

Thoughts about a "national security" autopsy -  
might there have been a legitimate reason for one?

Hypothesis to be tested: Is it possible that the available record significantly minimizes Jacqueline Kennedy's opposition to an autopsy? If her opposition was, at some time, strong or even hysterical, it might have appeared that even the most basic evidence about the number of shooters might become unavailable (despite Jackie's reported agreement, at one point, to allow an autopsy). Under those circumstances, it does not seem implausible that a high authority, concerned with the security implications of the assassination, might initiate a plan to remove the body for a quick inspection. Perhaps, because of timing problems or the general confusion, the official autopsy was set up after the body had been taken away (to Walter Reed?).

David Lifton and I have discussed the "national security autopsy" several times, and he can make a pretty strong case against it. As I recall, some of that case is based on the failure of that hypothesis to explain the existence, much less the nature, of the Dallas-Bethesda differences in the wound observations. Also, I'm sure it would be at least as hard to put together a time sequence for this alternative hypothesis as it was for Lifton's.

Since "Best Evidence" was published, I have suggested to quite a few people that they try to smoke out the quasi-official explanation, which I assume is floating around in some Washington circles, for the handling of the body (multiple coffins) and for the initial observation by some doctor that there had been head surgery - the strongest elements of Lifton's case, in my opinion. So far, no such explanation has reached me. I wouldn't be in a hurry to believe it, of course, but my hunch is that testing it would lead to important new evidence.

These notes were prompted by a comment Henry Hurt made to me, to the effect that someone might have been distressed by the possibility that the official autopsy might be restricted at the whim of the Kennedy family, and that an immediate examination of the body for evidence of a conspiracy was deemed necessary. In the past couple of days, I have made a very incomplete and hasty search of a number of sources. As far as I know, the possible implications of Jackie's resistance to an autopsy have not been pursued. I would appreciate comments and further information from anyone reading these notes.

Admiral Burkley is clearly a key person in this scenario. I wonder how he, and certain other people, would respond to questions about the extent of Jackie's opposition. These other people include HSCA staffers who are familiar with the full extent of the staff's work on the problem of the completeness of the autopsy.

What follows is a semi-random summary of facts and commentary.

(1) The Burkley-Jackie conversation:

The official version is summarized on page 59 of the WR: "Given a choice between [Bethesda and Walter Reed], Mrs. Kennedy chose the hospital in Bethesda for the autopsy because the President had served in the Navy."

Jackie's testimony does not touch on this choice. The WC's only first-hand account came in CE 1126, a typed statement by Adm. Burkley, dated 11/27/63. (I don't recall if we know how this statement - the published copy of which is not signed - happened to reach the Commission.) I've emphasized some words which might be read as supporting my suggestion that Burkley was not telling the full story, and I have added some observations. (From 22 WCH 96):

"During the course of the flight, determination of the immediate action on arrival in Washington was made to assure complete compliance with Mrs. Kennedy's wishes. [An odd sentence. Certainly a convoluted way of saying we made plans to go to the hospital Mrs. Kennedy chose. Could it be a sanitized way of saying that we made plans to get the body back from Walter Reed now that Jackie had agreed to go to Bethesda?] I spoke to her while kneeling on the floor so I would be at the level of her face rather than leaning forward, and expressed complete desire of all of us and especially of myself to comply with her wishes,

[translation: we would like to do what you want, e.g. go straight to the White House, but (?)] stating that it was necessary that the President be taken to a hospital prior to going to the White House. She questioned why and I stated it must be determined, if possible, the type of bullet used and compare this with future material found. I stated frankly that I had no preference, that it could be any hospital, but that I did feel that, if possible, it should be a military hospital for security measures. The question was answered by her stating that she wanted the President taken to Bethesda Naval Hospital.

Arrangements were made on the ground for departure to Walter Reed Army Hospital or Bethesda Naval Hospital, as the case may be." (Lifton has commented on the strangeness of the last five words. [BE 689] It makes a little more sense if he meant that arrangements had been made for either hospital, but not much. My hypothesis is that Burkley's language is masking his knowledge of plans to look at the body even if Jackie withheld permission.)

