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Oct. 1966

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EHEX: THE WARREN COMMISSION

The President's Commission on The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy is dead. Created by Kennedy's successor one week after the assassination, the Warren Commission, an impromptu, exigent, and unprecedented ad hoc body of dubious Constitutional legitimacy, anomalous function, and diverse political, but Establishmentarian, composition, labored strenuously to conclude its mission before the Presidential election of 1964, and dissolved in September, its staff dispersed, its transcripts of testimony and compilation of exhibits dispatched to the Government Printing Office, its materials deposited in the National Archives, and its Report submitted to President Johnson who, in accepting, praising, and ordering it published under the imprimatur of the United States, became sole political heir of the Commission and its only competent spokesman. Sanction by the President of judgment by the Commission set an official seal of government approval on the results of the two-day investigation into the assassination made by the Dallas police and district attorney's office, on the conclusions of the longer and more extensive FBI inquiries ordered by Johnson, and on the case made by the mass-communication media against the man accused of killing Kennedy and Dallas policeman Tippit.

Eulogies by men of the Establishment marked the Commission's passing, and press, radio, and television bruited its legacy. governmental and institutional power combined strove to implant in American and world consciousness and to inscribe on history's scroll the nation a disturbed and hapless, leftist, workingclass nobody, a

perverse exemplar of free enterprise and individual initiative, unaided and motiveless, slew the thirty-fifth President of the United States. Lee Harvey Oswald, American, ex-Marine, worker, avowed Marxist, aged 24, married, father of two infant children, twice accused of murder but pleading innocence, his trial aborted by execution in the custody and midst of his police captors, confined in cement, and buried with maimed rites, was branded assassin, his life defamed, and his name made odious by posthumous verdict of the Government of the United States, presided over by the man whose political fortune was advanced by the assassination and furthered by the findings of the tribunal created by Executive Order.

Abroad, wisdom distilled from ages past and present spoke against murder of a head of state without political cause and slaughter of the putative assassin without connected reason. At home, came a corporal's guard of armchair detectives, Talmudic exegetes, skeptics, critics, seekers after truth to find flaw and error, distortion and misrepresentation, lies and perjury, and hypocrisy in Johnson's legacy; and independent investigators uncovering evidence to controvert its bequests. To them replied a tribe of legal logicians, academic pundits, Solomonic savants, journalistic scribes and pharisees, and, of late, former Commission assistant counsel, some conceding grievous fault, but all knight defenders of the faith, affirming the defunct Commission's integrity and approving its findings. High above the battle, ensconced in governmental position and in prestige, the Commissioners maintained decorous and judicious silence until erstwhile director of the CIA, Allen Dulles, nettled by revelations of the Commission's shortcomings and prejudice, rebuked critics

for not naming the ^{conspirator} assassin the Commission found did not exist; and House Minority Leader, Gerald R. Ford, author of a misrepresentational "Portrait of The Assassin," asked defensively whether critics of the Report had developed new evidence which cast doubt on its findings. At the pinnacle of power, Commission sire, heir and spokesman, President Johnson, aloof from broils below, waits and watches, saying nothing publicly.

Three-quarters of a century passed before disinterested historical research destroyed the official version of, and established the essential truth about, the assassination of President Lincoln. In two short years since Johnson's tribunal handed up its verdict in the murder of President Kennedy, hostile searching analysis, contrary testimony, and devastating criticism by a number of its supporters have impeached the ex-parte evidence on which the Report of the Warren Commission is based, and invalidated its predicted findings. Sapping critic and guard^sman at the gate, forensic adversaries dialectically united in result, have demolished the government's case against Oswald. From the ruins strewn with shards of the government postulates^o of a single assassin, rises elder Hamlet-like, the ghost of conspiracy beckoning us to pursue truth beyond official myth and heed its blazon of "murder most foul, strange, and unnatural."

