

31 August 1970

My dear Paul,

I was pleased that I had an opportunity to meet you and your very lovely friend Kathy, although I felt most regretful that I should have been indisposed on just that particular day and that I therefore retained little if any recollection of our conversation about evidence and the case in general.

Actually, I wrote you a letter about a week ago but then decided not even to mail it, in case you should find a question I posed in it to be insulting or offensive. I had just returned from my first visit to Dallas, where I finally saw for myself Dealey Plaza and all other sites. While there, someone said casually during a conversation, in an aside, that I must know, of course, that Paul Hoch believes that Oswald is guilty and generally accepts the Warren Report. I was absolutely floored and immediately contested this remark. Later, however, it occurred to me that I had merely taken for granted your disavowal of the WR and that I could not recall any explicit statement of disagreement or rejection in your letters to me over the years. The only specific recollection that I could dredge up was that you had at first seemed cautiously pro-Garrison and (if I recall correctly) had seemed to urge me to suspend judgment on him, from which one might infer that you did accept a conspiracy hypothesis.

Still, I decided to write and ask you to clarify your view, but then felt that it would be presumptuous of me and destroyed the letter.

Coincidentally, then, this morning I read the news of Zapruder's demise, with an accompanying review of the history of his famous film and especially of the disputed backward/leftward recoil at the head shot impact (Decker had preceded Zapruder into the great beyond by one day, as you probably know), and then came your letter of the 28th, with your paper on the head snap! It certainly provided the clarification that I had decided not to request, among other revelations.

You request that I keep this paper confidential; but may I assume that you have sent copies to the other critics quoted or mentioned therein--specifically, to Tink Thompson and to Tom Stamm, the two with whom I maintain fairly close contacts --and may I assume that I am at liberty to discuss your findings with them? I can understand that you wish to preclude any pre-emption or leaks, since you intend to publish, and can assure you that I would act responsibly even without a request for confidentiality. I am less able to understand your request for particular secrecy on the matter of Odio's parents--perhaps it is Schmitt's request, rather than yours --whom would I tell? and how would I substantiate it? and what would a third person do that would harm anyone? I have recently become extremely troubled by the trend among WR critics to impose secrecy and confidentiality on small, medium, and large items, almost as if by involuntary reflex. Perhaps because I am personally most uncomfortable with secrets of any kind, generally, and with the mental bookkeeping and compartmentalization they impose, to say nothing of the inhibitions and frustrations, I have never withheld my own findings or hypotheses and have kept only those secrets imposed on me by other researchers. However, I am reaching the point where I find the secrecy-fetish more and more irrational and gratuitous, if not an actual disservice to the progress of research, and beginning to prefer not hearing information at all rather than hearing it under prohibitions against disclosure not involving risk of misuse.

As to the paper itself---how shall I attempt to convey my comments? Where begin? I have no competence whatever in physics, mathematics, photography, firearms, or any other sciences. I have no academic qualifications, not the meanest claim to any expertise. It would be immodest of me, in the extreme, to dispute the conditions of your experiments or your findings. But I do not shrink from immodesty, which is so small a sin when weighed against really breathtaking forms of moral and intellectual corruption.

The first comment I must make about your thesis is that if the head snap was the one and only known discrepancy between the hard evidence and the WR conclusions, the sole impediment to embracing the lone assassin findings, it would still leave the lay reader most dubious. It establishes that melons, under a variety of bullet impacts, react in a variety of ways. In certain instances they recoil backwards when struck by a missile traveling forwards. It is a great leap to transpose the dynamics of a melon to that of a human head, though you consider it as "not unreasonable" (a fetching choice of words). Nothing about a melon, even wrapped in Scotch filament tape (whatever that is), seems to equate with the adult human skull; and your melon-shoot proceeds to ignore the facts established by one Danny Kaye, to wit, that the head bones are connected to the neck bones, and the neck bones are connected to the shoulder bones, and so on and so forth. Is the autonomous melon perched on a plank an adequate scientific simulant for a live human head?

