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Conspiracy Fever

Jacob Cohen

How can one explain the extraordinary degree of political distrust and, beyond that, the pervasive taste for mystery and conspiracy which is everywhere so conspicuous in America today? Old conspiracy theories (concerning Alger Hiss, the Rosenbergs, and the assassination of President Kennedy) are out of the dustbin and enjoying new life; there seem to be more than enough readers for five different treatments of that laughable non-mystery, the Bermuda Triangle; the flying-saucer faithful are riding high; and a new species of high-class monster movie (*The Conversation*, *Chinatown*, *Night Moves*, *The Parallax View*) ends with the monster alive and still menacing. The message in these movies seems to be that we are surrounded by unconquerably complex and sinister forces; withdrawal and resignation are offered as appropriate responses.

The customary explanation is that recent revelations concerning Watergate, Vietnam, the CIA and FBI, *et al.*, have caused and perhaps justify the present mood of distrust and that truthfulness and rectitude on high will one day dispel it. However, close examination of the cultural scene reveals that this is only part of the explanation and perhaps not the most important part. I believe we are dealing with habits of mind in the very center of our life and times which positively revel in mystification, which do not wish to know the truth and perhaps could not recognize it if they saw it.

Let me illustrate by reciting a few representative tales from our times. They concern certain facts in dispute with regard to the assassination of President Kennedy, though I shall also want to refer in passing to aspects of the Rosenberg and Hiss cases. I offer them not to dispose of the mystery which attaches to these cases (to me there is no mystery, the truth of all three matters being quite clear) but as an example of how powerful feelings of distrust arise and breed upon themselves, powerfully resisting any efforts to dispel them.

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I

AS ALL assassination buffs know, one of the first and most pivotal disputes to arise out of the Warren Commission Report concerned the exact location of the small, neat wound of entry in President Kennedy's back and whether or not that wound could be connected to another small, neat wound in the President's throat. The Commission, following the autopsy report, placed the back wound quite high up, in the musculature between the shoulder and neck, and argued that that "single bullet," the famous exhibit 399, then exited from Kennedy's throat and went on to hit Governor Connally, causing all of his five separate wounds. All students of the assassination, pro and con the Report, agree that this sequence and every one of its constituent details are indispensable to the conclusion that there was a single assassin.

Now, it may be thought that it would be the easiest thing in the world to establish the location of a small, neat wound in the back and the evidence of its passage through the body toward the throat, especially since photographs and X-rays were taken of the President the night of the assassination, before and during the autopsy examination. Either the wound was here or it was there; there is only one truth in the matter. Either it left signs of its passage through the body, or it did not. If things happened otherwise, there must be other signs pointing to another singular reality.

However, if reality is always and ever singular, the evidence pointing to that reality is often ambiguous, especially evidence arising out of human observation. There is no scandal in this if we remember that reality is one, even if the evidence of it is sometimes murky. As it happens, several signs pointed to the possibility of a wound considerably lower in the back, one, therefore, unconnected with the throat wound. Beginning in 1965, critics of the Warren Report began to point out that the holes in the President's shirt and jacket seemed to align with a considerably lower back hit (though the clothing may have hunched up his neck as he waved to the crowd). They pointed to a small hole drawn on a silhouette by one of the doctors during the autopsy

examination (exhibit 397) which seems to place the wound quite far down (though precise measurements recorded in the margin of the same document point to the higher location). Then there were the FBI documents which revealed that for more than a month after the shooting the FBI (or, more precisely, the authors of the documents) worked on the assumption that the bullet which hit the President in the back had only entered a short distance and then somehow worked itself out; in other words, that it was unconnected to the throat wound. At this point, critics would remind readers and listeners that the doctors who treated the President in Dallas, immediately after the shooting, at first called the small, neat wound in his throat an entry wound, not a wound of exit. Finally, and perhaps most provocative, it became clear early in 1966 that the X-rays and photographs taken of the President the night of the assassination, which could have cleared up the dispute in a moment, were never seen by the Commission or its staff, who were refused access to them, never seen by the autopsy doctors after the night of the assassination, and were unavailable to independent investigators (at the behest of the Kennedy family which retained them).¹

What a fever these ambiguities raised, suggesting as they did not only the possibility of a second assassin but deeper, darker perfidies. Consider: no innocent error could have led the autopsy doctors to be off by inches in locating a back wound. Further, if the bullet did not pass through the body and exit from the throat, then the internal evidence of that passage cited by the autopsy doctors—a bruise on the dome of the right parietal pleura, an adjacent bruise at the upper end of the right lung, both of them in line with a passage from back to throat wound—was fabricated. The tiny traces of air in the tissues along the bullet track, allegedly visible in the X-rays, are not there. The doctors must have lied. And they must also have covered up the damage done by the bullet which caused the indubitable throat wound (was it a frontal hit, as Mark Lane suggests?). Bullets do not tear into a neck leaving no internal trace or ultimate point of exit.² The point cannot be overstressed: the facts in precise dispute in this matter were not at all subtle. The possibility of simple error on the part of the autopsy doctors is ruled out.

If the doctors lied and covered up, they prob-

¹The present writer was one of the first to point out that the X-rays and photographs were missing, and the first to establish that the Kennedy family was responsible. A benign explanation of their behavior is offered in "The Vital Documents," *Nation*, July 3, 1966.

