

Post Daily Magazine

The Warren Report And Its Critics

ARTICLE II: The One-Bullet Theory

By MICHAEL J. BERLIN

THE ONE-BULLET theory, Arlen Specter recalls, "started to take shape . . . early in the work of the Commission. The staff started to view the films of the assassination early in January (1964). We started to think of all the possibilities. Our thinking had originally been that the first bullet hit the President's neck, the second hit Gov. Connally, the third hit the President's head . . .

"But then, we knew the location of the wound in the back of the President's neck. We knew the bullet that made that wound didn't hit anywhere in the car . . . and, because of the trajectory, it couldn't have escaped from the car [without leaving a trace] . . . Where did it go?"

"The genesis of an idea is always very hard to pin down. But as best I can reconstruct it, the one-bullet theory came into sharpest focus during my first access to Commander Humes (the head of the team that conducted the autopsy on John F. Kennedy at Bethesda) the Friday before his testimony."

By the day Humes testified—March 16, 1964—Specter recalls, further indications favoring the one-bullet theory had been dug out of FBI reports by Specter and other lawyers on the Commission staff.

Nobody knew it at the time, but the "one-bullet, two-victim theory" was to be the cornerstone of the Warren Report's case that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, assassinated President Kennedy and wounded Gov. Connally of Texas on Nov. 22, 1963.

It was Specter's greatest contribution. But it was also his great failure, his critics say, because in setting out to prove the one-bullet theory, he left the role of investigator and became a prosecutor. They say his questioning of expert witnesses was designed to produce supporting testimony for his theory.

The theory itself is quite simple: Three bullets were fired from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas. One went astray and was never found. A portion of it nicked a curb, and caused a scratch to a pedestrian. Both curb and pedestrian were a good distance from the motorcade. A second bullet hit President Kennedy in the head—the fatal wound. Fragments, presumably from this bullet, were found under a floor mat in the back of the Presidential limousine, and on the front seat.

A third bullet—almost certainly the first to be fired—is the key one. According to the theory, which the Commission accepted, it hit Kennedy in the back of the neck, exited from his throat, entered the back of Connally (who was sitting directly in front of the President), exited through the Governor's chest, passed through his wrist, and imbedded itself in his thigh. The bullet, almost (but not quite) in perfect shape, its metal jacket intact, was found on a stretcher in Parkland Hospital that might well have been Connally's (but might not have).

This bullet was labeled Commission Exhibit #399.

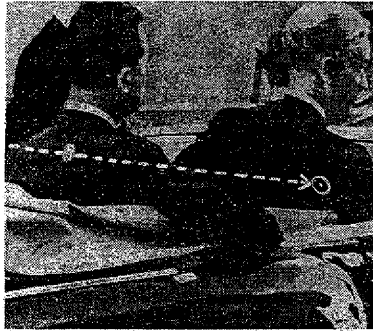
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THE BULLET'S TRAVELS SOUND FANTASTIC.

Specter admits that when he asked ballistics experts to duplicate this shot with cadavers, he was told that "not one shot out of a thousand" could match it. (The ballistics tests did not duplicate the conditions of the assassination; among other things, the bodies were not positioned to correspond to the way the President and the Governor were sitting in the car.)

So the Commission was obliged to demonstrate the plausibility of the one-bullet theory in a negative manner—by establishing that it couldn't have happened any other way. The critics, particularly Mark Lane and Edward Epstein, have made this chain of evidence the focal point of their attacks. The problems they bring up are these:

• Reports by FBI men who witnessed the autopsy contradict the Bethesda surgeons' testimony before the Commission. These reports say the bullet penetrated only "the length of a finger," and there was no path of exit. Rough sketches, which the autopsy



In re-enactment of assassination, dotted line shows Commission's theory of how bullet passed through President Kennedy (rear) and hit Gov. Connally.

surgeons later termed inaccurate, join the FBI men in placing the wound in the back—lower than the surgeons' final autopsy report places it.

But Specter says he questioned the FBI agents and satisfied himself that their report was based on snatches of doctors' conversation overheard at Bethesda before further exploration exposed the bullet's path out the front of the throat. "Should I have written a memo on these interviews?" Specter asks himself today. "Well, yes. Did I? I don't know."

As to whether the wound was in the President's "back" or "neck," the difference is semantic. If you measure 14 cm. (a little more than 5½ inches) down from the lower tip of your mastoid process—that bony thing behind your ear—you'll come to a spot—back, neck, call it what you will—that is higher than the knot of your tie. And that's what the autopsy report says.

• The wound in the President's throat, obliterated by a tracheotomy at Parkland Hospital in a futile attempt to preserve his life, was originally identified by Parkland doctors as an entrance wound.

The Parkland doctors have since conceded that what they saw may have been either an entrance or an exit wound. They did so under persistent questioning by Specter, whose motivating puzzle was: if one bullet went in the front, and another went in the back, what happened to them?

