

COMMENTARY October '75 "Conspiracy Fever" By Jacob Cohen

Critique: By Jerry Policoff

In his discussion of the location of Kennedy's back wound, Cohen implies that the sole basis for the critics' placing the wound below the shoulder is the low position of the holes in Kennedy's shirt and jacket and Boswell's errant dot on the autopsy face sheet. He then lays this off to coincidence, claiming that the measurements written in the margins by Boswell correctly place the wound at the base of the neck. Obviously, concludes Cohen, the shirt and jacket hunched up, explaining the location of the holes in a position much lower than the actual entry wound. Aside from the obvious absurdity of this contention it is dishonest in that it ignores the mountain of supporting evidence that the wound was at the lower location. Cohen adds that the confusion was further fostered because the FBI agents who attended the autopsy were under the mistaken impression that the bullet had entered only a short distance and was unconnected to the throat wound. Cohen does not mention that these agents (Siebert and O'Neill) also corroborated the location of the wound approximately six inches below the shoulder -- a fact which Cohen is certainly aware of since he mentions it in his article in the Nation in July 1966. He also does not mention that the death certificate signed by Admiral Burkley, Kennedy's personal physician, located the wound at the level of the "third thoracic vertebrae," a position that matches the site of the dot on Boswell's face sheet. Nor does he mention the existence of a copy of that face sheet "verified" by Burkley, something he certainly would not have done if it were wrong. Nor is Cohen accurate when he says Boswell's marginal measurements coincide with a wound in the neck. The reference point for these measurements is the mastoid, a small bone behind the ear which changes position in relation to the rest of the body depending upon the position of the body. The measurements could describe a wound in the neck. They also could describe a wound in the back. It is rather amazing that Boswell should choose this bone as a reference point rather than a vertebrae or some other "fixed" point. Finally, Cohen makes no reference to the fact that Secret Service agents Greer, Bennett, Kellerman, and Hill all corroborated the location of the wound below the shoulder at approximately the location of the holes in the clothing. It is inconceivable that Cohen does not know this unless he has read none of the books which he claims to be debunking.

Cohen stresses with obvious incredulity that if the autopsy report is wrong than it must have been by design and the doctors perjured themselves. There is no mention that in his Nation piece Cohen himself suggests that the autopsy report was doctored -- not to mask conspiracy, but to hide the fact that the President suffered from Addison's Disease. He suggests there must have been a massive conspiracy indeed for the morticians and the thirty or so people in and out of the autopsy room to have kept silent about the lower back wound. He does not mention that none of these individuals were called to testify or even to supply affidavits as far as is known or that everyone who actually saw the wound with the exception of the autopsy doctors located the wound below the shoulder (everyone whose testimony is known, that is). He does not mention the fact that the autopsy doctors were ordered not to discuss the autopsy or that Dr. Finck testified at the trial of Clay Shaw in New Orleans that the autopsy surgeons had been ordered not to dissect this wound that confused them so because they could not determine its path.

Next Cohen states that the autopsy material was relinquished to the National Archives in late 1966 by the Kennedy family which in fact never had possession of them. This material had been in the possession of the Secret Service. Cohen says that the Ramsey Clark panel "unanimously confirmed every conclusion of the autopsy." This is a gross misrepresentation. The wording of the Panel Report was extremely equivocal, and in point of fact, a comparison of their findings with those of the autopsy report turns up a number of glaring inconsistencies, not the least of which is a four inch discrepancy in the location of the small entry wound in the head. In addition, a number of items which were originally included in the autopsy material including X-rays of the extremities and photographs of the chest cavity were not seen by the Clark Panel.

In a footnote Cohen says that "the most brilliant confirmation of the autopsy findings in written literature" was provided by "doctor" John K. Lattimer. This is ludicrous. To begin with Lattimer is a urologist who has absolutely no expertise in the field of forensic pathology and was totally unqualified to examine the autopsy photos and X-rays. In addition, Lattimer's findings totally destroy the findings of the Warren Report if they are accurate. Of all those who have seen this material only Lattimer located the back wound at a higher

point than did the autopsy doctors. In fact, found Lattimer, the downward angle through the President's neck was so steep that it would have had to come from the floor of the car if it had come from the front. Lattimer did not explain how a bullet following this trajectory which presumably (reversing the example) would have taken it into the floor of the car could have then changed course dramatically to hit Governor Connally below the right armpit. Lattimer's other findings were equally ludicrous and at odds with the findings of the original autopsy report.

Cohen balks at the idea that the autopsy material may have been altered. Since we know that much of it is missing, and since descriptions of what is not missing is at odds with the autopsy report it would seem that it is a very real possibility that this material has indeed been altered.