²Not even the most ingenious of the critics of the Warren Report has suggested that a bullet entering the throat could be connected with the back wound. The angles make it impossible, and, in any case, an analysis of the fabric of shirt and jacket make it certain that the President was struck from behind.

ably began to do so the weekend of the assassination when the autopsy report was completed and submitted (and before it was clear what lies needed to be told!). That means they were told to lie, and those who told them were told to tell them. When one pieces together methodically the effort which would be necessary to plug all possible leaks likely in the telling of a lie of this magnitude, the scope of the necessary conspiracy is staggering (far larger, I might say, than anything revealed about Watergate). Were the morticians at the Lawson Funeral Home checked out to make sure that they did not spill the beans about a lower back wound? Were all the thirty or so people who were in and out of the autopsy room and might have heard a discussion of wounds radically different from those reported by the autopsy doctors, checked out as well? Why are all those implicated or who have knowledge of the conspiracy remaining silent? From fear, no doubt. What do they have to fear? What do we all have to fear? Thus a single, unresolved question of fact was capable of generating nightmares.

Not every writer at the time—I speak now of 1966-68—drew out the full conspiratorial implications of the material, though those implications were inescapable. Thus in a work like Edward Jay Epstein's *Inquest* (1966), which is widely respected for its moderate tone, nearly all the suspense is supplied by his discussion of anomalies arising out of the evidence concerning the back and throat wound, but he himself does not charge a massive conspiracy. Other writers were not so cautious. Books, articles, records, lectures came forth in profusion. The autopsy drawing, the FBI reports, the measurements of the holes in the shirt and jacket were replicated a millionfold. There was endless talk on the talk shows, gossip generating gossip. Simultaneously, there came an outcry for clarification and resolution (on to the X-rays and photographs!) so that the burden of the ambiguity and its dreadful implications might be lifted. And when the outcry was not heeded, for almost three years, until 1968, that was further provocation to the suspicious. At that time an immense emotional history was forged, constituted by people's accurate memory of their own terror, anxiety, anger, doubt, or worry (temperaments vary) when they contemplated the arguments and behavior of the critics of the Warren Report, and maintained by the natural human propensity to believe that the external provocation of our deepest emotions is not a chimera.

ONE would think that such tension would welcome the relief of decisive resolution. And if ever a question of fact has been resolved it is this one. Late in 1966, the Kennedy family relinquished the autopsy materials to the National Archives, placing strict restrictions on access to them. In February 1968, a panel

of four prominent physicians, three forensic pathologists, and a radiologist, each nominated by a prominent person outside of government,³ was convened by Attorney General Ramsey Clark to review that material and the panel unanimously confirmed every conclusion of the autopsy including the location of the back wound and the evidence of its passage to the throat. They found evidence of no other wounds except those which could have been caused by a gunman above and behind the President. Four years later two other forensic pathologists examined the material, including Dr. Cyril Wecht, a professor at the Duquesne University School of Law and chief medical examiner of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania,⁴ who had been and remains one of the major critics of the single-assassin theory. We shall want to consider Dr. Wecht's species of respectable fanaticism a little later, but it should be understood that with regard to the question of the back wound and its relation to the throat, he confirmed the Commission's findings of three years before, refuting some of his own earlier speculations into the bargain.⁵

Of course, all these doctors could be lying, ordered to, afraid not to, even Wecht, who cunningly would continue to criticize the single-assassin theory on other grounds, to maintain credibility. Or perhaps the X-rays and photographs produced for these distinguished doctors are all fake, the real materials having been destroyed or hidden, though the job of fabrication and erasure necessary for that is so staggeringly complex,⁶ the number of accomplices (all silent) so numerous, that a sane and serious person soon ceases dallying with the possibility. Therefore one must simply conclude that the holes in the jacket and shirt, the autopsy drawing, the testimony of the Dallas doctors concerning a possible frontal hit, the FBI summary of autopsy findings, all point to exactly nothing except everyday and most unthreatening human errors or coincidences. After the definitive reexamination of the autopsy material, they have interest only as psychological episodes with no essential connection to the truth of the assassination. They are like a prankster's fins in the water, not a shark at all; a mirage caused by the morning light, not a flying saucer;⁷ an unpleasant, nonconforming hag, but not a witch who flies on a broomstick, eats children, and copulates with the devil. Anyone caring about the truth of the assassination would need to erase the memory of the great public perturbation caused by these fantasies as he moves on to other areas in dispute.

II

WHAT of those areas? Are they so majestically disposed of? I shall touch only the familiar bases. Consider the well-

known concerns raised by frames 313-317 of the Zapruder film, the pivotal material in the controversy over the President's head wound. By now millions have seen the ghastly episode played and replayed on television and in movie theaters; seen the head and body snap sharply to the left within a third of a second; seen the splay of brain matter backward out of the open-top car. How, the critics ask, could a hit from behind and above have caused this violent motion to the left and backward? Isn't a hit from the front-right (at last, the grassy knoll) more likely, especially since many people thought the shots came from there and photographs indicate the presence of a gun or gunman?

