
Forensic History

The Assassination of the Late President John F. Kennedy

An Academician's Thoughts

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Another look is taken at the murder case of the late President John F. Kennedy. The overall pattern established by various investigations should force any reasonable person to conclude that a conspiracy of greater or lesser proportions did exist. The actors in that conspiracy have not been identified. The role of Lee Harvey Oswald in the event is still obscure. The art and science of pathology, in this case, failed the nation. Federal agencies were incompetent and possibly criminally negligent in their handling of the case. The fact that more than a single gunman was involved in the murder seems indubitable. Scientists, as scientists, have contributed all that they can to resolving the case. Suppression, modification, and destruction of evidence crucial to the case by those having it in custody have been completed so effectively that one esteemed historian has asserted, "at least some of those responsible for the murder of a President of the United States got away with it."

The House Select Committee on Assassinations, which was created by the House of Representatives of the Federal Congress in September of 1976, was supposed to restudy in depth the murder of the late President John F. Kennedy. Unfortunately, the chairman of that committee, soon after the body was created, revealed in a rather casual manner the goal that he had set for the committee. In essence, he said that the primary job of the committee was to make persuasive and credible to the majority of the American people the findings of the Warren Commission. Unfortunately, this orientation was similar to previous investigations of the murder of John F. Kennedy. This fact was apparent in 1978 when I published my book on the murder of the late President (1). At that time, I was forced to conclude that the scientific evidence presented by the Warren Commission did not in fact support the Commission's conclusions; rather, it demanded the recognition of the fact that at least two shooters were involved in the killing.

Three years later, G. F. Blakey, chief counsel and staff director of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, concluded emphatically that "President John F. Kennedy was killed as result of a conspiracy," and he further maintained that of overwhelming importance was the fact that "there was scientific evidence, as well as human testimony, of two gunmen shooting at the President in Dealey Plaza" (2).

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THE PATHOLOGY ENIGMA

It has been surprising how a number of pathologists, once they came in contact with the Kennedy murder case, seemed to lose their critical scientific sense; they

made statements and arrived at opinions that appear out of joint with the rigor of their day-to-day testimony in court as coroners or medical examiners [see, for example, House Select Committee, Vol. VII (3); CIA Commission (4); and President's Commission (5)].

A fairly recent book entitled *Best Evidence* has been written by David Lifton (6), who for a decade or more spent full time putting together material. He re-examined the autopsy data published in the Warren Commission Report. He looked at new forensic science material uncovered by the House Select Committee; he examined closely collateral information derived from extensive personal interviews of many persons who had witnessed some aspect of the crime. Lifton had graduated in engineering physics from Cornell University. He had worked as a computer engineer on the Apollo space project. In 1964, he attended by chance a lecture on the assassination of President Kennedy, and this lecture aroused his interest. Two years later, he discovered a previously neglected document that led him to conclude that more than a single assassin was involved in the event. From then until *Best Evidence* was completed and published, he devoted virtually full time to research and study about the murder.

The result is disturbing. Lifton presents evidence that there were three separate conspiracies. The first conspiracy was to murder the President; the House Select Committee on Assassinations also concluded that such a conspiracy existed. Unfortunately, that conspiracy was highly successful. A second conspiracy was centered around altering the corpse of the late President—altering it anatomically. The purpose seems to have been to ensure that the real direction and course of the rifle shots would never be known. The third conspiracy was to obscure and cloud the fact that the corpse of the late President had indeed been modified.

A WANDERING CORPSE?

Lifton maintains that Kennedy's body did not make an uninterrupted trip from Dallas to Bethesda, as we were led to believe by the news media. Somewhere en route the sheet-wrapped corpse was delayed; the existing wounds (it is claimed) were surgically altered; and the body was rewrapped but in a zippered body bag. Eventually, the corpse was delivered to the rear door of the Bethesda Naval Hospital. This operation was carried out purportedly in order to force the conclusion that all the shots came from behind the President rather than some from the front.

ONE GUNMAN?

