

Tom Stamm paper 8 April 1975

THE JFK ASSASSINATION

Memo on a dramatis persona minor

Problem of the president's physician: chevalier sans peur et sans reproche or particeps criminis in the penumbra of the plot.

Analogue

When Claudius rises in fright on seeing the player king poisoned in Hamlet's dumb show and flees, Hamlet is convinced his father's ghost had spoken truly - Claudius, like Cain, had murdered his brother. Now he could drink "hot blood And do such bitter business as the day would quake to look on." A little later, on his way to his mother's closet to "speak daggers to her," he comes upon the tortured king kneeling in supplication to "angels" to "make assay." His instant impulse is to seize his unexpected opportunity to kill the king. "Now might I do it pat...now I'll do it ...And so am I revenged?" As quickly he hesitates. "That would be scanned." And revenge is deferred.

This line in the third scene of the third act, in the climax of the drama, which signifies the onset of ebb tide in Hamlet's deadly conflict with the king, is ambiguous. Scanned by whom? Read as a psychological self-revelation, as a characteristic instance of Hamlet's habitual pondering and appraising his tumultuous thoughts and feelings, it is consistent with his doubt of the authenticity of the ghost and with his observations earlier in the same climactic act: "...conscience does make cowards of us all;" and "the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." By this reading Hamlet is an irresolute procrastinator, a gifted intellectual incapable of purposeful action.

But "That would be scanned" also may be construed to signify calculating concern by Hamlet with the impact of his act on the court which, ignorant of the ghost's revelations and witness to Claudius' designation of Hamlet as "the most immediate to our throne," would see in Hamlet's revenge only the desperate deed of an impatient and ambitious young regicide. Significantly, in the duel scene at the end of the play, after the court hears Laertes' confession he conspired with the king to kill Hamlet and the latter, dying, stabs the king and forces the poisoned drink prepared for him but drunk by the queen down the king's throat, the court cries with one voice: "Treason. Treason." In this reading Hamlet is played as a princely Elizabethan thinking man of action.

Either reading is permissible. Shakespeare's intention is unknown. We lack an authentic text of the greatest play in world literature.

Imitation of Art

Analogous characterological problems confront the dramatist who, like Shakespeare, takes a plot from history and would mine the rich complexity of the murder of a head of state. One such problem pivots on the role of Admiral George Gregory Burkley, White House physician to the thirty third president of the United States in the aftermath of the assassination of John F Kennedy, helmsman of the most powerful state in history at the peak of its imperial-

ist power. Establishmentarian history includes Burkley as an inconsequential supernumerary in a teeming cast. By his own homonymous account Burkley played the part of a knightly gallant devoted to the lady Jacqueline in Le Mort de Kennedy. But the investigator seeking nexus between the police frame up of Oswald in Dallas and the surrealist autopsy in Washington hours later, and pondering the significance of Burkley's connection with unpublished documents and his postmortem activities, wonders whether the chivalric admiral is not the missing link, a deus ex machina whose obversely natural or studied alter ego was an asinus ad lyram.

Who's Who

Biographical data on Burkley in Who's Who In America, arranged in the standard format of the conventional success story, are meager and unrevealing. He was born in Pittsburgh, Penna., on August 29, 1902; attended the University of Pittsburgh and was graduated BS in 1926 and MD two years later. In 1928-29 he interned at St. Francis Hospital in Pittsburgh. While attending post-graduate school at the University of Minnesota, 1929-32, Burkley was also a resident fellow in internal medicine at the Mayo Clinic. He was married in 1933 and became the father of four children. In 1933-34 Burkley was a fellow in cardiology at the University of Pittsburgh and for seven years following, assistant professor of medicine while also practicing as a cardiologist and specialist in internal medicine in Pittsburgh. In 1941 he was commissioned a lieutenant commander in the Marine Corps and served in the South Pacific in 1942-44. Advancing "through grades," he was chief of medicine in naval hospitals in Charleston, S.C.; Memphis, Tenn.; Newport, R.I.; and Portsmouth, Va. from 1946-57 1957; and commanding officer of the Naval Dispensary in Washington, D.C. 1959-61. In the latter year Burkley became White House physician to President John F Kennedy. In 1963 the University of Pittsburgh awarded Burkley a doctorate in science.

Osrice

Hamlet titled the dumb show to test the king The Mouse Trap. Claudius sends a popinjay messenger to lure Hamlet into the trap the king and Laertes have set for him. Hamlet calls Osrice "water-fly" and "lapwing." Scholar-producer Richard Flatter asked "Who is Osrice?" and observed, "He is usually played as a nincompoop, and his puffed up language and circumlocutionary verbosity are doubtless comic" (Hamlet's Father, Yale University Press, 1929).