Again, the autopsy findings should have silenced this line of speculation from the beginning, and if the autopsy doctors were not to be trusted, those who subsequently examined the autopsy materials, including the skeptical Dr. Wecht, must be. As with the back and throat wound, the point in dispute involves no subtle distinctions which could give rise to honest differences of expert opinion. The autopsy doctors found a small wound of entry above the hairline in the back of the skull and a large wound of exit in the right rear portion of the President's head. All the fracturing described was of a wound sprung open from within. The critics, on the other hand, posit a direct hit from the right-front capable of driving the head and body violently leftward and backward, which would have produced results almost directly opposite to those reported by the autopsy team. It is simply impossible that the many X-rays and photographs of the body would fail to show evidences of such a decisive hit. This is why so many of the critics, like Professor Josiah Thompson of Haverford and Dr. Wecht, eagerly awaited the availability of the X-rays and photographs, and

³William H. Carnes, M.D., professor of Pathology at the University of Utah, nominated by the President of Stanford University; Russel S. Fisher, M.D., professor of Forensic Pathology, University of Maryland, nominated by the President of the College of American Pathologists; Russel H. Morgan, M.D., professor of Radiology, The Johns Hopkins University, nominated by the President of The Johns Hopkins University; Alan R. Moritz, M.D., professor of Pathology, Case Western Reserve University, nominated by the President of Michigan State.

⁴The other doctor was Dr. John K. Lattimer of Columbia, whose summary of the medical evidence provides the most brilliant confirmation of the autopsy findings in the written literature. See "Further Information About the Autopsy of President John F. Kennedy," *The Forensic Science Gazette*, September 1973, pp. 3-9. Dr. E. Forrest Chapman of Michigan also reviewed the medical evidence and endorsed the autopsy conclusions.

⁵See "The Medical Evidence in the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy," *ibid.*, pp. 9-19.

⁶Writes Dr. Wecht: "The X-rays and photographic materials give every indication of being authentic . . . and the facial features, where they can be seen, are consistent with the . . . author's recollections of the President," *ibid.*, p. 14.

⁷Those with lingering affection for the flying-saucer cause are directed to the masterful debunking in Philip J. Klass, *UFO's Explained* (Random House).

others, like Vincent Salandria, predicted early on that the X-rays and photographs finally given the public would be doctored. Dr. Wecht summarized the unanimous opinion of every doctor who has seen the autopsy materials in an article written after he had spent two days with the X-rays and photographs:

The available evidence, assuming it to be valid, gives no support to theories which postulate gunmen to the front or right-front of the presidential car. The wound in the President's head can only have been fired from somewhere to the rear of the President.⁸

If that doesn't put the matter to rest, a careful perusal of Chapter 19 of the Rockefeller Report on CIA activities should. Ordered to check out rumors of a CIA assassination plot, the Commission staff⁹ assembled a group of five experts¹⁰ with expertise in forensic pathology, neuropathology, radiology, gunshot wounds, and accident reconstruction, and asked them to review the films of the assassination (Zapruder, Nix, and Muchmore), the autopsy materials, the President's clothing and back brace, and the bullet and bullet fragments recovered, to determine whether there was any evidence of a hit from the front, the front-right, or from both the rear and front-right. Their reports, submitted separately, completely confirmed the Warren Commission's conclusions: there was no evidence of a hit from the right; the violent motions of the President's body could not be attributed to a bullet from any source, but rather to "a seizure-like neuromuscular reaction to major damage inflicted to nerve centers in the brain." In testimony before the commission Dr. Wecht agreed that such a reaction could have happened within a tenth of a second. As for the slight movement of the head backward immediately after the hit, the panel explained that the explosion of tissue out of the exit wound would have produced a "jet effect," causing the head to move back in the direction from which the bullet came, almost instantly. I would add that the testimony of motorcycle policemen riding fore and aft the President's car indicates that a strong wind from a direction in front of the car may have blown the tissue backward.

One witness before the Rockefeller Commission directed its attention to frame 413 of the Zapruder film in which, he argued, one could plainly see an assassin in a German army helmet, or perhaps some form of rain hat, and a gun. A photograph of that frame has appeared in several of the underground newspapers which spread the rumors germinated by conspiracy detectors around the land. Since the assassin is not present in frame 411 or 415, the Commission concluded that it was unlikely that he had appeared and disappeared in a sixth of a second. Also, because the tree he was allegedly hiding behind was only inches wide, just five feet in front of Zapruder, and right out in the

open for hundreds to see, it seems unlikely that he would have gone unperceived. Calculating distances from Zapruder's camera, the Commission concluded that the assassin's head with or without helmet would have been the size of a large lemon, if head there momentarily was. As for the gun, it turns out to be as much a figment of light and shadow as the assassin who is supposedly holding it.

Two final items may help convince the convincing that all the massive speculation about a gunman to the right based on the Zapruder films is utterly baseless, however persuasive such speculation may have once seemed. First, a bullet fired from the front-right striking the President in the rear portion of the skull on the right side of the head would cause the head to turn right, not left. Only a strike in the front of the head would have caused the leftward head-snap so obsessively dwelled upon by critics of the Commission. Second, with regard to the earwitness testimony about shots from the grassy knoll, many people obviously did think they heard shots coming from the knoll; others heard shots coming from the Book Depository. But to anyone interested in the singular reality of the assassination, the question to ask of earwitnesses should be: how many heard shots coming from two different directions? In other words, of some 190 earwitnesses whose reactions are recorded, how many heard the shooting in the single way the critics imply it happened? The answer is: one.^{10A}

How does one add up the sum of emotions Americans have expended on what are now revealed as utterly illusory speculations arising out of the Zapruder film and the head-snap? Whole portions of respected books must be discarded as worthless (one thinks of Professor Josiah Thompson's *Six Seconds in Dallas*), for in matters of factual truth, momentary ingenuity and (apparently) passionate sincerity count for nothing. Professor Thompson, who worked closely with Dr. Wecht in preparing his

⁸*Forensic Science Gazette*, September 1973, p. 18.