In my book published in 1978 (1), I used data available from the Warren Commission documents. There

was strong evidence presented at the time that the President was shot in the head from two directions and that there is a distinct possibility that his head wounds were surgically altered between the time the corpse left Parkland Hospital and was later seen by the autopsy pathologists in Bethesda Naval Hospital (see especially ref. 1, Fig. 9-2, p. 210). This illustration, Lifton's evaluation, and a fairly widely distributed document by Newcomb and Adams (7) combine to cast doubt on the medical report contained in the volumes of the House Select Committee Hearings: The pathology panel, after examining photographs, concluded that the entrance hole in the back of the head was 4 inches higher (toward the crown) than shown and described in the original autopsy report (3). If true, the entrance hole would have been in the middle of a missing area of scalp, skull, and brain measuring 10 × 19 cm in size (ref. 1, p. 210). How could a photograph of a hole in a missing piece of scalp be made?

Lifton puts together bits of factual material that illustrate a basic contradiction between the alleged photographed entry hole high on the right top of the President's head and the autopsy description by Dr. Humes (3,6) that reveals bone and scalp to be missing in that region. A deluge of other facts suggests that we still do not have a thoroughly competent, complete, and credible official account of the assassination. The records of the now-defunct House Select Committee on Assassinations are to be retained *sealed* for half a century in the National Archives. Why are a significant number of the House Select Committee afraid to have the public know all the transactions of that deliberative body? For the vast majority of thoughtful Americans, such secrecy is suspect.

The book by Lifton is valuable to serious students of the President Kennedy assassination. Inevitably, publicity hounds may misuse the study for crass purposes. Nevertheless, Lifton's work must be reckoned with. It dramatizes for scholars the fierce historiographic hurdles that will face future historians as they try to sort out details of the murder in order to evaluate it more clearly.

THE FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

The entire episode from the very beginning was clouded by unreal, impossible, and conflicting events. For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has always indicted that it had no information about any sort of threatened assassination or assassination attempt. The FBI also maintained that it did not have any information that would cause them to pick up potentially dangerous people in Dallas on the day of the assassination. It was strange, however, that within 3

weeks of the murder, the FBI cranked out five volumes of "facts" connected with the assassination. This work was done at the request of the Warren Commission. These five volumes were factually questionable. They included opinions, fiction, prejudice, attempts to cover one's backside, and other similar creations that suddenly became factual when the FBI put them together under a single cover.

The five volumes that the FBI put together contain mostly wastepaper—possibly 500 words in the entire five volumes apply to the murder. The rest is an assemblage of irrelevancies. Unfortunately, the Warren Commission decided that this was to be their bible: Anything else that they found would be bent to fit in with the preconceived ideas in this particular report. If facts contradicted this overall outline or script, then the facts had to be bent out of shape.

THE WARREN COMMISSION

From the very outset the Warren Commission was doomed to failure. It had a staff of 84 persons. The seven members were public officials who had no particular competence for an investigation of this sort. The commission itself did not get together any experts in the field of criminal law, investigation of murders, or the like. The Warren Commission did not have its own investigating body. It depended on the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It should have been obvious that farming out the investigation to the FBI ensured the failure of the entire effort. After all, who was going to inspect, investigate, and evaluate Hoover and his activities in connection with this unfortunate episode?

The intellectual outrage known as the Warren Commission Report created inevitably a blizzard of articles, journalists' reports, books, and other documents that attempted to address one or more aspects of the situation.

WHERE ARE THE HISTORIANS?

It is obvious that historians should be the individuals most highly skilled and competent to handle documentary evidence of this sort. Unfortunately, historians have been derelict in their duty. They have not waded into the problems created by the murder of John F. Kennedy. They have not tackled, in any rigorous manner, the investigations that followed the murder of the late President. One outstanding historian, the Regis Professor of Modern History at Oxford University, Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper, published a professional examination of the Warren Commission documents. Since that time, virtually all American historians have avoided the entire problem like the plague. They have

accepted the published hearings of the Warren Commission as the total amount of data available.

Nearly a generation has passed since the murder, and only now has a recognized, respected professional historian devoted his considerable talents to unraveling some of the facts in the case (8,9). In his skillfully documented study, Kurtz (8) outlines the three main theories of the murder of President Kennedy. He explains that all three plausible views have evidentiary support of limited scope, but he also shows that such evidence as it exists is insufficient to tie Lee Harvey Oswald to any conspiracy. Kurtz is also unequivocal in his contention that "those responsible for the murder of John Kennedy got away with it." As a historian he has concluded that vigorous and persistent collusion among the several branches of government has suppressed information about the murder so that "the American people are still not permitted to review all the evidence their government possesses about the crime of the century."