Exhibit No. 1126, found on pages 93-97 of Volume XXII of the Hearings Before The President's Commission On The Assassination of President Kennedy - the late lamented Warren Commission - is a "Report of my participation in the activities surrounding the assassination of PRESIDENT JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY," dated "November 27, 1963 8:45 a.m." and signed "George G. Burkley, Physician to the President." Neither individual nor institutional addressees of the Report are identified or indicated. Reason for submission of the Report, the date and truth of which are not attested by oath or direct corroboratory witness, is not given.

Burkley's is a simple narrative tale, told in official, colorless

impersonal style. Despite frequent use of the egotistic pronoun, I, it is barren of Burkley's thought and feeling; and is eloquent because of its discreet lacunae.

Like the Bible, Burkley's Report does not recount what went before but begins at the beginning. We are left in the dark about Burkley's "activities" during D-day minus one and the time he went to bed. With exemplary naval directness Burkley commenced his Report with his awakening "at 6:30 a.m. on November 22, 1963." There follows a gap of thirty minutes. Then "At 7:00 a.m. I looked through the window in the hotel in Fort Worth, Texas which overlooked the parking lot in which provision had been made for President Kennedy to address the public at 8:30 a.m." Burkley was joined by Kennedy aides Kenneth O'Donnell and Lawrence O'Brien, time not given. The passage of time during the rest of the day is unremarked in Burkley's Odyssey through history. After breakfast and two speeches by Kennedy, Burkley rode with the presidential party to the airport and ~~arrived~~ with it for Dallas.

In the motorcade in the "hate capital of the world" (not Burkley's appellation) the doctor-admiral rode with presidential secretary Evelyn Lincoln in the "VIP car which followed the cars containing the local and national representatives." So the doctor was separated from his charge and hence, when the latter was murdered in broad daylight -- by ambush -- in the midst of police and Secret Service security, Burkley was "not exactly aware what had happened" but did "realize that something was wrong." While Kennedy was rushed to Parkland Hospital his most immediately available medical help was borne elsewhere to the Trade Mart, original destination of the motorcade. At the Trade Mart, Burkley and "Chief Hendrix" secured the aid of Secret Service Agent Burger who "commandeered a car" and a police escort to reunite Burkley with his patient.

In Parkland Hospital Burkley "went directly to the Emergency Room on the ground floor" and saw Mrs. Kennedy "seated in a folding chair directly beside the door of the small room in which the President was being observed." Therewith Burkley's purely passive role ended and he began to act the bifid role of the naval doctor and protective elder friend of the remarkably composed widow.

On entering the emergency room, "immediately," doctor Burkley "went to the head of the table and viewed the President." It was "evident" to him that despite the efforts of the Parkland Hospital doctors to save Kennedy, which he does not describe in detail except to say "Fluids had been started and he was being given extra cardiac massage," death was "imminent; the president "was in a helpless condition." And although Burkley advised the "team"...working to supply "O'RH negative blood" to Kennedy his "blood type was 'O' PH positive," he decided his "direct services" to Kennedy "at that moment would have interfered with the action of the team which was in progress."

Instead he "went out in the corridor and spoke to Mrs. Kennedy" who "expressed a desire to be in the room," whereupon Burkley "overrode the protests of some of the people in the room and brought Mrs.

Kennedy inside the door where she stood with my arms protecting her." She "momentarily rested her head" on Burkley's shoulder. When "one of the doctors said" Kennedy's "life was gone" Burkley "verified" the fact, then asked "A priest, name...not known...in the emergency room...who stepped forward and anointed the President and gave the last rites" to "recite the prayers for the dead." Burkley joined Mrs. Kennedy in the responses, "then walked out of the room with Mrs. Kennedy who again sat on the chair and expressed her desire to remain with the President's body continually until he was returned to the White House."

"At this point" Admiral Burkley "ordered" the Superintendent of the hospital "to get with dispatch a conveyance and a casket to carry the body back to Washington." He also spoke to Dr. Clark...the neurosurgeon in charge of the (emergency) room activity, and informed him that I would like the necessary papers and to expedite departure of the body from the area." When the medical examiner for the city of Dallas counterposed to Burkley's explanation of the "necessity of quick action" because "Mrs. Kennedy was going to stay exactly where she was" until "such moment was effected," the legal procedural need to make "further examination" of the "remains" in Dallas because "this was a homicide case," Burkley appealed to "one of the local judges" who "appeared," to "make the needed arrangements." The "local sheriff" was called "on the telephone," by whom and for what Burkley did not say. But "some confusion resulted in...delay." "Confusion" and "delay" are Burkley's tactful euphemisms, gloss over the heated contretemps with Dallas officials over the illegal removal, the kidnapping, of the president's corpse in which the admiral was culpably involved.