In the National Archives

Our truth begins where the government's ended. We go first to the National Archives in Washington. A courteous and helpful projectionist will show us copies of amateur 8-mm. motion-picture films of the assassination scene taken on November 22, 1963 by spectators Orville O. Mix and Mary Muchmore. The FBI found the originals helpful in

fixing the locus of President Kennedy when the angel of death in the guise of a bullet took his life. But the copies, of poor photographic quality and indistinct, are of no significance in resolving such critical problems as source and trajectory of the shots, number of bullets fired and hits scored, and the intervals between hits.

Dress manufacturer and amateur photographer Abraham Zapruder, however, took 8-mm., silent, motion-picture, color film of crucial evidentiary importance. We cannot see the original which Life Magazine bought for \$25,000 and kept because of its value, and exhibited to FBI and Secret Service agents and Commission representatives three months after the assassination because important particulars were indistinct and considerable detail was missing in the two copies given by Zapruder to the Secret Service and also in the copy of one of the copies made by and for the FBI. Clearer than the copies and available to us in the National Archives are the 35-mm. color slides made by Life from the original film for the government. As authentic photographs of an historic event, the slides are of absorbing interest, but if these are the frames projected for the Commission on the afternoon of June 4, 1964 in order to give the tribunal "a frame of reference and an orientation," their evidentiary value was impaired by the excision of frames 208-211 inclusive, the crude horizontal splicing of frames 207 and 212, and the obvious misnumbering of frame 317 out of proper sequence, making necessary the renumbering of a series of preceding frames. Moreover, slides viewed separately as still photographs, even when seen in sequence, are frozen moments abstracted from the swift current of time and events and do not convey the sense of continuous

fluid motion immediately visible in the film from which they are derived. Thus, frame 313 shows clearly the impact of the fatal shot - a fan-shaped red spray radiates upward from the area of the right temple of the stricken President's head which is pointed downward - and the immediately following frames, except for 317 in which his head is intact, reveal the gory spray subsiding. In the offspring film, a copy of indefinite pedigree, available to us in the National Archives, which is also in color and requires half a minute or less to run, whatever be its imperfections, the impact of the deadly hit is equally vivid. Less striking but of paramount importance are the sequences preceding and following the climactic moment of impact. In some fifty frames before the denouement, occupying less than three seconds, the four occupants of the seats behind the Secret Service agents in the front compartment of the Presidential limousine, are seen to be in diverse motion as Kennedy reacts to his first wound with hands rising to his throat, shoulders moving forward, head falling downward, and body inclining to the left; Governor Connally, after turning to his right, then left and right again, collapsing into his wife's lap; and the two women moving differently toward their husbands - all constituting a complex of rapid and erratic movements distracting to a distant marksman at the eastern end of Dealey Plaza, sighting through a defective scope on a cheap rifle with fragile firing pin and only one bullet to spare. Immediately evident in the film sequence following 313 is the macabre pirouette executed by Kennedy's body. As the fatal bullet hits home and brain and blood and life depart, the President's moribund torso is hurled violently against the rear seat of his

limousine, from which it bounces forward, spinning off to his left into Mrs. Kennedy's arms, then falls away from her. The sudden violent backward thrust of Kennedy's body is unmistakable and in sharp contrast to the comparatively upright position of Mrs. Kennedy before she rises in obvious shock and revulsion to escape the ghastly horror assaulting her.

Hit and thrust occur to the eye as cause and instant effect. True, the car accelerated suddenly and shot forward in a desperate race for medical help at Parkland Hospital. But only, Secret Service agents testified, after Kennedy was struck fatally; the Connallys too, and the Report so quotes them.

By the sensible and true avouch of the camera's eye, by the incontrovertible evidence of Zapruder's film, the bullet that took Kennedy's life was fired by a marksman positioned in front of the Presidential limousins and to its right. False is the undated government-autopsy "opinion that the deceased died as a result of two perforating gunshot wounds inflicted by high velocity projectiles. . . fired from a point behind. . . the deceased." Not Oswald nor any gunman situated behind the President could have fired the fatal shot, score the deadly hit.

In Dealey Plaza

It is an honest ghost that waves us to a more removed ground. We go to Dealey Plaza.