CONSPIRACY

In my view, it seems incontrovertible that in the case of John F. Kennedy, at least two conspiracies did in fact exist. The first conspiracy was to kill the President; that conspiracy worked. The second conspiracy was to subvert the truth and to obscure it. Some writers maintain that essentially honorable men were involved. The extent of the conspiracy to obscure, its ramifications, and its diabolical nature all combine to lead me to question the honorable nature of the men who did so attempt to subvert and obscure the truth.

I do not pretend to know the individuals who clearly were involved in the first conspiracy. The second conspiracy unquestionably involves the highest levels of our government. Some have referred to it as an institutional conspiracy. I suspect that part of it involved various minor bureaucrats attempting to cover themselves and protect themselves from accusation and proof of dereliction of duty. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the White House, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Secret Service, and the Justice Department, as well as the Department of State, had individual and varying interests in a cover-up. Why has the National Archives, as a matter of policy, been so negative toward this kind of scholarly study, unless forced to assist by Freedom of Information litigation?

The so-called Warren Commission Report on President Kennedy's murder consists of 26 volumes. Material is scattered randomly throughout those volumes in no apparent order. No index to these volumes was published. Why? Meagher and Owens (10) have published the results of a heroic study of the Warren

Commission Report and of the House Select Committee on Assassinations Report entitled *Master Index to the J.F.K. Assassination Investigations*. Interested scholars now have an indispensable key to these voluminous and disorderly volumes of information.

One type of conspiracy that has been suggested from the very beginning is that organized crime somehow managed to kill Kennedy. The factual data are somewhat less than satisfactory; however, most recently, the U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations in the final report seemed to favor this particular idea.

THE HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE ON ASSASSINATIONS

The final report of the House Select Committee on Assassinations frankly was a disappointment to most students of the assassination. The Congressional committee refused to pay attention to the enormous amount of documentary material that was wrenched from government files through Freedom of Information litigation. The committee seemed to go out of its way to ignore and have nothing to do with responsible critics of the Warren Commission Report. It seemed that the original charge given to the committee by its chairman to make plausible the Warren Commission Report was in fact the general thrust of that particular group.

One of the interesting things about the House Select Committee on Assassinations was the way in which it built up an assortment of strawmen, knocked them down, and then claimed a victory for truth. The fact that the strawmen in no way resembled the issues that critics raised did not seem to bother the committee.

Strangely enough, the Report of the House Select Committee on Assassinations is marked by apparent prevarications. One of these concerned the matter of Dr. Hume's destroying his notes at home. The matter that concerned many critics was not that Dr. Hume destroyed his notes. That action was bad enough; but the real problem was the fact that the Warren Commission never saw the original autopsy report. That document was destroyed, and a second copy (a second draft) was seen by the commission, we think. The first draft of the report was made on November 21, and that draft was burned according to a certificate, a sworn certificate, that Dr. Hume issued. Much to their dismay, members of the House Select Committee also found that the single bullet hole in the back of the President was in fact in his back, where the critics said it was, and not up in his neck. They then attempted to square this fact with the Warren Commission by confusing this issue with an assault of verbiage.

THE SLITS IN THE SHIRT

There was much made about the slits in the neckband of the President's shirt. These slits were supposed to show the exit of the bullet from the President's throat. Unfortunately for the single-bullet theory, the one slit is parallel to the long axis of the body; but the slit on the other side of the collar, the buttonhole side, is perpendicular to the long axis of the body. Below the seam of the neckband, when the shirt is buttoned, these two holes do not overlap: They do not coincide. Tests that were made on the slits show absolutely no trace of metal, which would be present if a bullet had made the slits. Apparently, these slits were made in the emergency room by a staff member of the hospital running a scalpel through the shirt. If we try to conclude that the bullet came out above the collar, we encounter an impossible situation with respect to the trajectory when going into Governor Connelly. There are a whole assortment of obvious prevarications in the report of the House Select Committee. How this happened is not clear, but it does indicate that the House Select Committee was not particularly interested in getting at the truth.