When the casket arrived in the hospital the admiral "supervised the transfer" of Kennedy's body into it. After the emergency room was "vacated" Burkley "again examined the room" and saw "the roses which had been in the car with the President were in the waste basket." Two "which had broken off" were lying on the floor. Burkley "picked them up and put them in my pocket." Then he followed the "cortege" out of the hospital. He rode in the "ambulance beside the coffin with Mrs. Kennedy sitting at the head of the coffin on the small chair." After riding "in silence for awhile" on the way to the plane, Burkley "reached into the pocket and took out the roses... and gave them to Mrs. Kennedy stating what they were. She took them, put them in her jacket pocket, smiled and thanked" the kindly doctor.

In flight to Washington, while "Mrs. Kennedy sat in the vicinity of the coffin talking to Mr. O'Donnell and various close members of the party," the attentive admiral "spoke to her while kneeling on the floor so I would be at the level of her face rather than leaning forward" and expressed (the) complete desire of all of us and especially of myself to comply with her wishes...". Notwithstanding this avowal of knightly subserviency, the Report of the admiral who had boldly defied Texas law shortly before, continued, "... stating that it was necessary that the President be taken to a hospital prior to going to the White House." When Mrs. Kennedy "questioned why," Burkley "stated it must be determined, if possible, the type of bullet used and compare this with future material found."

The admiral explained "frankly" he had no preference; "it could be any hospital," but, he felt, "if possible, it should be a military hospital for security measures." Mrs. Kennedy chose Bethesda Naval Hospital and decided "she would accompany the body" there, whereupon her loyal self-appointed escort "assured" her he would remain with the President until he was returned to the White House."

In Bethesda Naval Hospital, while Mrs. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, who had joined her on arrival in Washington, went to the 17th floor to await release of Kennedy's body on completion of the autopsy and morticians' gruesome services, the admiral "met" the president's body in the "mortuary" and "observed its transfer to the table." Apparently Burkley's capacity for observation in Bethesda, as in Parkland, was limited or his memory short lived. Of the autopsy itself he reported only and partly inaccurately, "The examination was performed by Commander Humes and members of his staff," which overlooked the active participation in the autopsy of the only forensic pathologist present, Army Lt. Col. Pierre Finck. Burkley noted he made "numerous trips to the 17th floor for reassurance to those in that area and to supply them with some idea of the contemplated departure time." And "On one of these occasions" Mrs. Kennedy spoke to him "in the bedroom of the suite expressing her appreciation which was greatly valued by" her devoted messenger and which, he wrote, he "will long remember." On another "occasion," during the autopsy, "we received a call from the 17th floor in regard to Mrs. Kennedy's wedding ring which was in place on the ring finger (of the president) in the appropriate position. This ring" Burkley "removed personally and carried to her on the 17th floor and gave it to her in person." Afterward admiral-doctor-messenger Burkley "accompanied the President's body back to the White House..." And "The following day we had a request for the St. Christopher medal which the President always carried in his wallet...It was stated that she (MRS. Kennedy) wished to have this placed in the casket with the President's body." End of Report.

Dark Angel

In exploring Ceric's role Flatter thought "to take him as comic and nothing else would be mistaken. His function is similar to that of the 'rural fellow' in Antony and Cleopatra who in the last act delivers the deadly serpents. He is called a 'clown' and his speech and manner of speaking is (!) clownish enough. Yet who would think of him as nothing but a comic figure? Nor can the Button-moulder in Peer Gynt be taken as a mere mechanic. There are many disguises for the Angel of Death. Ceric is a dark angel."

Who was assassination activist Burkley? A comic figure merely? The question arises because of Burkley's activities and knowledge "surrounding the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy" ambiguously reported and not included in his Report.

His reinspection of the emergency room in Parkland Hospital after it was "vacated" - was it a casual survey; or was he looking for something? The second possibility gains point from the unsolved mystery "surrounding" the discovery in the hospital of the magic bullet (Commission Exhibit 399) which Commission Counsel Arlen Spec-

Parkland

ter persuaded the receptive Commission, first traversed Kennedy, then Connally, and emerged from these case-hardened politicians unscathed and virtually intact to watch the rifle Oswald was falsely accused of using to kill Kennedy.