• Connally and his wife are convinced that the first bullet hit Kennedy, the second hit the Governor. A study of the film of the assassination (taken by an amateur photographer), shows that Connally grimaces at his wounds about half a second after Kennedy does. This seems too much of a differential for one bullet to have hit both men.

But a closer look at the film indicates that a good number of frames before Connally's face expresses pain, he is lifting his wrist, the one the bullet passed through, from his lap. One interpretation of the film is that his wrist, when lifted, is departing from the path that the bullet followed from chest to thigh—so he had to have been shot before lifting his wrist.

• Medical experts testified that they doubted that any bullet could have done that damage and emerged in such good shape as #399.

The Commission's explanation was that there were indications that the bullet was tumbling, entered the wrist backwards, and therefore didn't get as dented as it might have, had the softer front end entered first.

• According to some unofficial calculations, more metal was found in Connally than was missing from #399 — so #399 couldn't have been the bullet that hit them.

The Commission staffers insist that no calculations can be exact. At most, #399 is missing 2.4 grains of metal. One of the fragments removed from Connally—the largest one—was lost. A second fragment weighs

½ grain. A third piece, of undetermined weight, remains in Connally's thigh. Commission staffers say the exact weights can never be determined.

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THESE ARE JUST SOME OF THE WEAK SPOTS—and explanations—in the one-bullet theory, but there are two things, some experts say, that could help make it stand up.

One is a look at the 51 photos (25 black-and-white; 26 in color) and 14 X-rays reportedly taken at the Kennedy autopsy. It is likely that these can determine just where the bullet hit, and perhaps the path it took going out.

The second thing that bears looking into is whether the ½-grain fragment from Connally's wrist is a piece of lead from Bullet 399 (if it is, #399 was the bullet that hit Connally).

Ballistics experts say the way to go about this is by spectrographic analysis or neutron activation analysis. Both are tests aimed at a comparison of impurities found within pieces of lead. If the impurities match, then the probabilities are that the pieces of lead came from the same source. Spectrography identifies the impurities by means of their color wavelengths. Neutron activation identifies them by their varying reactions to radioactivity.

The critics point out (and no one has contradicted them) that nowhere in the Report, in the 26 volumes of evidence, in the 300 cubic feet of Commission papers, has anything yet been found to indicate that #399 and the Connally wrist fragment underwent the neutron test.

As the spectrography, FBI expert Robert Frazier testified on May 13, 1964, that various bullet pieces, including the wrist fragment and #399, had been compared with one another. He was asked "Is it possible to state with any more certainty whether or not any of these fragments came from the same bullet?"

"Not definitely, no," Frazier replied, "only that they are of similar lead composition."

Earlier, Frazier had testified: "That examination was performed by a spectrographer, John F. Gallagher, and I do not have the results of this examination here, although I did ascertain that it was determined that the lead fragments were similar in composition."

Gallagher was called upon by a Commission counsel on Sept. 15, 1964. He was not asked about the spectrography test, but about evidence that Oswald had fired a weapon sometime before his arrest.

This would not be noteworthy in itself, were it not for the fact that for some unexplained reason the report of Gallagher's tests referred to by Frazier appears to be missing from the Commission files.

The National Archives, asked about its whereabouts, replies that this report is not among the Commission papers, either classified or unclassified. The archivists say they have written to the FBI about it, but have not yet received an answer.

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IT BOILS DOWN TO THIS: IF BOTH X-RAYS AND analysis support the one-bullet theory, it would appear that one weapon, fired from the rear, did all the damage. (Ballistics tests show that both #399 and fragments from the fatal head shot came from one source—Oswald's rifle.)

All possible contradictions will not have been explained by such a finding, but what remained would have to be disregarded.

But if either X-rays or analysis destroys the one-bullet theory, it would appear that there was probably more than one assassin, probably a conspiracy—a whole new range of possibilities opens up.

For the Commission accepts FBI findings that Oswald's rifle could be fired only once every 2.3 seconds; and accepts the film of the assassination, which provides conclusive evidence that Connally must have been hit less than 2.3 seconds after Kennedy.

Therefore—if two separate bullets were involved—Oswald's rifle couldn't have fired both shots; someone else was firing as well.

What then, happened to the other bullets? The only answers would be a Grand Conspiracy or—much more believable—utter inefficiency. (The fragments from the fatal head shot were not found until hours later, AFTER the Presidential limousine had been brought back to Washington. Perhaps other bullets were never found at all.)

The Commission's defenders suggest, in case the one-bullet theory fails, that Kennedy may have been wounded earlier than had been thought.

The Commission, though, did a pretty good job of showing that the time span between the Kennedy and Connally wounds, as seen in the film, was less than 2.3 seconds.

Whether the Oswald rifle could fire in less than 2.3 seconds (West Coast writer Joel Pimsleur claims a University of California professor has been timed in one second flat) is irrelevant. The Commission's Archimedes, inadvertently operate the bolt of a similar rifle almost as quickly while on TV) remains to be determined.

If the one-bullet theory collapses, there is one fascinating alternative.

TOMORROW: The Grassy Knoll Theory