At the present time, we must be aware of the ignorance that surrounds the murder case of John F. Kennedy. After one studies carefully the final report of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, this official version of what happened does not meet the test of minimal satisfaction. It does not get us anywhere nearer to what actually happened in Dallas on the day of the murder. The one favorable aspect is that the House Select Committee report does recognize the fact of conspiracy. Perhaps this admission will be the yeast or the stimulus for getting other official agencies to recognize reality.

THE STOCK MARKET AND CONSPIRACY

In 1983, Robert Pisani of the Department of Statistics, University of California, Berkeley, reported on a method for quantifying the *temperature* of the stock market on a specified day (11). The report was the subject of a talk presented by Dr. Pisani, 21 November 1983, noon, Room 170, Barrows Hall, University of California, Berkeley. The stock market temperature index is based on a sophisticated mathematical analysis of the market and reveals both the direction of the market on a given day and the degree of turbulence in the market.

An extract from the nontechnical summary of the paper is informative:

On the day before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, the temperature of the market was

abnormally high [taking the market base temperature before and after the day in question as 2, on the febrile day it was about 7]. No explanation for this high value can be found in the financial press. In fact, several financial commentators expressed puzzlement at the day's activity.

The results suggest that market participants strong enough to influence prices may have had foreknowledge of the assassination. An examination of transactions records from November 21, 1963 may lead to the identity of these participants.

The stock market fever on the day before Kennedy's murder was "unusual" at the 99% confidence level.

Historians might find it revealing to analyze in detail the stock transactions records for that period. If such records still exist, the "who" of the murder conspiracy might be uncovered at least in part.

A PLEA TO SCHOLARS

Today, it seems that scholars will have to face up to the fact that they will be forced to use the Federal courts and the Freedom of Information Act to pry loose from official government bodies whatever documentary and other materials are still available in order to reconstruct what actually happened on that sad day in Dallas so long ago. I suggest that we must not depend too much on the press. Strangely, the press has shown itself to be completely unreliable, incompetent, and indifferent to the facts of this case. The press as a whole swallowed without chewing all the so-called information sent it by various government departments. In essence, the news media played the role of a docile mouthpiece for government bureaucrats.

Needless to say, the legislative and executive branches of the central government not only showed that they were incapable of investigating themselves; but, certainly, that they were also incapable of investigating the killing of a President.

With these few comments, I close these thoughts; however, they do summarize, at this time, my views on the murder of John F. Kennedy. It was a conspiracy. Who was involved or how widespread this conspiracy was, I do not know. The conspiracy to cover up is obvious; all of us who have done any studies on the assassination know painfully how this conspiracy operated and is still operating. Will we ever be able to get the true story of what happened? In my own view, I think not.

AN AMERICAN NOBILITY?

I urge historians and other scholars to move to do what they can to ensure that further destruction of ev-

idence does not occur. The fact that Robert Kennedy himself was involved in the destruction of the brain of the late President and of the microscope slides and possibly other tissue specimens related to the autopsy should horrify all honest men. The fact that the Kennedy dynasty has been permitted to decide who will see matters of evidence in a capital crime is beyond belief.

In monarchies it was said that the king could do no wrong. The nobility had special privileges that the great masses did not. Apparently, this special privilege of the nobility applies in the United States. The Kennedy family has taken upon itself to decide who will see the slides and the x-rays that are deposited in the National Archives and who will not. By what right does this dynasty decide such matters in our country? They did not pay for the films. They did not pay for the processing of these films. These films and x-rays are integral, substantial, and critical matters of evidence in a capital crime. The State has ownership of all materials in evidence or of potential evidentiary value in capital cases.

That the family lawyer for the Kennedys can arrogantly decide who will and who will not see these materials is outrageous. It is offensive to our fundamental concept of law in the United States. When I examine this aspect of the case, I become apprehensive and alarmed. It seems that the privilege of the nobility, which we had thought was given a death blow by our Constitution, is now resurrecting itself and has resurrected itself in connection with material evidence germane to solving the murder of John F. Kennedy. Moreover, we see further signs of attempted perversion of our Constitution in the stubborn moves by the executive branch of the central government to curtail and even eradicate the Freedom of Information Act. The excuse given is to protect national security—the actual goal is to camouflage nefarious action by public officials and misbehavior of bureaucrats.

