

The JFK Autopsy and the Urologist-Apologist

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The first non-Governmental viewer to inspect the JFK autopsy photographs and X-rays, Dr. John K. Lattimer, announced that they "eliminate any doubt completely" that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin. The anticlimatic news appeared on the front page of the New York Times on January 9, 1972 in an exclusive story under the by-line of Fred Graham. Until the preceding week, the Times pointed out, only representatives of the Government had been given access to the autopsy photographs and X-rays and not even the Warren Commission or its staff had seen them.

Who is Dr. John K. Lattimer? A prominent urologist, attached to the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. There is no reason to doubt that he is a highly competent urologist but every reason to deny that he is qualified to evaluate the JFK autopsy photos and X-rays. He is not even eligible to see those materials under the terms of the agreement governing access to this evidence, which stipulates "recognized experts in the field of pathology or related areas of science or technology".

Urology is as far removed from forensic pathology in the examination of gunshot fatalities as pediatrics or psychiatry. The fact that

Dr. Lattimer examined gunshot wounds while in military service during World War II is irrelevant. It means only that he was trying to save lives, not that he tried to determine whether the bullets came from the right or the left or from a treetop or a trench. Urology is the branch of medicine that deals with disease processes of the genito-urinary tract. A urologist never moves above the umbilicus. He cannot claim the smallest degree of competence in the field of forensic pathology, which is a highly specialized branch of legal medicine requiring five years of special training followed by continuing work on official medical-legal investigations. A cardinal rule in malpractice is that physicians do not involve themselves in diagnosis, treatment, or testimony in a court of law in any specialty in which they do not qualify. That tradition is steeped in wisdom, founded on logic, and understood by all physicians.

Therefore, it is amazing that Dr. Lattimer, who is accredited only as a urologist, should have ventured to examine the JFK autopsy photos and X-rays, which he himself acknowledges that he was not competent to interpret. It is even more astonishing that Dr. Lattimer then rushed on to the front page of the New York Times with categorical pronouncements which went far beyond the semantic hesitations of forensic pathologists who had earlier reviewed the same evidence for the Government.

In contrast to the equivocal and qualified language of the three original autopsy surgeons who conducted a review of the photos and X-rays in 1967 and the four-man panel who did the same in 1968, Dr. Lattimer has made emphatic assertions which verge on the omniscient.

He tells us that a bullet entered the back of the neck at a point even higher than ever claimed before, which happens to coincide with the point of entry on a sketch used by Dr. Lattimer in his lectures on behalf of the Warren Report as early as 1969 or some three years before he saw the autopsy photos. He does not explain how this bullet high in the neck produced holes in the coat and the shirt more than five inches below the top of the collar, except to offer the lame suggestion about the garments riding up that was discredited long ago. Perhaps Dr. Lattimer confused this bullet wound--originally located in the infra-scapular region or the lower part of the big wing bone on the back, then moved up several inches to a point immediately over the top of the shoulder--with the bullet hole in the back of the head, near the occipital protuberance and slightly above the hairline, as it was described by the autopsy surgeons --although later that wound too was moved upward by four inches, by the four-man 1968 panel headed by Dr. Russell Fisher. Dr. Lattimer describes a halo-like bruise around the neck wound as proof that it was a wound of entry. But such a bruising effect or ecchymosis is also found at wounds of exit, even if a urologist has no reason to know that.

Lattimer insists on a back-to-front bullet transit through the neck because he wants to demonstrate that the shot came from the sixth-floor window of the Book Depository. He argues that the bullet had to come from behind the President because it was on such a steep trajectory that if it came from the front it could only

have come from the floor of the car. But since the trajectory is fixed and absolute, the bullet had end up in the floor of the car, under Lattimer's thesis. Instead, as he seems to have overlooked, it stopped in mid-flight, reversed direction, and struck Governor Connally at the armpit. In other words, Dr. Lattimer is hoist by his own canard.

Lattimer did not content himself with foolish interpretations of the bullet wounds which failed to reconcile gross conflicts in that evidence but proceeded to identify the perpetrator as Lee Harvey Oswald. Not forensic pathology, much less urology, but an occult "science" would have to be invoked to determine that from the autopsy photos and X-rays. Lattimer insists that Oswald was a "perfectly competent marksman" on the evidence of his "rifle scorebook" in the Marine Corps. Well, he is even holier than the Pope, for the Marine colonel who evaluated the scorebook for the Warren Commission testified that Oswald left the service "a rather poor shot".

Why was Lattimer, a urologist and apologist for the Warren Report in writings and lectures over the last six years, selected to view the autopsy photos and X-rays in violation of the agreement under which they were deposited in the National Archives? Eminent forensic pathologists who applied to see those items back in 1966 and again in mid-1971 have not been given the same opportunity. Dr. Cyril H. Wecht, preeminent in the field of forensic pathology and President of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences as well as Coroner of Alleghany County, Pennsylvania, is still awaiting the courtesy of a reply from Burke Marshall, the representative of the Kennedy family, with whom the decision ostensibly rests. Rumor

has it that Burke Marshall has only one-third of a secretary at his disposal and has therefore been unable to answer letters from Dr. Wecht--although the lack of secretarial assistance did not obstruct Dr. Lattimer nor visibly retard Marshall in his various activities. Perhaps the discriminatory and discourteous treatment received by Dr. Wecht stems from the fact that he has the highest expertise and a sceptical, critical mind which he has no hesitation to speak.

Seven governmental experts and now one private urologist have been allowed to view the controversial autopsy photos and X-rays. The 1967 three-man panel made findings that contradicted the original autopsy report and testimony. The 1968 four-man panel made findings which contradicted the 1967 panel and the original autopsy findings. Now a urologist-apologist has come along with findings which are in conflict with those of the 1968 panel, the 1967 panel, and the original autopsy.

Isn't it high time that an independent expert from the other side of opinion is allowed into the picture? What is there to fear, if everything is above-board and full of the rectitude that is claimed for the autopsy and the Warren Report by its apologists? Dr. Lattimer himself, if he has any integrity, should be clamoring for Cyril Wecht and other qualified pathologists to receive the same opportunity that he got without being competent or eligible.

Nothing would surprise me more. I have been certain all along that the Government has dirty hands in the autopsy and in the assassination and would never open the door to Cyril Wecht or any other non-apologist.

Burke Marshall has not replied by Dr. Wecht not for lack of secretarial service but because he cannot find any legitimate reason or any pretext to deny his request and because he does not dare allow an independent outspoken highly qualified forensic pathologist to view the photos and X-rays. After all, even the Warren Commission itself could not be trusted to look at these materials!

I continue to doubt that Oswald was guilty of anything, but I cannot say the same for John Lattimer or Burke Marshall and their fellow-travelers.

(This article is based in part on a broadcast by Dr. Cyril H. Wecht.)