Moving west on Main Street, we pause at the corner of Houston where Kennedy's car made its turn to the north on its fateful way to nemesis. Across the street lies the wide eastern end of funnel-

shaped Dealey Plaza, three acres in area, "The Front Door of Dallas," through which pass almost ceaseless streams of traffic to and from highways leading north, south, and west. Main Street, declining east to west one foot in twenty, bisects the Plaza. Green lawns, each a block wide at Houston, separate Main from Commerce Street to the south and Elm Street to the north; but at the narrow west end of the plaza, 425 feet from Houston Street along Main, the three east-west streets converge to form a tripartite roadway beneath a railroad overpass, then go their separate ways. Symmetrical grassy knolls rise from Commerce and Elm Streets at the overpass and extend eastward toward Houston Street. On their summits wooden stockade fences abut the overpass and run to the east less than half the distance to Houston, then extend at approximately right angles to the north and south, away from the Plaza, partly screening unattractive parking lots between the knolls and railroad tracks beyond. Single rows of lower hedges and taller trees parallel the fences. Concrete steps near the bends in the fences give access to sidewalks and roadways below, and walks passing through and beyond concrete pergolas on the knolls lead from the fences to the eastern end of the Plaza, ornamented with pylons, reflecting pools, and flower-bordered peristyles between Elm and Commerce Streets.

In front of the peristyle between Main and Commerce Streets stands a statue of George B. Dealey, publisher of the Dallas Morning News, in whose honor and memory the Plaza was named. We cross the street to read the plaque on the back of the statue, paying homage to the man for his achievements and to his love of truth. The laudatory words awaken memories of November 22, 1963 when the News ran a

full-page ad by a John Birch Society adjunct, accusing Kennedy of betraying the cause of anti-Communism. And printed on the bottom of page one, a sketch of the Presidential motorcade route, two columns wide, showing its course from Houston Street to the railroad overpass down Main Street in the middle of Dealey Plaza, when three days before it had described the route in exact detail, including the turns from Main into Houston and from Houston through Dealey Plaza along deadly Elm Street.

Behind the statue, leaning against the peristyle, cut flowers in anonymous remembrance of the slain President wither in the inhospitable Texas sun. No token else, neither document in bronze or stone, nor landscaped arrangement attest the man or signify the flight of his life through The Front Door of Dallas.

From the lower level of the verdant lawns, the U. S. Post Office Building at the southeast corner of the Plaza and, on Houston Street, the old Court House and newer Dallas County Criminal Courts where Jack Ruby was tried for the murder of Oswald, and Records Building, all loom large above the Plaza. Were all their occupants in the street at half past twelve on November 22 in 1963? Did no one in them with glass or naked eye see tragedy unfold below? No man or woman, no government employee come forth to say what had transpired? Was not a single witness found? Was any sought? We wonder.

Ay, we wonder. On the unencumbered lawn our eyes lift high to the bright brick face of the forever-famous, 94-foot-tall, seven-storey Texas School Book Depository at the corner of Houston and Elm, and settle on the glinting panes of the southeast corner window on the sixth floor, shut now and dark behind. What sort of man was he who

chose to fire so close to buildings used by armed men and so far from any of many exits below? He meant to take Kennedy's life; had he no care for his own? Was no other place available? On that floor? On the one above? Below? Was he unsure of the motorcade route and took, despite its hazards, a vantage point to follow in his scope, without let by tree or building, the progress of the Presidential limousine on Main Street through Dealey Plaza, or toward him on Houston Street? Or, sure of the route, did he plan to shoot Kennedy on Houston Street?

Yet he held his fire as the President's car came slowly toward him, growing larger, and turning into Elm Street swung close beneath him, almost stopping, his target large and clear. Why? What cause obliged him to forego his best chance, to wait, lethally patient; cool in the oppressive heat, eye, hand, and nerve steady; his target smaller as it moved away, lost to view behind an oak tree in voluminous leaf, reappearing beyond, nearer the overpass and sanctuary? What reason? What motive? Perhaps he was not there and first the police, then the FBI, and following them the Warren Commission evoked him out of an improvised paper bag, three spent cartridge cases, four cartons of books, and the intermittent eyesight of a perjurious steamfitter. And called him Oswald.

