

"Inglorious," Mr. Kronkite? "Idiotic," Mr. Severeid?

A Commentary on
A CBS News Inquiry:
The Warren Report

by Sylvia Meagher
July 1967

Walter Kronkite applied his epithet to the FBI, and Eric Severeid bestowed his on the "demonologists" who persist in charging that the Warren Commission knowingly suppressed and distorted decisive evidence about the assassination. Some who watched the four-hour CBS news inquiry considered it inglorious and frequently idiotic. And it is indisputable that CBS knowingly suppressed and distorted decisive evidence, in its zeal to rehabilitate the discredited Warren Report and its resoluteness to confuse or convert public disenchantment with the illusion of the lone assassin.

The CBS inquiry had all the trappings of scientific impeccability and high-minded impartiality. These were nothing but a facade for a massive propaganda effort, conceived and executed with insidious disregard for fact and truth and with barely concealed contempt for the intelligence of the viewer.

The CBS inquiry was televised in one-hour installments on four successive nights beginning on June 25, 1967. The first two segments went through the motions of an exposition and evaluation of evidence, including "new" evidence developed by CBS in experiments it had commissioned and in expert opinions it had solicited. By the third installment, either bored or short of time, CBS dispensed with evidence and merely announced its conclusions. Did Oswald have enough time to do everything attributed to him by the Warren Commission in the 45-minute interval between the shooting of Kennedy and the shooting of Tippit? Yes, said the stentorian Kronkite voice, CBS has concluded that he did. But Mr. Kronkite gave no data to support that conclusion. Nor did he trouble to mention that a Warren Commission lawyer, reenacting Oswald's alleged walk from his rooming house to the Tippit murder scene, took over 17 minutes--a time span which in Oswald's case would have brought the accused killer to the scene in time to assist the ambulance in removing the body.

Three hours were devoted by CBS ^{to} hammering into the mind of the audience the lone assassinship of Lee Harvey Oswald, as if constant repetition would succeed even if its evidence faltered. The fourth and final hour was devoted to ritual slaps-on-the-wrist of the FBI, the Secret Service, Life Magazine, and even the Warren Commission. Since the critics of the Warren Report insist on the full loaf of truth, not ^{one} ~~on~~ crumbs from the CBS table, this interpolation of reproach and reprimand into an otherwise shameless whitewash occasions no applause.

"New" Evidence

The Time-Span of the Shots

What new evidence, if any, did CBS produce? It purported to establish that Oswald had as long as 8.35 seconds to fire three shots at the motorcade instead of the 5.6 seconds estimated in the Warren Report. The Report said that the first shot had been fired between frames 210 and 225 of the Zapruder film, and the last shot at frame 313. Because Zapruder's camera operated at a speed of 18.3 frames per seconds, the time-span of the three shots was therefore 5.5 to 5.6 seconds. CBS argued that the first shot had come earlier, at about frame

186, which yielded an additional second, and that the camera might have been operating at a slower speed than 18.3 frames per second, adding almost two more seconds.

CBS pointed to the blurring of frames 190, 227, and 318 of the Zapruder film, suggesting that the blurring coincided with the sound of gunfire four or five frames earlier in each instance which had startled Zapruder and caused him to jerk the camera. The blurring of frames of the Zapruder film and its possible correlation with shots was called to my attention in 1965 by critic Ray Marcus, author of The Bastard Bullet, and is discussed in Harold Weisberg's book Whitewash, a copy of which has been in the hands of CBS for a year or more. Yet CBS claimed for itself such credit as is due for the "discovery," possessing a sense of fairness which is also, seemingly, blurred.

The postulate of correlation between the three blurred frames and rifle shots seems reasonable, but CBS omitted to mention that at least two more frames (195 and 203) are as blurred as the three frames it identified. Three shots between frames 190 and 203 (or two-thirds of a second) are manifestly impossible unless three rifles were fired.

The CBS argument with respect to the camera speed is even more vulnerable. CBS tested five cameras like Zapruder's and found that their speeds ranged from 15.3 to 20.6 frames per second. The lowest speed, combined with the enlarged frame-span, would produce 8.35 seconds for the three shots. But the speeds of the five test cameras are absolutely irrelevant. The only relevant camera speed is the speed of Zapruder's camera, which the FBI had determined was operating on the day of the assassination at 18.3 frames per second.

CBS did not share with the audience its reasons for rejecting the FBI finding. As it happens, there are reasons for rejecting it, as Harold Weisberg has pointed out. In FBI reenactment tests in which Zapruder's own camera was used, conducted on May 24, 1964, the segment of the Zapruder film that took 5.6 seconds in the original took only 3.5 seconds in the reenactment. In other words, the camera said by the FBI to have operated at 18.3 frames per second on November 22, 1963, was filming 24 frames per second on May 24, 1964. At that speed, the accused assassin would have had to fire three shots in only 4.5 seconds, under the Warren Commission's reconstruction; or 5.3 seconds, under CBS's.

The Zapruder camera can, in fact, be set to operate at 24 frames per second. It is a three-speed camera with a lever that is pushed up for animation or individual exposures; down, for the normal speed of 16 frames per second; and pushed down a little more, for slow motion at 24 frames per second. Zapruder easily could have pushed the lever down further than he intended, in the excitement of the Presidential visit.

The new evidence by which CBS sought to increase the time-span of the shots is neither new nor was it developed by CBS, both the blurring of frames and the speed of the camera having been raised in the first instances by critics of the Warren Report. Nor does this evidence serve exclusively to prolong the time-span of the shots—it serves no less powerfully and validly to reduce the 5.6 seconds estimated by the Warren Commission.

The Feat of Marksmanship

Please forward to Maggie when you have read. Had a long conversation with Mesi of Manhattan East night 6/30. If you go to Washington, I will be there Wednesday, at least in the afternoon, to pick up more copies of the new book to mail out.

1503 - Zed