I'm a bit surprised to see that WR 59, quoted above, does not cite this Burkley report, but rather the testimony of Ken O'Donnell (7 WCH 454-5), which openly suggests that Burkley et al. were not being candid with Jackie:

"Mr. O'Donnell: We arrived at Andrews and meanwhile the Attorney General had been notified, the decision had been made that he would go to Bethesda.

"Mr. Specter: Who made that decision, by the way?

"Mr. O'Donnell: Mrs. Kennedy.

"Mr. Specter: That the autopsy should be performed? [Did he suspect something?]

"Mr. O'Donnell: I don't think she knew anything about an autopsy. The question is where the body went. We didn't tell her there was to be an autopsy. And the choice was Walter Reed or Bethesda. He being a Navy man, she picked Bethesda.

"Mr. Specter: She chose Bethesda, as between Bethesda and Walter Reed?

"Mr. O'Donnell: She did.

"Mr. Specter: Who made the decision there would be an autopsy, if you know?

"Mr. O'Donnell: I don't know who made the decision. I just think we all agreed - we arrived at Bethesda. The Attorney General was there. I think it was just our assumption that this was a necessary part."

Before proceeding, let's review some of the questions:

How intense was Jackie's opposition to going to a hospital, or to an autopsy?

Should we assume that there were no conversations on the subject prior to the one in which Jackie chose Bethesda?

When was that choice made, relative to the known arrangements for ground transportation to either hospital, and relative to possible unknown arrangements to get the bullets regardless?

In an October 1967 oral history interview for the JFK library, Burkley gave what seems to be a slightly more candid account of his conversation with Jackie. (Well, more candid about Jackie's opposition, but probably less accurate about the language used - i.e., the use of the word 'autopsy.' It is my general impression that some people become less precise during oral history interviews by uncritical and typically rather uninformed people from the Presidential libraries.)

"During the flight I contacted her, and stated that an autopsy would be necessary, and that I was perfectly willing to arrange to have it done at any place that she felt it should be done. She said, 'Well, it doesn't have to be done.' I said, 'Yes, it is mandatory that we have an autopsy. I can do it at [Walter Reed, Bethesda, or a civilian hospital.]' However, I felt that it should be a military hospital, in that he had been ... Commander in Chief... [No mention of security reasons here.] After some consideration [meaning - it took a while to convince her?] she stated that she would like to have the President taken to Bethesda. This was arranged by telephone from the plane, and it was accomplished. [Again, isn't that a sort of funny thing to mention, unless it was less trivial than the known record indicates? Would you say, I arranged to go to New York, and that was accomplished?] I accompanied the President in the ambulance going to Bethesda, and also accompanied him to the area where the autopsy was performed.

And during the autopsy I supervised everything that was done ... and kept in constant contact with Mrs. Kennedy and the members of her party who were on the seventeenth floor in the suite at that level...."

By the way, the transcript of this Burkley interview may not be copied or duplicated in any way without the permission of the Director of the Kennedy Library, so I guess I don't have a copy.

Manchester's account of this conversation has Burkley explaining "that because the President had been murdered there would have to be an autopsy. 'Security reasons,' he said, required that the hospital be military." (DOAP, p. 349) Manchester had 5 interviews with Burkley (p. 661) (including one in November 1966, when the Lifton memorandum was being finalized - the Liebler memo, I mean, which was dated 11/8, the day after Manchester's last Burkley interview). Manchester also had 5 interviews with Jackie. Of course, he didn't identify sources for specific statements, and his book is notoriously unreliable in some small details. For what it's worth, he did note the mention of an autopsy at Walter Reed (p. 342); he attributed that to "inter-service rivalry" and said that Army Surgeon General Heaton, "sensing conflict, called General Eisenhower and asked his advice; Ike replied that 'since there is no way of knowing who is giving orders,' the Surgeon General had better play it safe, go to Andrews, and stand by." Manchester lists Ike but not Heaton among his sources. Would Heaton call Ike if he just sensed conflict? Would he do so if he knew that he was being asked to set up a covert autopsy to get around Jackie's unwillingness to have an official one??

