

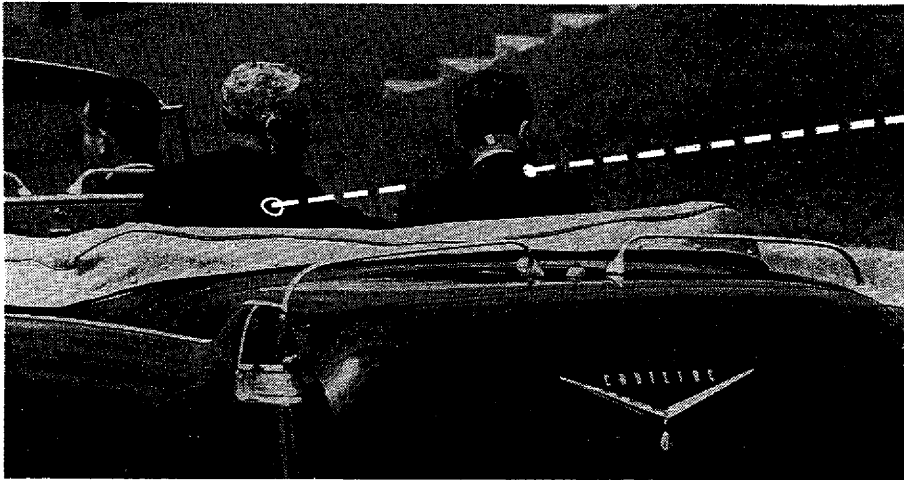
ASSASSINATION:

The Missing Link

Of all the loose ends in the John F. Kennedy murder case, few have so fascinated the conspiracy theorists as a single mystery within a mystery: what became of the photos and X-rays of the JFK autopsy? Those pictures, so doubters argued, might well knock the heart out of the Warren commission's case against Lee Harvey Oswald as the lone assassin—and the inevitable allegation was that they had been “suppressed” for

sion would be that two riflemen were involved. But the commission came up with the one-rifleman, one-bullet theory. In doing so, it relied on the official autopsy report, the testimony of the doctors who performed it at Bethesda (Md.) Naval Hospital, a series of reconstructions posing agents as Kennedy and Connally and some artists' conceptions of the path of the bullet through JFK's neck. Assured by the doctors that the actual autopsy pictures—pinpointing the exact location of the wounds—weren't necessary, no commission members demanded to see them.

Dark Surmise: Only this year did the pictures become a serious issue—notably with the publication of Harvard graduate student Edward Jay Epstein's “Inquest,” a critical study of the commission inquiry. Epstein argued that the government's own evidence—including a rough autopsy drawing and photos of JFK's coat and shirt—indicated the shot hit the



Single-bullet theory: Commission's re-enactment of Oswald's double hit

precisely that reason. Fanciful? Perhaps. But official Washington could only offer the vaguest rejoinder—until last week, when, three years after the fact, the 65 X-rays, color slides and black-and-white negatives were at last delivered to the National Archives. If the pictures still remained off limits to all but Federal investigators for the next five years, the mystery within a mystery at least was solved: the pictures, in effect if not in fact, had been in the possession of the Kennedy family all along.

What made them important was their potential value in settling a pivotal point of the investigation: whether or not a single bullet ripped through Kennedy's neck and inflicted multiple wounds on Texas Gov. John Connally. Films of the assassination indicated the two men were hit no more than 1.8 seconds apart—too fast for anyone to rip off two shots with Oswald's obsolescent Italian rifle. If the two men were hit by separate bullets, the almost inescapable conclu-

late President too low on the back to have exited at his necktie knot and caused all of Connally's wounds. And, in the archives, he found two FBI reports that said the bullet actually had lodged in Kennedy's back and had apparently dropped out without passing through the body. Epstein's dark surmise: the official autopsy report may have been rigged to sustain the single-assassin theory. Plainly, the substantive points could be settled only by the autopsy pictures—and the pictures, as commission staffers vaguely noted, were “unavailable.”

As it turned out, Bethesda had given the pictures to the Secret Service; the Secret Service, by one inside version, held onto them but—as is customary in routine autopsies—surrendered actual ownership to the family. And the Kennedys, in turn, withheld them from public view—including even the commission record—as a matter of taste. For nearly three years, neither the commis-

sion nor the government pressed them.

Only in mid-September, with the drumfire of doubt mounting in the U.S., did the Justice Department broach the subject to Sen. Robert F. Kennedy—a man still so deeply scarred that not even intimates will raise the subject of the assassination with him. Kennedy turned over negotiations to his old Justice Department colleague, Burke Marshall, now general counsel for IBM and lawyer for the executors of JFK's estate. The public version was that the Kennedys had simply delivered the pictures in time for the Nov. 2 statutory deadline for the U.S. to take title to all evidence in the case. But the delicacy of the negotiations was made plain by the terms the Kennedys set on the grant.

Those terms specified that only Federal investigators could look at the pictures during the next five years—a span chosen, said Marshall, “on the grounds that by that time there will not be a lot of people making money out of the assassination.” Even after that, Marshall will screen applicants and grant access only to “recognized experts—so long as their intent is serious and not sensational.” Those restrictions will stand for the lifetime not only of Kennedy's widow, parents, brothers and sisters but Caroline and John Jr. as well—a proviso likely to foreclose the pictures to public view into the 21st century.

The Doctors: They *were* examined last week by two of the autopsy doctors, who insisted that the pictures only confirmed what they had originally told the commission. But the family's Feds-only rule would also permit an independent review by a Congressional committee. Neither was likely to suit the doubters. New York lawyer Mark Lane, the best-known of the skeptics, threatened to file a taxpayer's suit to break the restrictions on outside scrutiny of the pictures. And even some cooler heads thought an independent check was in order; one commission staffer, indeed, suggested showing the pictures to an ad hoc blue-ribbon panel.

But there were some powerful countervailing voices. Lyndon Baines Johnson, for one, thought it was enough that the evidence was available to any official body: “. . . I think that every American can understand the reasons why we wouldn't want to have . . . everything paraded out in every sewing circle in the country to be exploited and used without serving any good or official purpose.” And there was an improbable second from none other than Edward Jay Epstein, who had helped raise the great photo mystery in the first place. The restrictions, said Epstein, sounded “very reasonable” to him—and he thought the possibility of a second assassin would, thanks to the pictures, “probably be reduced to nil.”