Additional point accrues from Burkley's explanation to Mrs. Kennedy an hour or so later it was necessary that the president be taken to a hospital prior to display in the White House "because" "it must be determined if possible, the type of bullet used and compare this with future material found." "Future material found" may be no more than a clumsy, innocent, characteristic Burkley euphemism for legitimate medicoballistic autopsy evidence; but also may be interpreted as indicating consciousness of the necessity to link the manufactured evidence in hand and awaiting "discovery" in Dallas with corroboratory forensic medical evidence then yet to be fabricated in Washington.

Notwithstanding his concern for development of ballistic evidence Burkley's Report made no reference to the puzzlement of the autopsy doctors, reported by FBI and Secret Service agents present, over the doctors' failure to find a point of exit of the bullet which made Kennedy's back wound and which, X-rays established was not in his body. Nor did Burkley report his own failure to inform his medical colleagues and fellow officers the wound they observed in Kennedy's anterior neck resulted from extension of a small wound when the Parkland Hospital "team" performed a tracheotomy on Burkley's patient in his presence.

Perhaps Burkley was inhibited from communicating this information which Commander Humes testified he obtained in a telephone conversation with Parkland on November 23, 1963, by the presence at the autopsy, as Burkley reported, of Admirals Kenny and Calloway, Naval Captain Canada, and General McHugh, one of whom, autopsy surgeon Finck testified in 1969 in the trial of Clay Shaw in New Orleans, prevented Humes and company from tracking the path of the back-wound bullet through Kennedy's neck; an activity Burkley did not observe, did not remember, or did not think necessary or advisable to include in his Report. But however forbidding the presence of Burkley's peers, he was not prevented from providing a "lead" to the autopsy surgeons, Finck testified more than five years later, by advising them three shots had been fired in Dallas, a number about which the Commission, later, had some doubt; and by informing the autopsy "team" of the publication on the 22nd of a press photograph showing a rifle "disappearing" from a window in the Texas Schoolbook Depository; two items subsequently included in the official autopsy report but not in Burkley's.

Burkley did report he had asked Dr. Kemp Clark in Parkland Hospital on November 22, 1963 to make out a death certificate - "necessary papers" - for Kennedy. Doris Nelson, "Nursing Supervisor in Emergency Room of Parkland...", made a "statement" in the form of affidavit, dated November 25, 1963, "relative to the Record of Death prepared for President John F Kennedy on November 22, 1963," in which, she swore, "Dr. Kemp Clark...asked if all that was necessary was a Record of Death...Mrs. Jeanette Standridge obtained Record of Death form, and I saw Dr. Clark and the doctor whom Secret Service informed me was the President's physician go into the nurse's station of major surgery. Now I do not definitely know who this Record of

Death was given to, but presume it was given to the Secret Service and President's doctor. This is the extent of my knowledge concerning the preparation of the Record of Death and its disposition as I did not see the completed form (Hearings, Vol. XXI, Price Exhibit No.4, p.155, originally stamped TOP SECRET).

Apparently Burkley saw the "completed form." Dr. Clark, when his testimony was taken "at 11:50 a.m. on March 21, 1964 at Parkland," deposed he "filled out the death certificate at the request of Dr. George Burkley...signed the death certificate...and gave this to him to accompany the body to Washington" (Hearings, Vol. VI, p.20). Specter did not enter this Record of Death into the record as an exhibit, nor ask Clark any questions about its content. The original Kennedy death certificate has not been published anywhere.

Nelson's affidavit suggests something about the origin and possibly also the content of Clark's death certificate was troubling officialdom in the immediate aftermath of the assassination while evidence was being "developed" to convict and defame a dead victim of police-and-underworld murder. Burkley's Report, dated two days after Nelson's affidavit, shed no light on the problem.

Conviction Burkley's omissions were studied flows from an activity he failed entirely to report. On November 23, 1963, when Clark's Record of Death form for Kennedy was twenty four hours old, a "Certificate of Death" for "President John Fitzgerald Kennedy" was issued by "The White House, Washington, D.C." Death is attributed to "Gunshot wound, skull." The sole signature reads, "George Gregory Burkley RADM Physician to the President." Neither Burkley's matutinal Report of the 27th nor the Warren Commission's ten months later makes any reference to Burkley's authorship of a second set of "necessary papers." Burkley's death certificate, like Clark's, was omitted from the Commission's 26-volume compilation of testimony and exhibits.