⁹Critics have pointed ominously to the fact that attorney David W. Belin, executive director of the Rockefeller Commission staff, was a lawyer on the Warren Commission. In fact, for that reason, he did not participate in the preparation of Chapter 19, turning the Kennedy assassination investigation over to senior counsel Robert B. Olsen.

¹⁰Lieutenant Colonel Robert R. McMeekin, chief of the Division of Aerospace Pathology of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology; Dr. Richard Lindenberg, director of Neuropathology and Legal Medicine in the Maryland Department of Mental Health; Dr. Werner U. Spitz, Chief Medical Examiner Wayne County, Detroit, Michigan; Dr. Fred J. Hodges III, professor of Radiology at The Johns Hopkins School of Medicine; and Dr. Alfred G. Olivier, director of the Biomedical Laboratories at the Edgewood Arsenal, Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Maryland.

^{10A}A. J. Milliken, but he also thought there were eight shots where most people heard the three alleged by the Warren Commission. Warren Report, Vol. 19-H, p. 486.

book, has known for nearly three years that major portions of it must be discarded as baseless gossip, and so too has every student of the assassination. One recalls no public concessions of error. Indeed in the spate of articles now appearing in the wake of Watergate, one hears the same ground gone over again and again. Mark Lane is back on the college lecture circuit rehashing old mischief, most of which has even been discarded by other critics. A writer like George O'Toole, whose fanciful book, *The Assassination Tapes* (Penthouse Press), has received a big play in the sex magazines, rehearses lines of argument which he admits are far-fetched, as if to say: any event which can generate such heated comment, even plainly absurd comment, can't be completely clean. And here is the staid old *Saturday Evening Post*, September 1975, with a Norman Rockwell portrait of Kennedy on the cover, and within, sandwiched between the familiar homespun nostalgia, a section on the "unsolved murder mystery," featuring decade-old speculation about the back and neck wound and pictures of the leading critics of the Warren Commission: the new culture heroes.

Hannah Arendt has written that the opposite of a fact is a lie. There will come a time when many of the writers and lecturers who have gained celebrity by raising doubts about the assassination will be known for what they occasionally were: conscious liars. But in explaining the grip these writers have on audiences and readers (and editors), one must invoke a public psychology quite familiar to the historian of witch crazes and other paranoid enthusiasms in which even proven fantasies retain lingering reputation. When it comes to the Kennedy assassination or, for some, the Rosenberg or Hiss cases, normally rational people display the sweet madness of the flying-saucer freak or the Bermuda Triangle buff who makes no effort to hide his assumption that a palpably mistaken identification of a flying object or ocean mishap is an identification of some sort which retains status as evidence.¹¹

Characteristically, the assassination critic will move swiftly from one critical riff to another, never pausing long enough to permit reader or listener to test the validity of each separate provocation. Over the past ten years one has seen one after another of these riffs dissolve as completely as must any speculation about the head and back wounds, though that has not dissuaded cunning writers and orators from rearranging them in new improvisations. Thus, the photograph of Oswald, rifle in hand, is not a fabrication, but a picture taken on his camera by his wife seven months before the Kennedy assassination—the shadow under Oswald's nose notwithstanding. Any jury in the world, except perhaps one made up of assassination critics, would have found Oswald guilty of shooting officer Tippit, which is not to say that the defense attorney in the case would have been at a loss for words. The picture of two

derelicts arrested after the shooting does not reveal the faces of E. Howard Hunt and Frank Sturgis: the derelict Hunt is shorter, older, and fatter than the real one; the derelict Sturgis much taller and lighter than his alleged look-alike. And the several photographs allegedly showing another gun or gunman have, after years of the most intense scrutiny, one by one, proved to be mirages.¹²

It is usually the case in public discourse that revelations of major errors invalidate the accompanying case. When the graduate student admits faking test results, the professor is expected to denounce the conclusions resting on those results. With the assassination very different rules of discourse seem to prevail: as soon as a new line of speculation appears and remains temporarily unrefuted, all the rest take on new life. Reviewing Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment* (1967) soon after it appeared, Norman Mailer, who has often claimed he is able to recapitulate the deepest currents and emotions of the times, wrote, in the *Village Voice*, that if just one-tenth of what Mark Lane was charging was true, there was serious mischief afoot in the land. A less contemporary judgment would hold that if nine-tenths of what Lane said was nonsense, the chances of the rest containing much sense are very slim.

III

IT IS impossible to soothe every doubt generated by this veritable religion of suspicion, but before moving on to some general reflections on the meaning of these assassination tales and their relation to other clusters of doubt—the Rosenbergs and Hiss—let me try to deal with two lines of argument which for many are the redeeming 10 per cent. One concerns the timing of the shot which struck Governor Connally, and the other concerns the famous bullet, exhibit 399. Together they comprise the last stands of Dr. Wecht and others.