A FINAL CHARGE

I urge historians to address themselves vigorously to this problem. I also ask political scientists and others who are concerned with the law and our Constitution to demand and ensure that they be protected and that their erosion and corrosion be inhibited by revealing abuses and subversive attacks on the law (such as the special handling of photographs and x-rays in the Kennedy murder case). Scientists have done all that can be done to throw light on the murder of President Kennedy. They can do no more. Further clarifications must come from historians using their unique methodology and genius. □

EDITORIAL COMMENTARY

It is usually expected that the passage of time will dull the senses, assuage the anxiety, and eventually dissipate the anguish of even the most painful experiences in our lives. This phenomenon is probably desirable, if indeed not necessary, from a psychological standpoint, if human beings are to be able to continue functioning in a hectic, complex, and, frequently, rather indifferent and insensitive society.

Perhaps this is also a beneficial sequence of events from an overall sociopolitical standpoint; otherwise, a nation or group of people might dwell in morbid fashion on those dramatic historic episodes that caused them severe pain and suffering to such an extent that they could not meaningfully contemplate the future or appreciate the present.

There are, however, great tragedies and other momentous events that have such a special significance in our lives and the society in which we live that they should never be completely forgotten or ignored, for to do so would be to deny the lessons and importance of history, and thereby increase the possibility of similar cataclysmic events being repeated in the future.

In this context, Dr. Charles G. Wilber had done all of us a great service by the detailed scientific analysis of such an event in his excellent book, *Medicolegal Investigation of the President John F. Kennedy Murder*. The article by Dr. Wilber in this edition of the Journal is a follow-up to that original study.

A thorough, objective, and dispassionate review of all the official medical and scientific examinations and studies conducted in the John F. Kennedy assassination, from the autopsy at the Bethesda Naval Hospital on November 22, 1963, to the multifaceted endeavors of the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations (1976-1978), will unquestionably lead to the conclusion that the author has courageously and forthrightly stated in his article, namely, that a number of forensic pathologists have failed to apply their usual and customary stringent criteria and intellectual acumen in the course of their involvement with the Kennedy murder. Sophistry, evasion, imaginary hypotheses, and fanciful rationalizations replaced objective scrutiny and meticulous analyses, and in some instances, were even used to deliberately obfuscate certain pieces of evidence that the Warren Commission had originally seized upon as a matter of sheer necessity to arrive at their ultimate official conclusions, the most blatant example of which was the infamous and totally absurd so-called single-bullet theory. This bit of scientific fantasy is the sine qua non of the Warren Commission Report vis-à-vis a sole assassin. Every forensic scientist and investigator who became involved with

this case and even superficially knowledgeable of the physical evidence realized the quintessential importance of this theory. To challenge it is to put the lie to the Warren Commission's findings that Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone assassin. It cannot be otherwise. Yet, the overall physical condition of this "magic bullet" (Warren Commission Exhibit 399) and the trajectory it would have had to follow in going through Kennedy's back and throat and then through Governor John Connelly's back and chest, right lower forearm, and finally into his left thigh, clearly and unequivocally demonstrate the scientific untenability of the single-bullet theory. Nevertheless, several competent, experienced forensic pathologists have attempted to find ways to ignore or explain away this objective evidence in their efforts to confirm the government's official report.

I am constrained to express my disagreement with Dr. Wilber's analysis of David Lifton's book on the Kennedy case, *Best Evidence*. I have had the opportunity to personally review Lifton's findings and have attempted to correlate his conclusions with all the other known physical and medical evidence. I cannot accept the major contention set forth in this book, namely, that the President's body was surgically altered sometime after the shooting and before the autopsy in order to change the appearance of the various gunshot wounds. There is no need to hypothesize such an incredible scenario in order to understand how the Warren Commission members and other investigators were misled. Regrettably, the ineptitude, negligence, lack of expertise in forensic pathology, and the "controlled" military status of the original autopsy pathologists provided ample basis for explaining the inadequacy, multiple deficiencies, and superficiality of the Kennedy postmortem examination.

The assassination of President Kennedy can and should be utilized by various forensic scientists as an excellent teaching vehicle. It would be a great shame if this unfortunate tragedy were to be forgotten and ignored and worse yet if the Warren Commission Report were to be permitted to distort and subvert the basic purposes and historic objectives of official governmental medicolegal investigation.

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