You set out to produce an "unexpected" result and you produced it---at times. You also produced several other results, as your paper acknowledges. But, when all caveats are said and done, and a few agile leaps are made, you "present evidence" that the head snap (always described as "backwards" although it was also leftwards) "is consistent" with Oswald-the-lone-assassin. I imagine that your paper will be a triumph, presented to an audience of physicists or functionaries of the Department of Justice, but I am not sure that a more pedestrian audience will grasp the subtleties and somewhat intoxicating sweeps of logic.

But the head snap is NOT the one and only impediment to the credibility of the WR. You very properly deal with collateral and related discrepancies in the same general area (the autopsy findings of 1963, 1968 and 1969, etc.) but even so you are able to reach the "most likely hypothesis" expounded on page 23---although you do not explain what deflected the first shot or why the bullet that exited from the car was never located, and although you casually attribute all of Connally's wounds to the ubiquitous CE 399, as if that disposes of The Bastard Bullet and all the other treatises on the same subject.

A generalist is no more capable of appreciating that than he is capable of making a nuclear bomb. I suspect that the average man will be so intimidated by the formulae that he will be tempted to fall in with the over-all thesis---that the head snap is consistent---provided always that his stomach does not rebel.

A few questions occur. Why a 30.06 rifle with a 150-grain round-nose reloaded bullet, and not a 6.5 Carcano with WCC 6.5 cartridges? Is that on the theory that the test weapon and test ammo need only be approximated, since the head is only approximated anyhow, if that is not too obscene an overstatement? Why no discussion of the fact that the rear motorcyclists, especially on the left of the car, were covered with brain matter and fluid and blood? Why no attempt to measure the forward spray against the backward, leftward bath?

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Why no discussion of the Nix film other than the excerpt from CD 298 ("head suddenly snaps to the left")? I assume you have viewed the Nix for yourself. Not only does the head snap to the left, but it makes such a whiplash of a turn that where you were looking at the back of the head you proceed to see the full left profile and then the full face. No doubt there is a codicil to Newtonian law that will soothingly explain this, too, as perfectly consistent with a shot from the sixth-floor window (which you inadvertently term the fifth-floor window at one point in your paper, I forget the page number).

Why no discussion of the ambiguous, contradictory and unresolved evidence as to which section of the skull was blasted clear away, and of the fairly massive indications that it was the back of the skull and not the right side that was a huge gaping hole?

Why no discussion of the marksmanship required in relation to the capabilities of Oswald and of the three rifle masters whose "reenactment" was cited by the WC, or the riflemen who performed later for CBS? Why no discussion of the quality and condition of the C2766 rifle and its scope? Why no discussion of the purchase and possession of WCC ammunition?

Or of the long list of discrepancies, misrepresentations, omissions and outright inventions which are to be found throughout the Warren Report, with scarcely one page in it invulnerable to factual or logical challenge?

In other words, your melons do not even dispose of the head snap which you seek to eliminate from the inventory of the WR's disabilities and deformations---yes, I know, you do point out and emphasize the inadequacy of the investigation---I will rephrase my remark. Your melons do not dispose of the head snap as an obstacle to the credibility of the official conclusions, much less dispose of the galaxies of conflicts to be found in each and every area and sub-area of the over-all investigation.

The effect of the paper, especially to the uninitiated, is, however, to promote a strong impression that Oswald could have and did assassinate the President acting alone, just like the WR says even if in spite of its assertions and arguments rather than because of them. It is, I believe, a real shot-in-the-arm to and a notable extension of the epistemological approach to the Warren Report for which we must all give due credit to Edward Jay Epstein. It is so even-handed while also so deft and imaginative⁴ vindication of the WR that it is small wonder that I have rambled on for several pages, dizzied and disorganized by...what shall I call it...cultural shock?

Your ingenious report---perhaps destined to be the "Hoch Report" or the "Hoch-Alvarez-Olson Report" or the HOAR (no phonetic pun intended)---is certain to intrigue and delight many people, regardless of race color creed or origin, and it certainly amazed me. I'll never again eat a piece of melon without thinking of you.

I wanted to set down and mail you my spontaneous, sincere reactions, not temporize, sanitize, or dehumanize them, so I will mail this at once and eschew any self-editing or rationalizations. This letter is not confidential. I look forward to learning the comments of our various colleagues, in due course.

It is past midnight, so I will close without further ado.

Sybil Meagher