In discussion of the head wound Cohen dismisses the possibility of a frontal hit on the grounds that the X-rays and photos do not provide evidence of one. In his book "Presumed Guilty," Howard Roffman devotes a great deal of space to this very point and offers persuasive and compelling evidence that the photos and X-rays do provide evidence of a frontal entry from a frangible bullet as well as a rear entry by a non-frangible bullet. This theory is lent some added credibility by the forward movement of Kennedy's head for 1/18th of a second followed by an explosion toward the front of his head and the movement of his head backward in the Zapruder film.

Cohen's embracings of the Rockefeller Report (whose Executive Director, David Belin, was a lawyer for the ^{WARREN} Commission) reveal his eagerness to bolster the official conclusions of the Warren Conclusion no matter how weak the defense. He states that Belin removed himself from the inquiry into the Kennedy killing, but Belin's correspondence with the critics while serving on the Commission would indicate otherwise. Cohen's contention that the backward spray of brain matter might have been due to a strong wind is laughable. One of the motorcycle policemen riding behind the car was hit so hard that he thought he too had been shot. Cohen says a witness told the Rockefeller Commission that a gunman is visible in a single frame lurking behind a tree at frame 413 of the Zapruder film. He says the Commission found that the tree was only a few inches wide and just five feet in front of Zapruder, and thus the man, who's head must therefore have been the size of a lemon, would have been in plain view of Zapruder and hundreds of other witnesses had he indeed been there. This is a typical example of how the Rockefeller Com-

mission dealt with troublesome testimony. This refers to the testimony of Robert Groden who testified not that there was a man in the tree but that there was a man at the base of a retaining wall who could be seen through the foliage of the tree in the Zapruder film. Moreover the "figure" appears not for one frame but for about a dozen. It is extremely doubtful that this figure is an assassin, but it is rather likely that it is a man. A figure appears in the identical spot in the Nix movie film and several still photographs taken from the opposite side of the street than the side Zapruder was on. In 1967 Itek undertook a study of two of these photographs for Life magazine and concluded that a shadowy figure at the base of the retaining wall was indeed a man (though they found no gun). Itek, ironically, is a Rockefeller company. Thus rather than deal with the possibility that Groden's figure might indeed be a person (with or without rifle), the Rockefeller Commission merely moved him to a position where he could not possibly have been and thereby proved that he couldn't have been there. Similarly the Commission found that no one could have fired from the railroad overpass in that a shot from that location would have had to pass through the windshield of the car and there was no evidence that this had occurred. I know of no serious critic who has ever suggested a shot from the overpass. The Commission might as well have ruled out a shot from the moon as it was out of range.

Cohen's statement that only one witness heard shots from front and rear is also deceptive, since the first shot apparently had a different sound than the others and was mistaken for a backfire or a firecracker by many witnesses. Those who heard shots from the front, however, far outnumber those who heard them from the rear.

Cohen makes the flat statement that "the photograph of Oswald, rifle in hand, is not a fabrication... the shadow under Oswald's nose notwithstanding." He gives no reason for his certainty nor does he mention that those who have challenged the authenticity of this photograph have raised several points in addition to the discrepancy of shadows. His flat assertion that "any jury in the world" would have convicted Oswald of killing Tippit is arguable as well, if one looks beyond the facts as stated by David Belin. As far as Cohen's statement that photos of tramps arrested in Dallas are not Hunt and Sturgis, again no responsible critic has ever suggested they were, which is no doubt the reason the Rockefeller Commission was so selective in deciding who they would hear as witnesses.

Cohen states on page 37 that "it is usually the case in public discourse that revelations of major errors invalidate the accompanying case." Nevertheless Cohen goes on.

In his discussion of the single-bullet theory in Section III (a theory which crumbles, incidentally, if the wound was below Kennedy's shoulder rather than in his neck) Cohen says Connally was seated "in front and slightly to the left of Kennedy." Again Cohen is incorrect, and it is hard to believe that the error is an innocent one. Connally was seated slightly to the right of Kennedy -- an important distinction since the downward trajectory from the sixth floor of the Depository was right to left and a bullet following this trajectory presumably would have had to make a right turn to hit Connally below the right armpit after first hitting Kennedy. As for the contention that the bullet had to hit Connally because it hit nothing else, first this supposes that the bullet transited Kennedy's body which is not proven (and again unlikely if the lower wound is accurate). Secondly bullets do strange things and it is much more likely that the bullet would have flown free of the car than that it would hit Connally where he was hit and then proceed to do so much further damage.

One must believe that Cohen would accept that the world was flat if the Warren Commission had said so. It stretches credibility to suggest that Connally could experience a delayed reaction to a wound which shattered a rib and sent secondary missiles of bone into his lung while Kennedy would react immediately to a bullet that passed through his neck striking no bones or vital organs. But the Warren Commission said it happened that way, and Cohen accepts it.

