

A Conspiracy

Scientific acoustical evidence establishes a high probability that two gunmen fired at President John F. Kennedy. . . . [He] was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy.

With the first of these sentences from its summary report, the House Assassinations Committee makes what may turn out to be a genuine contribution to public understanding of Nov. 22, 1963. But the second sentence suggests that the committee is, after all, more interested in inflaming than informing. That detracts from its recent reputation for careful work and needlessly jabs a national nerve.

The committee developed its acoustical evidence conscientiously. It came from a Dallas police radio tape. A motorcycle officer in the Kennedy motorcade had his "transmit" button down so no one else could use the channel, a fact that conspiracy theorists consider highly suspicious. Committee staffers located the tape in July and concluded that the channel had been kept open innocently.

Then they realized something else: the open mike and tape would have picked up the gunshot sounds. If there were three shots, that would bolster the conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone; he fired three shots. What if there were more?

Quickly, a re-enactment in Dallas was arranged to create a comparison tape and a reputable acoustic expert concluded that there was a 50-50 chance of a fourth shot. For further authentication, the committee went to two other acoustic experts. They concluded — now with 95 percent certainty — that there had been a fourth shot. Sound patterns seemed to show that it came from a grassy knoll, and that it could not have been an accidental discharge but was fired toward the motorcade.

Was there a second gunman? No clear judgment is possible for weeks, until the committee publishes its

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detailed supporting material. Some credence is lent to the acoustical evidence by spectators interviewed by the Warren Commission who said they heard shots — one saw a puff of smoke — from the direction of the grassy knoll. But many more spectators, including policemen, testified that they did not. It is not yet known how the Assassinations Committee went about the difficult task of weighing the new acoustical material against the testimony of eye witnesses. Still, for the moment, it appears that the committee has developed evidence seriously suggesting a second gunman and that it did so in a responsible way.

What, then, is so troubling about the committee's assertion of probable conspiracy? The problem is the word. It is technically correct. If there were two gunmen, then either two independent assassins pulled their triggers in the self-same second, an incredible coincidence, or there was, indeed, a "conspiracy." But as students of assassination learn quickly, "conspiracy" means much more to the lay public. The word is freighted with dark connotations of malevolence perpetrated by enemies, foreign or political. Yet "two maniacs instead of one" might be more like it.

That may, in fact, be closer to what the committee believes. The committee does not doubt that it was Oswald's shots that killed President Kennedy. And the summary report pointedly denies all the suggested plots: it was not the Russians, not the Cubans, not the anti-Castro Cuban groups, not the mob, not Federal agents. Implicitly, the report dilutes the word "conspiracy." But one should not have to be a close or sophisticated reader to understand that. It is not hard to find language that suggests, say, "two maniacs" rather than "massive plot." Considering how open the subject is to suspicion and exploitation, we wish the committee had found it.