I think Jim Bishop's book is even less helpful about sources than Manchester's, and in the following passage it is hard to tell how much is just Bishop's own interpretation. (From 'The Day Kennedy Was Shot,' p. 356) Burkley "said: 'It's going to be necessary to take the President to a hospital before he goes to the White House.' She was in a trance-like state, but the young lady came out of it quickly. 'Why?' she said. The tone was sharp because she had had her fill of hospitals and their cast-iron rules. Burkley looked like a supplicant at prayer. 'The doctors must remove the bullet,' he said. 'The authorities must know the type. It becomes evidence.' Mrs. Kennedy could understand the situation. The admiral did not use the word autopsy, which entails evisceration and the removal of the brain and other organs. She asked where the bullet could be removed. Burkley said he had no preference although he had. He was a United States Navy admiral, and Kennedy had been a Navy lieutenant. 'For security reasons it should be a military hospital,' he said. Mrs. Kennedy was prompted to say the right word. 'Bethesda,' she said. The admiral was satisfied...."

(2) Burkley's credibility and his HSCA testimony:

As late as his 1967 oral history interview, Burkley was protective of the Kennedy account of the condition of JFK's adrenals and back. "... there again the question of adrenal insufficiency, it was never a problem with the President.... And as far as the President was concerned he had no problem in concern to this. Now that is a touchy problem ... [Recorder off-resumes] ... to [m]e that the press and various other people tried to interpret every action of the President in light of his medical condition. I may state here that President Kennedy was a essentially normal, healthy male, who had all the vigor and vitality, and much more so than the average male. None of his activities were curtailed, in any way, by his physical well-being...."

I recently read, for the first time, parts of "The Search for JFK," by Joan and Clay Blair. It's pretty clear that there was an extensive and systematic effort to minimize JFK's health problems.

The medical evidence collected but unpublished by the HSCA includes at least 3 items with information from Burkley: an interview (8/17/77), an outside contact report (1/16/78), and an affidavit (11/28/78). [See 7 HSCA 20 and 34, notes 82, 48, and 47.] I can't recall where I heard this, but one HSCA staffer supposedly told someone that he thought Burkley was a bit senile.

Some peculiarities in Burkley's 11/27/63 statement (CE 1126) have been noticed elsewhere. It contains basically no medical information, and I don't think we have any medical details from the only doctor to see JFK both in Dallas and at Bethesda. Nor do I know of any explanation for his handwritten note, "accepted and approved this date," on Humes' certificate about the destruction of certain preliminary draft notes. ("Post-Mortem," pp. 524-5; the notation on this and another document was not published by the WC.)

Burkley was, of course, not a Warren Commission witness.

I haven't yet checked all the indexed references to him in the published material.

Lifton did talk to Burkley in November 1967.

All in all, I don't think it is unfair to suspect that Burkley has reported only one of several conversations with Jackie, and that he limited his account to protect Jackie's feelings and privacy.

(4) A reasonable expectation that an unrestricted autopsy would be forbidden?

I think that the adrenals issue alone would allow someone on Air Force One to expect that efforts would be made to prevent a full autopsy, followed by full disclosure. I assume that quite a few people knew about the adrenals problem and the extent of the coverup of it.

If you had been in this position, how much subterfuge would you be willing to support in order to get the most basic information about the number and direction of the shots? I can see someone doing quite a lot with a clear conscience. At the very least, Jackie may have been persuaded to agree to a trip to a hospital as if the purpose were only to remove and study the bullet (not, for example, to determine the direction through dissection of the body).

Is it possible that Jackie was told that embalming was necessary before they could go to the White House, and that for security reasons it had to be done at a military hospital? If that speculation is correct, it would explain the emphasis on having the embalming done at Bethesda, rather than at a funeral home. (See Lifton, p. 395 ff.)

Is there any more information about Jackie's actual feelings about an autopsy during the flight back? It is quite possible that she changed her mind more than once, or that she became quite irrational on the subject. The need for an autopsy had, after all, been the cause of the bad scene in Dallas, where the Secret Service had to force their way out (with the casket and Jackie following). It's not clear to me how much Jackie's feelings were behind the Secret Service's desire to get out of there fast (and how much was due to LBJ, for example.) As a buff (whose mother is a pathologist), I tend to forget how offensive the idea of an autopsy can be to many people, especially after a sudden death.

In this context, perhaps one can make something of a couple of words in the radioed instructions from Gen. Chester Clifton. (BE 686) "We do want an ambulance and a ground return from Andrews to Walter Reed, and we want the regular post-mortem that has to be done by law under guard performed at Walter Reed. Is that clear?"