Where was the gunman whose bullet spared the women in the President's limousine and made the holes in Kennedy's jacket, shirt, and back? And the marksman whose missile pierced Connally from the rear? How came the gunman in the Depository to fire in concert with the distant assassin whose frontal shot killed Kennedy? By prearrangement to shoot when the President's car reached a fixed point between them?

By visible signal? Or two-way radio?

Where was the deadly marksman stationed? By the testimony of Zapruder's film, between the photographer standing at the western end of the pergola on the grassy knoll between Elm and Main Streets, and the overpass. On the knoll our eyes seek out the likely place. Not under the single line of trees in front of the stockade fence, in easy view of nearby spectators on the knoll and of cameras on the Plaza. And quick escape cut off in all directions. But behind the fence, partly screened by the trees in front, with gun rests between the palings, panoramic view of the Plaza, and instant access to cars at hand. And no police nearer than the overpass and the street below. Probably at or near the corner where the fence extending eastward from the overpass turns northward toward the railroad, waiting watchfully, confident, iron-nerved, remorseless.

How did the assassins escape? From the Depository and the grassy knoll amid swarming police and government agents? By their own wits entirely? Or with help? Were they truly lost to view, or invisible in the protective coloration of false badge or true? Who were the assassins, hidden from public view by three investigations, the findings of the Warren Commission, and acceptance of its Report by President Johnson? At whose bidding did they risk death to take the life of the head of the most powerful of states? In whose interests? For what inducement? Where can such men be found? Where seek them out? Among virulent fear-and-hate-filled racist terrorists of bomb and torch and murderers by rifle fire from ambush? In the ranks of the CIA, organizer of world-wide subversion, plotter of war and counterrevolution, conspirator with assassins? In the

files of the FBI, impotent foe of the underworld, nationally syndicated and internationally connected dealers in murder, a commodity unknown in Marx's day, produced by asocial, reptilian-blooded, skilled professionals?

L The sulphurous scent of empyrean taints the air in Dealey Plaza. we follow the ghost to Parkland Hospital.

L Close to the broad divided roadway of Harry Hines Boulevard in northwest Dallas, modern Parkland Hospital stands large, free, and clear in its grassland setting, no residence, store, or factory near, with easy access to Love Field Airport few miles and few minutes away. To the emergency entrance on November 22, 1963, in desperate howling speed, came police and Secret Service escorting and guarding the stricken Presidential cortege.

Necessarily first to be removed was Governor Connally of Texas, sorely wounded in back, right wrist, and left thigh, borne swiftly to safety in trauma room and succoring surgery, unable to communicate the "thought that crossed my mind" on hearing the first shot, "this is an assassination attempt," and his belief when struck a moment later by a second bullet, either "someone was shooting with an automatic rifle" or "there were two or three people involved"; and without opportunity or subsequent request to elucidate the anguished cries wrung from him by the wounding missile before he knew Kennedy had been hit, "Oh, no, no, no!" and "They are going to kill us all."* Impulsive and enigmatic utterances, signifying emphatic rejection very likely of his own imagined impending demise, and

* Testimony of Gov. Connally, Hearings Before the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, Washington, 1964.

possibly of the sudden despairing realization "They are going to kill" not only one marked for death but all the notable occupants of the Presidential limousine and even others besides.

After the Governor, the President, come to Taxes intending, in preparation for his projected reelection campaign in 1964, to reconcile Democratic liberals supporting him with the state party's conservatives led by Connally, and shot as was his alleged assassin two days later, in the midst of his guards, was sped atop a sheet-covered, thin mattress on the upper surface of a two-tiered, four-wheeled stretcher cart to trauma room one where doctors and nurses worked desperately against time and fate to ease his breathing, administer blood and hormones, massage his heart, and restore consciousness. All in vain. In less than thirty minutes death became official. Whatever thoughts of assassination and conspiracy may have shot through Kennedy's mind when he was struck in back and throat were annihilated by the bullet which struck his skull.