By now all agree that the single-assassin theory requires that one bullet strike Kennedy high in the back, exit from his throat, and then hit Governor Connally, causing all of his five wounds and broken bones: (1) an entry wound in the back near the right armpit; (2) a shattered fifth rib and an exit wound below the right nipple and twenty-five degrees below the back wound; (3) an entry wound on the knuckle side of the right wrist about two inches up from the wrist joint and a broken wrist bone; (4) an exit wound on the palm side three-fourths of an inch above the wrist crease; and (5) a shallow puncture of

¹¹The spoil-sport in the Bermuda Triangle brouhaha is Lawrence David Kusche, *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery: Solved* (Harper & Row).

¹²For a fascinating account of a twelve-year effort to find something in the pictures, which turned up nothing, see Maurice W. Schonfeld, "The Shadow of a Gunman," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July-August 1975, pp. 46-50.

the left thigh about five inches above the knee.

Connally was seated on the jump-seat directly in front and slightly to the left of Kennedy; it is difficult to see how a bullet exiting from the President's throat could miss him (which is one reason the first-generation critics strove so mightily to keep that bullet from coming through). If the bullet did miss Connally, it could not have missed the interior of the open car, and the absence of any damage to the car caused by a high-speed bullet, barely slowed by its passage through the President's neck, argues strongly that the bullet in fact struck Connally. The car was thoroughly examined by the FBI within forty-eight hours of the assassination; one doubts that the FBI covered up evidence of bullet damage, not because that agency is incapable of fibbing but because the FBI could not have known what lies to tell that early. It seems logical to conclude that the bullet struck Connally in the back and precisely in the place he was actually hit.

The ambiguity fastened on by the critics arises because the Zapruder film seems to show Connally being hit well after Kennedy but too soon after to allow for the possibility that he was struck by a second shot from the same rifle. During frames 207-225 of the film, which was running at 18.3 frames a second, Kennedy is out of view, blocked by a sign. As he reemerges to view in frame 225 it is clear that he has already been hit: both hands are clutching at his throat (which, according to the critics, has not yet been wounded). However, Connally's reaction is not dramatically visible until frame 237, perhaps a second after Kennedy was struck. Professor Thompson, whose book deserves a graphics award, has dwelled lovingly on that and the ensuing three frames, directing the reader's attention to the sudden slump of Connally's right shoulder between frames 237-38 and the puff in his left cheek. Connally himself, reviewing the films frame by frame, thought he was hit somewhere between 231-34. He does not remember ever being aware of wounds to his wrists and thigh. Both men, let it be stressed, were hit from above and behind, not from the knoll. The question is, was it by one or two assassins?

Delayed reactions to a bullet hit are not uncommon; by dwelling on the Zapruder film frame by frame the critics distort the time values in the case. If, as to me seems obvious, Connally was struck by the same bullet as Kennedy, a reaction a second later does not present a major challenge to the credibility of the Commission's reconstruction of the shooting. But there is one set of facts in the case—apart from the fact that the bullet which exited from Kennedy's throat could not have missed Connally or the car—which proves beyond honest doubt that they were hit by the same bullet, and that has to do with Governor Connally's wrist wounds. No critic has ever disputed these basic facts or interpretations of fact:

(1) that the wound of entry in Connally's wrist was on the knuckle (dorsal) side an inch and a quarter further up the arm than the exit wound on the palm (volar) side; (2) that the bullet which struck Connally's wrist had already struck something else, blunting its impact; (3) that Connally had a shallow puncture wound in his left thigh caused by a large missile whose force was almost dissipated by the time it struck. As Howard Roffman, a third-generation critic who has shaken-down and shaped-up a decade of criticism puts it: "It is probable that one bullet caused all of Connally's injuries."¹³

A careful perusal of the Zapruder film reveals that in frame 225, as Kennedy reemerges into view from behind the sign, Connally's torso is turned slightly to the right and his head is turned far to the right, perhaps executing the look backward the Governor vividly recalls making after the first shot. His right arm is over his lap, the wrist over the left thigh; his right hand, knuckles up, is grasping a wide-brimmed hat. At that point, a split second after Kennedy was hit, he is in perfect alignment to receive all his wounds. Assuming he was in something like this posture a moment before, that would be the only moment when the double hit was plausible: but then that is the only moment when the Warren Commission says it happened. By frame 230, however, *before* the critics say he was struck, Connally has begun to turn to his right; he has raised his right hand, which is still clutching the hat; his knuckles are just above and facing his right shoulder, his elbow is at his side. All during the 230's, as he continues his turn to the right, Connally's knuckles are at least shoulder high, his elbow at his side. By frame 240, slightly more than a second after Kennedy was struck, he has turned 90 degrees to the right and is facing out the side of the car. A bullet striking Connally when the critics say he was hit then would have had to exit from the chest at a downward angle; to have taken at least two sharp turns upward, in midair—right and then left into the knuckle side of the wrist; and then, upon exiting on the palm side, further up in the air than the wound of entry, would have had to execute a very sharp U-turn into the thigh:¹⁴ plainly impossible. Indeed in order for a gunman to have wounded Connally in the wrist during those frames, he would have to have been firing from the floor of the car. But no gunman was noticed there.

