination is bigger than any single individual or his book. That cause cannot survive a stubborn allegiance to error but may weather its disavowal.

Moreover, the issues of strategy and tactics are too important to leave in the hands of those who make the assassination their lifetime business pursuit and command substantial media attention to their theories, including those theories that are incapable of proof and hostile to any form of disproof. The media chooses such people to provide "bread-and-circuses" to the masses, and their theories, somehow institutionalized in a constrictive array of shooting targets, become divorced from pressing substantive issues too long ignored by both the media and officialdom.

It is not everyone who gets the opportunity to publish a book and appear on public platforms on this subject, but those who do not can still make their voices heard by writing letters to the conveners of these Symposia in Dallas and Chicago, contacting journalists, and speaking with friends and colleagues. As a general matter, we do not require charismatic leaders, and we can certainly do without shrewd manipulators. From the earliest days, the drive to force our government to tell us the truth (or to tell us that it does not know the truth) has been a grassroots phenomenon, and there it still finds its greatest strength. That essential quality must not lag.

Roger Bruce Feinman  
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