Closely ringed by Secret Service guardians on arrival at Parkland Hospital and whisked to isolated security in a room not far from his dying chief, the chrysalid President pondered the grim event elevating him to helmsman of the ship of state in discussion with Mrs. Johnson, Congressmen Homer Thornberry and Jack Brooks, and Vice-Presidential executive aide Cliff Carter. While Johnson waited, drama unfolded and power accrued to him in anticipation of formal investiture. As priests administered last rites and prayed in solemn silence, a trio of the dead man's aides moved by chivalric concern for the blood-and-brain-spattered, grief-smitten, but composed, widow who would not leave her husband's body, busied them-

selves to awe and override local officials with exclusive authority to order autopsy and inquest, and with Johnson's knowledge and police and Secret Service assistance, abduct the corpse for postmortem in Washington. With arrogant contempt for law the dead President's subordinates stained the transition of power from the truncated Administration to its successor.

Simultaneously, in disciplined autonomous response to cogent necessity, Major General Chester V. Clifton, military aide to Kennedy, linked Johnson's hospital room with Presidential plane Air Force One on Love Field, the White House, and the Pentagon whence, on news of the assassination and in fear of a coup d'etat, directives sped to all nine world-wide combat commands of the United States, ordering readiness for action. And unobtrusively, mufti-clad, army warrant officer, Ira Gearhart, Kennedy's courier, carrying a briefcase with optional plans for emergency response to atomic attack, and never distant from the President, reported to Johnson and attended him in an adjoining room.

At twelve minutes past one, on Johnson's order, Carter made note Secret Service Assistant Agent in Charge, Vice-Presidential Detail, Emory Roberts, brought word, without explanation of the delay, Kennedy had died. To Kenneth O'Donnell, Kennedy's Appointments Secretary, come to convey the news eight minutes later, Johnson's "first words. . . were that we must look upon this in a sense that it might be a conspiracy of some nature."* Delay announcement of

* ^{Henry H. O'Donnell,} Testimony of ~~Malcolm Kilduff,~~ Hearings.

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Kennedy's demise, Johnson advised Malcolm Kilduff, Presidential Assistant Press Secretary, to give him opportunity, urged by all, to quit the hospital and reach Love Field for flight to Washington, because "We don't know whether this is a world-wide conspiracy, whether they're after me as well as they were after Kennedy, or whether they're after Speaker McCormack or Senator Hayden. We just don't know."^{*}

President Kennedy dead; Vice-President Johnson, House Speaker McCormack, Senate President Pro Tem Hayden - not Connally - men in the line of Constitutional succession to power! Johnson, endowed with primordial instinct for power, with no illusions about its sources, ambitious realist unhampered by idealistic vision or consistent principle, virtuoso skilled in duplicitous opportunist acquisition and uses of power in thirty-two years at the seat of government, privy to affairs of state, man of power, saw conspiracy in Dallas, wondered aloud about Washington and cities beyond the country's shores. What was his thought? Who were "they?" Soviet agents? Chinese communists? Vietnamese terrorists? ~~Castroites~~? Puerto Rican nationalists? Members of the FBI-ridden American party of Moscow? Spewers of hate and slime who greeted Kennedy with accusations of perfidy and treason, attacked Stevenson weeks before, spat on Johnson in 1960? Fanatic followers of rabid rightist hero, General Edwin Walker, clamorous summoner of 50,000 armed men to do battle with the Federal government at the University of Mississippi in 1962? Southern racist desperadoes, hands stained with blood of victims black and white? He did not say.

^{*} Making of the President, ^{1964,} ^{H.} Theodore White, New York, 1965.