TO AFFIRM the Commission's version of the shooting, then, one need only live with the possibility that the Governor *accurately* remembers his own thoughts and reactions at the

¹³*Presumed Guilty* (Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1975), p. 132.

¹⁴Also to avoid hitting the hat, which would have been struck if the bullet came straight out the palm side.

time but that his reactions were slightly delayed. His failure to remember ever being hit in the wrist or thigh confirms that he is not the best witness to what happened, however well he remembers what he thought happened. As for the sudden slump of the right shoulder and the puff in the left cheek, they are clearly there in frames 237-38, but viewed in the context of the moving film are part of an earlier motion commencing in frame 230, when Connally begins a rapid turn to the right which is completed a little more than half a second later in frame 240. Living with these slight ambiguities should not prove an impossible burden for a citizen to carry through life as compared with the manifest impossibilities demanded by the critics' version of the shooting.

But significantly, the critics have no difficulty with the impossibilities of their own theories. One of the reasons I have dwelled on this matter in such detail is to demonstrate the utter recklessness of men who are respected as the most responsible critics of the Warren Commission and the tolerance for recklessness which has developed in this country in the last decade. The critics don't care to reconstruct a singular reality, preferring a strategy of pure attack, from contradictory points of view. 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, when Wecht must know that if Connally had not yet been struck in the wrist, then he never was, for the wrist will never again be in a position to receive its wounds from any plausible source. I know of no critical work on the assassination which even acknowledges Connally's wrist as a problem for an alternative version of the shooting. And not because these writers are unaware of the problem; no one who has lived with these movable jigsaw-puzzle parts as long as they have can fail to know exactly where the parts refuse to fit together. Professors are taught in graduate school that a complete critical argument must include frank acknowledgment of the difficulties in one's position, a rhetorical figure known as prolepsis, and one which I am obviously fond of. Scholarship which avoids facing the obvious problems carries the scent of dishonesty.

ALL of which brings us finally to the famous "magic bullet," as it has been dubbed by the critics, exhibit 399, which, in my view, presents the only serious challenge to the Warren Commission's case; how serious, the reader can judge.

The bullet was found on the ground floor of the Parkland Hospital in Dallas, within an hour of the shooting, by Darrell C. Tomlinson, the hospital's senior engineer. Kennedy and Connally had been taken on stretchers to two different emergency rooms. The President remained on his stretcher until he was declared dead, but the Governor was

immediately transferred to an operating table. Whereupon: a nurse, Jane C. Webster, rolled the bloody sheets on his stretcher into a small bundle; an orderly, R. J. Jimison, placed it on an elevator; and Tomlinson removed the stretcher from the elevator, where it had been for perhaps ten minutes, and placed it in a corridor on the ground floor of the hospital alongside another stretcher unconnected with the care of either man. Somewhat later, Tomlinson shoved one of the stretchers against the wall and a bullet rolled out. He is not sure from which of the two stretchers.

The bullet he found was a 6.5 millimeter, copper-jacketed, Mannlicher Carcano, almost perfectly formed save for a slight distortion in its lead base. It weighed 158.6 grains, about 2.5 less than the average bullet of its type, apparently the result of the lead missing from its base. Ballistic tests performed in the next twenty-four hours established that that bullet had been fired from the rifle, Oswald's, which was found miles away in the sixth floor of the Texas Book Depository. The last of Connally's wounds was a shallow puncture of the left thigh, caused by a large missile whose energy was almost entirely expended. Since no other large missile was recovered which could be related to Connally's wounds, and this one was found in conjunction with Connally's stretcher, the Warren Commission concluded that it was the bullet which had caused all of Connally's wounds after having passed unobstructed through Kennedy's neck.

Through the years the critics took several lines of attack on the bullet. For a while they tried to associate it with Kennedy's stretcher, implying it was the bullet which hit Kennedy in the back and worked itself out.¹⁵ That proved unproductive as it became clear that the bullet which struck Kennedy in the back did not work itself out, and furthermore, that Kennedy's stretcher was nowhere near the place where the bullet was recovered. Then the critics tried to argue that the metallic fragments recovered from Connally, plus those remaining in him and Kennedy, exceeded the amount of metal missing from the bullet, which if true would leave the Commission's case in a shambles. But that too failed to pan out: the weight of the bullet is no longer considered a problem for the single-assassin theory. Then, for years, there were heated demands that the FBI release its spectrographic analysis of the bullet, which, critics promised, would prove that the metal recovered from the bodies was copper and/or from a different bullet. The recent release of that report should stymie this line of investigation, momentarily.

¹⁵Wecht's summary of the matter is extremely misleading: "The bullet was reportedly found under a stretcher in a remote part of the hospital in the afternoon of the assassination. It was never conclusively determined whether the President or the Governor (or neither) had occupied the stretcher," *op. cit.*, p. 11.

Still, a problem remains and it is a considerable one. Save for a slight distortion in the base, the bullet is nearly pristine. How, the critics ask, could a bullet which caused seven wounds and shattered two bones, Connally's rib and wrist, have emerged so unscathed? The Warren Commission never conducted tests to ascertain the plausibility of the bullet's shape, but other tests, on bullet velocity, left test bullets considerably more distorted than exhibit 399. Several experts testifying before the Commission were clearly shaken by the bullet's pristine shape and unruffled copper surface, and the Commission's own account of the bullet shows the strain of advocacy.¹⁶ A fair summary of the expert testimony on the bullet is that its shape is improbable, highly improbable to some, but not impossible.

