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The JFK Case: ... The Demons Are All in Our Minds

By Jacob Cohen

How can one explain the extraordinary degree of political distrust and hatred that, the pervasive taste for secrecy and conspiracy which is everywhere so conspicuous in America today? Old conspiracy theories concerning Alger Hiss, the Rosen-

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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.

able non-mystery, the Bermuda Triangle; the flying-saucer faithful are riding high; and a new species of high-class monster movie (*The Con- version*, *Chinatown*, *Night Moves*, *The Parallax View*) ends with the monster alive and still menacing. The message in those movies seems to be that we are surrounded by unquenchably complex and sinister forces; withdrawal and resignation are offered as appropriate responses.

The customary explanation is that recent revelations concerning Water-gate, 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 deal-

ing with habits of mind in the very center of our life and times which positively reveal 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 some of the facts in dispute with regard to the assassination of President Kennedy. I offer them not to dispose of the mystery which attaches (to me there is no mystery, the truth 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.

In his *Commentary* article, Cohen analyzes and dismisses arguments for a second assassin of President Kennedy. He reviews the findings of five doctors empaneled by Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark to study the autopsy materials and the reports of nine doctors who have seen the X-rays and photographs of President Kennedy. Cohen argues that the Warren Commission findings have been competently reviewed and confirmed.)

It is impossible to soothe every doubt generated by this veritable religion of suspicion, but let me try to deal with two lines of argument which for some indicate there must be fire behind all the smoke. One concerns the timing of the shot which struck Gov. Connally, and the other concerns the famous bullet, exhibit 309.

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 Gov. 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 35 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;

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and (5) a shallow puncture of the left thigh about 3 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 48 hours of the assassination; one doubts that the FBI overtook up evidence that such is in principle of fishing 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 famous Zapruder film of the motorcade 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

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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. Prof. Josiah Thompson, whose book *Six Seconds in Dallas* 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 237-238 and the puff in his left cheek. Connally himself, reviewing the films frame by frame, thought he was hit somewhere between 231-234. 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 Gov. 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 1 1/4 inches 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 in his book: "It is probable that one bullet caused all of Connally's injuries."

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, per-

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 200s, 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 (also to avoid hitting the hat, which would have been struck if the bullet came straight out the palm side); 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 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 237-238; 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. Cyril Wecht, a professor at the Duquesne University School of Law and chief medical examiner of Allegheny County, Pa., 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 10 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

Reality happens only one way, but that one way does not always follow the laws of maximum probability. Strange things happen, and accounts of strange happenings must sound strange.

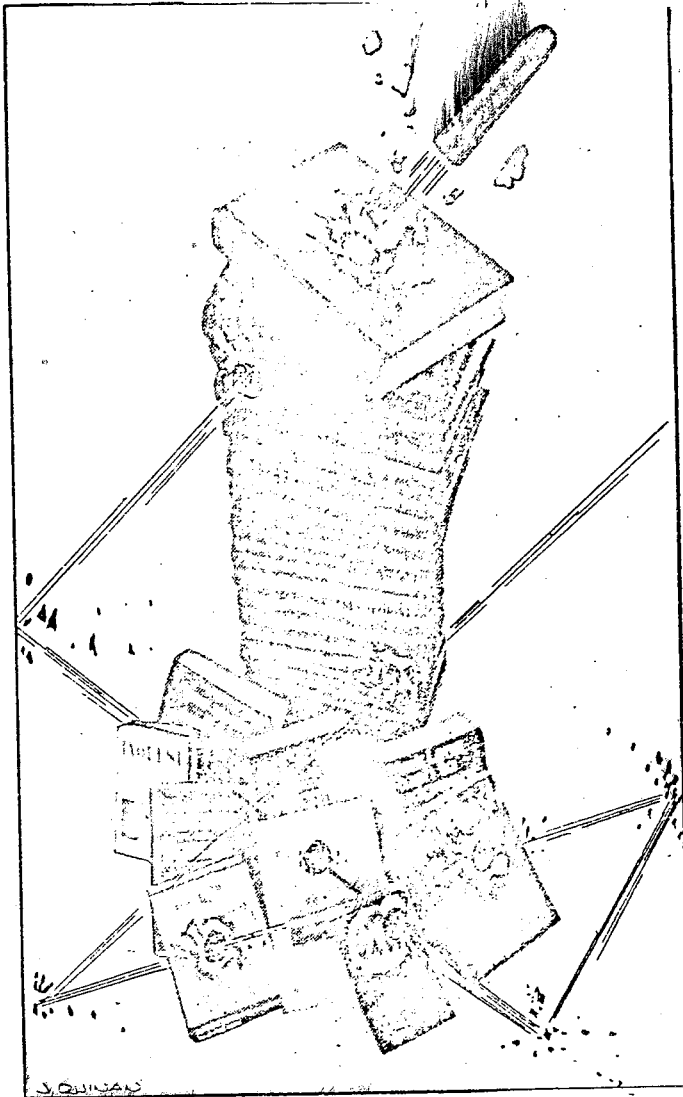
haps executing the look backward the governor vividly recalls making after the first shot. His right arm is over his lap, the wrist over the left thigh; his right hand, knuckles up, is grasping a wide-brimmed hat. At that point, a split second after Kennedy was hit, he is in perfect alignment to receive 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

Carcano, almost perfectly formed save for a slight distortion in its lead base. It weighed 158.6 grams, 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 24 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. 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.

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 unruined copper surface, and the commission's own account of the bullet shows the strain of advocacy. 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 played 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 decent, of course, have remained silent for more than 12 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 assassination 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.

One frequently hears the opinion that if there is nothing truly 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 of the commission, and even today, he 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 omit 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. The lawyers on the commission could not have imagined that a kind of criticism would arise oblivious to the methodology by which events are usually reconstructed.

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 what is plausible. When the Gallup polls, 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 peo-

ple 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 his 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 wrongdoing.

Actually, the speculations in the Kennedy case are utterly illusory. Whole portions of respected books must be discarded as worthless (one thinks of Thompson's *Six Seconds in Dallas*) for in matters of factual ruth, momentary ingenuity and apparently passionate sincerity count for nothing. Prof. Thompson, who worked closely with Dr. Wecht in preparing his book, has known for nearly three years that major portions of it must be discarded as baseless gossip, and so too has every stu-

dent of the assassination. One recalls no public concessions of error.

Indeed in the spite 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 relishing old mischief, most of which has even been discarded by other critics. A writer like George O'Toole, whose fanciful book, *The Assassination Tapes*, 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 stand 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 some other cases, normally rational people display the sweet madness of the flying-saucer freak or the Bermuda Triangle buff who makes no efforts to hide his assumption that palpably mistaken identification of a flying object or ocean mishap is an identification of some sort which retains status as evidence.

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 Kennedy head and back wounds, for instance, 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, expect 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 Howard Hunt and Frank Sturgis: the derelict Hunt is shorter, older, and fatter than the real one; the derelict Sturgis much taller and hunter than his alleged look-alike. And the several photo-

graphs allegedly showing another gun or gunman have, after years of most intense scrutiny, one by one, proved to be mirages.

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.

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 some other cases. 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 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!"