Burkley's certificate was found in the National Archives by Harold Weisberg who has not published it and refuses to discuss it. Whether Weisberg also has Clark's certificate is not known. Possibly it languished in the National Archives or in files in the office of the White House physician as part of the medical protocol of the assassination, collected by Burkley in the days following the assassination, another activity unreported by him on the 27th of November. Or it may repose in his personal archive, awaiting research and revelation. If and when it comes to light comparisons can be made between the two certificates, and judgment made whether Burkley's certificate was only a nicety of official bureaucratic prestige and concern or resulted primarily from some necessity in the evolving frame up of Oswald and coverup of the assassins and their powerful sponsors.

A curious aspect of Burkley's certificate is its erratically constructed seven-sentence Summary of Facts Relating to Death; suggesting agitation in its author at the time of its composition, possibly as he relived the events of the day before, or distressful response to unwelcome external pressure. The fourth sentence, informing the reader Burkley arrived at Parkland Hospital "approximately five minutes after the President," interrupts the account in sentences three and six of the efforts of the "team of physicians at the hospital"

to save the President; and the description in sentences two and five of Kennedy's fatal head wound. The last sentence includes pronouncement of death by Dr. Clark and verification by Dr. Burkley.

The first sentence, locating only two of Kennedy's wounds, is the most important in the Summary. "President John Fitzgerald Kennedy," wrote RADM physician Burkley "was struck in the head by an assassin's bullet and a second wound occurred in the posterior back..." No mention is made of Kennedy's neck wound in the Summary as in the admiral's Report. It is assumed "second wound" was not meant to refer to the sequence in time of the two wounds, which would be contrary to the official version of the assassination, but had the sense of "another," or was intended to signify the importance of the two wounds with respect to the cause of death. The latter interpretation is borne out by other sentences in the Summary. Ambiguity is Burkley's hallmark.

logate- Locus of the back wound is given as "in the posterior back at about the level of the third thoracic vertebra." The qualifying adverb, "about," suggests a layman's attempt at approximation rather than the schooled precision of an experienced doctor. Nevertheless Burkley's back-wound location in an official document is in contradiction to the location - "above the scapula" - given in the official autopsy report published as Appendix IX of the Warren Report, pp. 538-543. Whether that contradiction motivated the Commission to transmute Burkley's second set of "necessary papers" to Lombo is yet to be established.

A tactful omission from Burkley's account of his assassination "activities" was the delivery on November 26, 1963, one day before he composed his Report, of a copy of the official autopsy report to the Secret Service which soon afterward persuaded the Parkland Hospital doctors to weaken their original opinion Kennedy's anterior neck wound was made by an entering bullet - fired obviously from in front of the presidential limousine and arguing, therefore, an ambush and a conspiracy.

"Nothing neither way"

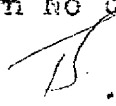
Flatter thought, "It can hardly be doubted" Osrice "knows of the murder plot or even actively helps in it. It is he whom Claudius addresses: 'Give them the foils young Osrice,' and again it is he to whom the dying Laertes says...'I am justly killed with mine own treachery'..." And Flatter might have added Osrice was the ironic counterpart to Horatio, each attending the fallen victim of the king's plot. But on Flatter's reading Shakespeare, a superb craftsman and meticulous expositor of the motivations of his dramatis personae, for unfathomable reasons, created Osrice, as the Warren Commission, in unavoidable obedience to its creator's needs, recreated Oswald - a villain without motive.

In the end, it is Horatio, bid by Hamlet ere he died to "report me and my cause aright," asks leave of Fortinbras to "speak to th'yet unknowing world," while Osrice makes no report of his "activities surrounding the assassination"s. And Burkley, transmuted by the Commission into a nonwitness, served Lyndon Johnson as White House physician from the end of 1963 to the end of 1968, after which he retired with the rank of vice admiral. Possibly he cultivates roses.

What role for Burkley in construction of the plot? Loyal medical officer? Gallant escort? Brave kidnapper? Devoted friend? No more than Othello's "duteous and knee-crooking knave That doting on his own obsequious bondage Wears out his time...and when he's old cashier'd?" At worst a helpless pawn in the assassination gambit? Or a dissembling plotter putting "an antic disposition on?"

Either way:- a link between frame up in Dallas and cover up in Washington.

"Be thy intents wicked or charitable," Hamlet tells his father's ghost, "Thou com'st in such a questionable shape, That I will speak to thee." Who will speak to George Gregory Burkley ere he departs for "The undiscovered country, from whose bourn No traveller returns?"


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For Edith Harris Guggenheim
who wants to write a play.