Reality, I have said, happens only one way, but that one way does not always follow the laws of maximum probability. Strange things happen, though never impossible things, and accounts of strange happenings must sound strange. However, if acceptance of exhibit 399 as the bullet which struck Connally implicates one in an improbability of a high order, consider the implications of the critics' version of what happened.

Clearly, exhibit 399 had to have been planted by the real conspirators. No other conclusion is possible. Let us try to imagine how that might have happened. Immediately after the shooting news comes to Conspiracy Central that the President has been taken to the Parkland Hospital; a messenger is sent over to the hospital with a spare bullet fired from Oswald's gun, missing a little lead from the base, though not more than was found in the body. He drops it somewhere, next to Connally's stretcher, as it happens. One wonders, did he inquire, "Where is Connally's stretcher?" (And why not Kennedy's while he was at it?) Months later it becomes clear that this bullet fits neatly into a single-assassin theory. All this effort, recall, is part of a massive scheme to *hide* the existence of a conspiracy from the authorities, when obviously the chances at the time were overwhelming that a bullet from Oswald's gun dropped randomly and irrationally in the hospital would point directly at the existence of other conspirators. Also, this version necessitates that the bullet which really hit Connally, resting finally in the flesh of his left thigh, is missing or was intentionally hidden, and if hidden, hidden before anyone could have known that would be necessary. All official parties to the deceit, of course, have remained silent for more than twelve years. Readers who suspect me of constructing an evadable *reductio ad absurdum* are invited to construct a more believable scenario.

I submit that anyone, like Dr. Wecht, who has seen speculation after speculation about the as-

sassination refuted, and continues to proclaim his vast distrust of the Warren Commission's conclusions while hanging from this narrow thread, is receiving inspiration from a source outside this world and its evidences.

IV

ONE frequently hears the opinion that if there is nothing fishy about the assassination, then at least the Warren Commission was seriously culpable in not forestalling the enormous controversy which the Report has provoked. But I think careful study of the history of the controversy would show that there is nothing the Commission could have done to silence the more extreme critics or discourage the media and the public's tolerance for their antic accusations. Not that the Commission is beyond reproach: Chief Justice Warren should have forced the Kennedy family to release the photographs and X-rays to the Commission, and even today, one wishes to press the Kennedy family to provide an explanation of why President Kennedy's brain, removed by the autopsy doctors for laboratory examination, was not sent to the national archives along with the other autopsy materials. But to argue that these and other errors provoked the controversy is to commit the fallacy *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. In analyzing the specific debate, as we have done, it is clear that the extreme criticisms of the Report rested on demonological assumptions which no rational arguments could have forestalled. There was no reason, for example, for the Commission's lawyers to have anticipated the discussion of the back wound because the autopsy had already established the absurdity of that whole line of argument. Most human events leave a trail of ambiguous evidence, as every lawyer knows. The lawyers on the Commission had seen those ambiguities dissolve like soap bubbles as the singular reality of the shooting emerged from the burden of evidence; they could not have imagined that a kind of criticism would arise oblivious to the methodology by which events are usually reconstructed.

I have charged some of the critics with conscious deceit because I cannot think how else to characterize writers and orators who continue to rehearse lines of argument which they know are incorrect, who disguise difficulties they know to exist in their own theses, and who argue from palpably contradictory or fantastic premises. If one must begin to assign responsibility for the distracting public debate over the assassination, one must begin with these critics who—well before Watergate, the Pentagon Papers, and CIA revelations, *et al.*—created a controversy whole out of the flimsiest cloth; after that one should go on to the keepers of the media gates, editors and producers, who have sought and sponsored the critics, grateful

¹⁶The Rockefeller Commission, so eager to take on the critics on other counts, avoids a discussion of Exhibit 399.

for the distracting thrills they could provide. Those who predict that future government honesty will be sufficient to dispel public distrust must ponder how tiny was the impact of the Clark panel in 1968, which reexamined the X-rays and photographs, and thereby demolished significant portions of the critics' major arguments. Seven years later the debate goes on as if the Clark panel's findings were simply news among news, like the latest sighting of the Loch Ness monster. Meanwhile, the *Saturday Evening Post* is lionizing the principal critics of the Warren Commission, and the Commission's Report is no longer available in paperback.¹⁷

THE public, for its part, can only be a spectator to all this, as Walter Lippmann said long ago, in *The Phantom Public*. It never judges issues on their merits—having neither the time, inclination, opportunity, nor ability—but rather forms its conclusions from the sound and style of the debate and its brute sense of the plausible. When the Gallup poll finds, as it has consistently since late 1966, that two-thirds and more of the American public doubt the essential conclusions of the Warren Commission, that only means that many people have heard an ill-mannered debate raging and concluded that such passionate and apparently well-informed dissent must signify something. After all, where there is smoke there is fire. But the smoke in this case is only the smoke of verbal battle, a green, chemically produced mist not at all like the black billows which arise from real flames. What is alarming is that the public seems incapable of detecting the difference because its sense of the plausible has come to include incredible charges of government wrong-doing.

The Kennedy assassination, of course, is not the only occasion for the leveling of these charges. Now the debate over the Rosenbergs and Alger Hiss is beginning anew, and in the "proofs" of the innocence of these three, one sees some of the same arts of insinuation practiced by the Warren critics.