Minutes later the Vice-Presidential party was gone from Parkland Hospital, departing surreptitiously in unmarked cars, its exit masked by Poesque drama staged by the kidnapers with hearse, corpse, bereaved widow, and conniving escort. At Love Field Johnson ran up the ramp to enter Air Force One. A call to Attorney General Robert Kennedy for instruction in the law relating to time and place of the oath of office, prompt response from Washington, summons to Federal Judge Sarah Hughes, hurried ceremony aboard the waiting plane, and Johnson, highest ambition fulfilled in tragic irony, great power in his hands, became the thirty-sixth President of the United States, his immediate pressing problems contrivance of stable government through temporary continuity of personnel and policy, reassurance to the world the American ship of state, intact, was on course.

At the White House

In flight to Washington, from Dallas came reassuring news and ominous danger. In police custody, custom-made for the assassin's role, was Lee Harvey Oswald, no one else sought. Quick to exploit sensation, press, radio, and television, fed ready police data, embroidered Oswald's political portrait in bright red ^{hue} colors - Marxist, Communist, erstwhile defector to the Soviet Union, Castroite.

What should President Johnson do? Sing in the chorus? Hunt with the pack? Cry havoc? Open wide the doors to unbridled reaction? Invite a national tidal wave of hysterical anti-Communism? Wreck the budding detente with the Soviet Union? Renew and intensify the cold war? Unleash the combat commands at the ready? Was this the aim of the assassination?

Could the establishmentarian man of consensus, millionaire and political roots deep and wide in Taxes, stand against the hue and cry, stem and turn the running tide, save the sacrificial victim, find guilt where political instinct, logic, and knowledge directed, in the broad bosom of the malignant, reactionary right nurtured by the "military-industrial complex" against which Eisenhower warned the nation on leaving office? Spur Negroes to smite the segregationist flank of the conspiracy? Rouse the passive working class to struggle against the capitalist arch villains? Who would rally to his cause? Dr. Martin Luther King? Bayard Rustin? A. Phillip Randolph? Roy Wilkins? Where find allies? In the Republican or Democratic Party? Americans for Democratic Action? The Anti-Defamation League? Among reactionary lickspittle and mock-liberal bureaucrats in the AFL-CIO? Or Soviet sycophants in the emasculated Communist Party?

Was there another way? "Quick briefings on the state of the world and the implications of the assassination were Mr. Johnson's first concern last night and this morning," wrote N. Y. Times correspondent Max Frankel from Washington on November 23. "No responsible official *believed that any foreign power or government had any connection* with the assassination. . . . Greatest fear" of the "highest men in Government" was "that the assassination and the left-wing background of the prime suspect, Lee H. Oswald, would generate anti-Communist passions and cries for vengeance. . . . Officials tried through the night to prevent the police and prosecutors in Dallas from drawing political conclusions from the assassination." Officials in Washington, Times correspondent E. W. Kenworthy reported two days later, shared the concern of the Soviet government to keep "alive the glow of

detente that has existed since the beginning of the nuclear test ban treaty," and its fear of "a wave of violence in the United States because of the left-wing assassination," whom it denounced as a Trotskyist. The Dallas police and the Texas state prosecutors found no real motivation for the crime."

As the Presidential policy came, got, and panderer, Jack Ruby, with transparent intent to exterminate Oswald at the moment he was taken from police to sheriff's custody. Now the overwhelming reaction swept the world, shook the Establishment.

So, in Caesarian urgency, by Presidential fiat, the Warren Commission "To satisfy itself that 'as far as it can be discovered'; an instruction to denude the assassination of political and distinguished establishmentarian members of the government, balanced politically to preclude miscarriage of justice, its verdict against left or right, its finding of the assassin therefore predetermined.

Its proliferating critics do it grievous wrong. It had no evil intent, malfeasance, nonfeasance, premeditation, had no choice, did its best with the intricate details at its disposal to falsify the event. Men make the garment, Marx, but not out of the whole cloth. The garment is the unlovely garment to hide the truth. But in retrospect, it was only a minor villain among

after the fact, puppet not puppeteer, Laertes not Claudius.

Kennedy's murderers go free, their employers unscathed, the interests they served unidentified, all sheltered by the government.

Commission critics, have done with endless dissection of a putrescent corpse! Confront the assassination. Truth lies outside the grave.

The ghost beckons. History waits.

Thomas P. Sarn
10/31/66