Again when Cohen says that Connally's wrist was only in position to receive its wound at a point earlier than he and many critics say he was hit "proves beyond honest doubt that they were hit by the same bullet" is a blatant non sequiter. It is not established just when Kennedy was hit. If, as all reason indicates, he was hit some six inches below the shoulder it is ridiculous to say that this bullet exited the throat. The pristine nature of the supposed single-bullet mitigates against it having done what it is alleged to have done. The relative positions of the two men would seem to make a double hit extremely unlikely. Thus even if the Zapruder film revealed the two men being hit at precisely the same time (which it does not) this would not prove they were hit by the same bullet, and in fact all available evidence indicates that they were not. Finally, in the same paragraph, Cohen quotes Howard

Roffman completely out of context to imply that Roffman subscribes to the single-bullet theory in his book, "Presumed Guilty." In fact Roffman again offers persuasive evidence that the wound to Connally's wrist could not possibly been caused by a pristine bullet such as the one that rolled out from under a stretcher in Parkland Hospital and was subsequently traced to Oswald's rifle. He also argues that the nature of the fragment that hugged Connally's femur ruled out a shallow superficial wound out of which the bullet could have fallen as the Warren Commission concluded this bullet had. Indeed one of the nagging unanswered questions is the statement of Dr. Robert Shaw, the doctor who attended to Connally at Parkland Hospital. Shaw told a press briefing on November 22nd after Connally had been removed from his stretcher that "the bullet is still in his leg."

Cohen's statement that "testifying before the Rockefeller Commission, Dr. Wecht has the audacity to argue that the fact that Connally still held his hat in frame 237 proves that he hasn't been struck in the wrist yet..." is interesting. This part of Wecht's testimony is not printed in the Rockefeller Report, and the testimony is still classified. Even Dr. Wecht has been refused a transcript. How then does Cohen know what Wecht testified to unless he was given access to testimony or was briefed by Commission staff?

As for the condition of the pristine bullet, Cohen states that the critics' arguments that the weight of fragments recovered from Kennedy and Connally when added to the weight of the recovered bullet are too great "is no longer considered a problem for the single-assassin theory. Why not? In fact it is a more serious problem because the Panel Report and Dr. Lattimer turned up fragments that were not previously reported, thus adding to the unlikelihood that all of these fragments added to the weight of the recovered bullet would not surpass the probable weight of an unfired bullet of that make and calibre.

Cohen's statement that the recent release of the spectrography report should stymie allegations that metal recovered from the two bodies were inconsistent is again a falsehood. Some material was released due to a freedom of information suit by Harold Weisberg. Weisberg, however, has not received the report or all of the materials, and is continueing his litigations. His lawyer, Jim Lesar, confirms this. Cohen spoke to neither of them just as he did not speak to Wecht.

Cohen's argument that CE 399 must be legitimate despite the unlikelihood that it would remain pristine employs true pseudo-logic. Conspirators would not risk planting it he says, because this would point too obviously toward a conspiracy. Since the evidence suggests that this bullet was indeed planted, however, and since the Warren Commission ignored that evidence, Cohen's argument carries little weight. What happened to the bullet that hit Connally if it was not CE 399, asks Cohen? Here it is important to remember what Dr. Shaw told the press on November 22nd. Why would people lie, asks Cohen? Why should we assume they are telling the truth, especially when the facts indicate otherwise?

It is also interesting that throughout his discussion Cohen scrupulously avoids any discussion of the throat wound (which he is so certain was an exit wound). Each and every Parkland physician who observed that wound believed it to be a wound of entrance. Indeed as late as two weeks after the assassination the Secret Service was still reconstructing the crime to ascertain how the President had been struck from the front from the rear.

Cohen also avoids discussion of the transcript of the January 27, 1964 Executive Session of the Warren Commission, released earlier this year through the efforts of Harold Weisberg. The autopsy report under discussion during this executive meeting does not appear to be the same one ultimately published by the Warren Commission. But then at this point the Commission was unaware that a separate hit to Connally meant a conspiracy since Oswald's rifle was incapable of firing two shots in the allotted time. Thus on January 27 the Commission discusses a report that contains a back wound "below the shoulder blade to the right of the backbone," and the troublesome throat wound is the result not of an exiting bullet, but of an exiting fragment.

Perhaps the crowning absurdity is Cohen's praise for David Belin's book "November 22, 1963: You Are the Jury," a book which is basically a rehash of the Warren Report with very selective excerpts from the testimony. It contains virtually nothing new and is rampant with omissions and distortions.

Cohen's concluding sentence provides an apt review of this piece: "I wish more people, everyone, would shake their fingers at these cranks and say: 'For Shame!'"