"What about the hotel registration?" asks a student who has seen a stunning TV documentary, "The Unquiet Death of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg." During their trial the FBI produced a hotel registration to help prove that Harry Gold had indeed been in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on June 3, 1945, the day he says he received atomic information from David Greenglass. Greenglass seconded Gold's story and said that the Rosenbergs put him up to it. However, Walter and Miriam Schneir (*Invitation to an Inquest*) have studied the photocopy of the hotel registration at the Hilton Hotel where Gold allegedly registered the day of June 3, 1945. On the front, in Gold's hand, is his name and address, and the date, 6-3-45, allegedly written by the desk clerk. But on the back is stamped "June 4, 12:30 P.M."

The Schneirs conclude that the card is a forgery, that the meeting did not take place, and that Gold was not even in Albuquerque at the time. Imagine: the FBI has forged a card with Gold's collaboration, to prove he was where he wasn't and somehow gotten the date wrong on the back. The government then makes the card available to private investigators like the Schneirs, confident that the mistake won't be noticed. But that is only part of the absurdity. By denying that a meeting took place in Albuquerque that day, the Schneirs attempt to buttress their contention that Greenglass never gave atomic secrets to Gold—despite both their confessions. In their trial, even the Rosenberg defense conceded that Greenglass was guilty, arguing only that his accusations against the Rosenbergs were false. If Greenglass is lying about himself as well as Rosenberg, if the entire episode of atomic spying was concocted with Gold and Greenglass's collaboration, the government plot against the Rosenbergs becomes much larger by a considerable factor and its ability to carry it off rendered even more implausible.

"But what about the serial number and altered type face?" the student will ask, having heard Hiss or one of his defenders attack the authenticity of the typewriter which helped—but was not needed—to convict him.¹⁸ Belief that the typewriter was forged involves the believer in the contention that a conspiracy to frame Hiss had been going on for a number of years, probably as early as 1938. Having forged documents which seemed to prove that secret papers in Whittaker Chambers's possession had been typed on Hiss's typewriter in 1938, the government then planted a fake typewriter for Hiss's lawyers to find and bring into court to convict him, and then gave the fake typewriter to Hiss's lawyers enabling them to discover the marks of forgery and reveal the plot. Those who know the case know that Chambers only produced the Hiss documents on the provocation of a libel suit by Hiss, and therefore the FBI, or whoever, must have quickly forged the documents, and prepared the fake typewriter, all at a time when forgery by typewriter was thought to be impossible. As usual, all parties to what upon close analysis turns out to be a very wide conspiracy with many contributing participants have remained silent for at least twenty-seven years. As for the serial number and the allegedly altered type-face, they turn out to be dubious proofs of forgery indeed. The defense has never definitely established that the serial number of the machine precludes its being Hiss's, though it has some arresting arguments to make; and

¹⁷The best presentation of the Warren Commission's case, however, is available in hardcover. It is by a Warren Commission lawyer and the chief of staff of the Rockefeller Commission, David Belin, *November 22, 1963: You Are the Jury* (Quadrangle, 1973).

¹⁸See "Was Alger Hiss Guilty?" by Irving Younger, *COMMENTARY*, August 1975.

while there are some letters whose type-face has been worked on, as might happen to a machine first built in 1928, the letters altered were not the same as those offered for comparison by those experts who testified that the machine in question had typed the documents.

Actually, what these students are asking when they raise these questions is this: "How can honest men who argue so urgently about points of fact in what seems obviously to be a good cause, not have something serious to say? Why hasn't twenty-five years of debate silenced them?" Part of the answer is this: some of them are mistaken, others are zealots, and others, those who hide from their readers and auditors the complete extent of the conspiracy they are implying, are not so honest.

All of which does not mean that there were no Watergate or CIA revelations, no lying in connection with Vietnam. Nor are the bureaucratic, political, and plainly immoral tendencies associated with those events absent from the government's handling of the assassination or the prosecution of Hiss and the Rosenbergs. There is already evidence, for example, that the FBI, fearing that the agency would be blamed for not providing better protection for the President, hid evidence that it knew of Oswald's violent tendencies before the shooting. Nor is some future revelation that Oswald worked in some capacity

for the CIA or FBI precluded, though that would not in itself tie those agencies to a plot to kill the President. I would guess that HUAC and the Justice Department's pursuit and prosecution of Hiss and the Rosenbergs were often unscrupulous and excessive, as documents now being released in those cases will probably show. Obviously such wrongdoing cannot be blinked at; indeed, a little paranoia is probably healthy in keeping the scoundrels in line. However, the evil forces conjured by the assassination critics and their like are of an entirely different order. In their hands the system is simply unrecognizable. Among the lessons of Watergate, after all, is that in a free society it is very hard to hide conspiracies for very long, even conspiracies which, in the case of Watergate, are considerably more modest than those implied by the assassination critics. But to those critics the government is capable of anything. We are beset by demons. The delirium and confusion they tend to provoke turns citizens into metaphysical spectators ill-equipped for the hard, realistic vigilance which is necessary to preserve liberty.

Of course, there is no Civil Liberties Union to protect our institutions from slander and rampant paranoia. And I am not calling for an inquisition. I just wish more people, everyone, would shake their fingers at these cranks and say: "For shame!"