If you are routinely setting up an authorized autopsy, the fact that one is required by law is really irrelevant to you, and certainly Clifton would not have reason to believe that it was relevant to the people making the arrangements on the ground. (Clifton was talking with Gen. Heaton. Lifton did interview Clifton.) On the other hand, if you were making covert arrangements for an unauthorized but justified autopsy, the fact that it was "required by law" might be very much on your mind, and it might slip out when you were giving instructions.

I've read the short Walter Reed section in BE (p. 681 ff.), but I'm not familiar with whatever new evidence Lifton has about the body going to Walter Reed, and I haven't reviewed the Air Force One transcript.

(5) Subsequent restrictions on the autopsy:

It is well known that the autopsy was subject to restrictions from the Kennedy family once the body got to Bethesda. Both Lifton's book and the HSCA volumes go into considerable detail. (In the case of Lifton, of course, the hypothesized context is quite different.) Just to mention a few points in summary: Humes was

told that the purpose of the autopsy was to determine the cause of death. (Which may have meant nothing, or stay away from the adrenals, or stay away from pre-autopsy surgery.) There were pressures to finish quickly. Burkley at one point "questioned the feasibility for a complete autopsy to obtain the bullet which had entered the President's back," advising that "Mrs. Kennedy had granted permission for a limited autopsy." The SS and FBI agents pushed for locating the bullet, and Galloway told Humes to perform a complete autopsy. (BE 487) And, of course, specimens from the body later disappeared and were probably disposed of under RFK's orders.

(6) Formal authorization:

Harold Weisberg published the formal authorization form, which he found in CD 362a at the Archives. ("Post-Mortem," p. 507; see also p. 101 ff. for comments.) (CD 362 is supposed to be a file from the Texas AG!) Weisberg noted that, in two of the three blanks reserved for 'signature,' typed names appear - Mrs. Kennedy and Capt. Canada. The signature of RFK, as witness, looks to me as if it might be a rubber stamp, or an aide's signature - perhaps it is a little too legible to be the real thing? The Archives had been unable earlier to find the authorization for Weisberg (which doesn't mean it was not in any of the autopsy files derived from Federal sources, but that does seem to be the case). Weisberg says that the form authorizes a complete post-mortem exam, which no indicated restrictions. (The relevant words are illegible in the copy Weisberg reproduced. He says that he saw the original several years later. Presumably we could now get it from the Secret Service or the Archives or some such source?)

The funny business with this form suggests that Jackie never really authorized a complete autopsy, in those words. (Or, perhaps - understandably - nobody was going to give her a form like that to sign.) My guess is that she was persuaded to allow more time, bit by bit.

A P.S. to section (5) The HSCA and Lifton had quite a bit to say about the restrictions imposed once the body reached Bethesda. The HSCA did not publish anything on the issue of earlier restrictions - e.g., Jackie's resistance to the whole idea of even a limited autopsy, to remove the bullets. The HSCA may well have gathered evidence relevant to that question.

(7) Who might know more:

Among the direct participants, Burkley, Clifton, et al.

Among HSCA sources: Andy Purdy, Blakey, Ewing.

Just possibly: Sen. Arlen Specter; William Manchester.

And, of course, Lifton. (For all I know, he went through all this 10 years ago.)

P.S. 10/15/84:

From 7 HSCA 263 (medical panel session with the autopsy doctors):

"Dr. Boswell: There were no constraints. Initially Admiral Burkley said that they had caught Oswald and that they needed the bullet to complete the case, and we were told initially that's what we should do, is to find the bullet." (Later, Humes and Burkley discussed it, and "it was at that point that he agreed that we should continue and do a complete autopsy, which we then did.")

Lifton is not at all attracted to this point. The first issue he raised to me is that the body must have been removed from the casket before the plane took off, which is (as far as we know) before Jackie refused (or was even asked for) permission for an autopsy. (I concede the point, but given the flap over the Dallas autopsy attempt, Jackie may well have said 'no autopsy' well before Burkley persuaded her to go to Bethesda.)

(1/16/86) Correction to p. 3: Manchester's last Burkley interview was on "11.7.66," which means July, not November.