

March 31, 1975

Cyril H Wecht
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Dear Dr Wecht

My first thought when sorting a large pile of correspondence, publications, and ads, accumulated while I was abroad, was I would find a copy of your reply to Dr Lattimer which, you wrote in a letter received before I left, you intended to make. I was disappointed to find nothing from you. Has something delayed you? Or is publication slow? Please let me know.

In the meantime forgive me if I press the mystery of Burkley's activities in the assassination of president Kennedy which grows with each new item of information I come across. Take, for instance, your and Smith's article, The Medical Evidence In The Assassination of President John F Kennedy (Reprint from Forensic Science, 3-1974-105-128) which I reread for another purpose. In "2. Origin of the Medical Evidence...2.4. The autopsy materials and restriction on access," you wrote, "Numerous photographs and X-rays were taken in the course of the autopsy. The Warren Commission declined to examine these...The materials were held to be the property of the Kennedy family prior to their donation to the United States Government in late 1966" (p112). (I think it outrageous that vital evidence produced by public officials at public expense and essential for public purposes should be "held" to be private property - "held to be" by virtue of what formal process? - and after being withheld during the course of the official investigation of the assassination should be "donated" to the government with public access restricted by the "donors"!)

On page 114 of your article, under "3. Observations of the Autopsy Materials...3.2. The missing evidence," we find, "We also know from the testimony of the original autopsy team that color photographs were taken of the interior of the President's chest cavity. These photographs are important to the determination of the path of the bullet which struck the President's upper back. They are missing also. All these items had been turned over to the National Archives by Admiral George Burkley on April 26, 1965, according to a memorandum of that date. However they are not included in the inventory of items officially transferred (now the donation is an official transfer!-TS) to the United States Government by the Kennedy family on Oct 29, 1966. There has been no accounting for these missing items, and there are no known reports of re-examination of them since the original autopsy team examined them in December 1963." I do not question the accuracy of what you wrote, but I would very much appreciate being able to document your account. Where is the memorandum of April 26, 1965 to be found? What is the source for the statement the autopsy team examined these particular photographs in December 1963? Too bad you didn't include reference notes on these points in your article.

More important, of course, is the significance of what you reported but did not note in your article. Burkley, you established, was in possession of important medical evidence during the investigation of the assassination and during the examination of the autopsy doctors by the Warren Commission, and held it for unexplained reasons for about a year and a half before depositing it in the National Archives. This gives rise to a series of questions:

What is the significance, innocent or otherwise, of the peculiar division of custody of the autopsy photographs -part private, part official?

Was it Robert Kennedy's decision? When autopsy doctor Lt. Col. Pierre Finck was asked during cross examination in the trial of Clay Shaw in New Orleans in Feb. 1969, "Can you tell me why the X-rays and photographs were not available..." when he appeared before the Warren Commission in March, 1964, he replied, "I was told it was the wish of the Attorney General...who was then Robert F Kennedy" (Transcript of Finck testimony, p64). Again, when Finck was asked why the autopsy "prospectors" had not dissected the neck, he said, "We didn't remove the organs of the neck" because "...we were told to examine the head wound and that the...family wanted an examination of the head...and chest (Transcript, pp115-116). One recalls Burkley's account in his "Report of my participation in the activities surrounding the assassination of PRESIDENT JOHN F KENNEDY," of his kneeling before Jacqueline Kennedy in the air en route from Dallas to Washington and expressing the "complete desire of all of us and especially of myself to comply with her wishes..." and of his "numerous trips" during the autopsy, from the "mortuary" to the "17th floor" of Bethesda Naval Hospital where "Mrs. Kennedy... with the members of the party" waited, in order to give "reassurance to those in that area and to supply them with some idea of the contemplated departure time" (Warren Commission Exhibit 1126; Hearings, Vol. XIII, p96). Finck's testimony of "family" influence in overriding protocol and law supports the accounts of Kennedy's aides, including Burkley, of the forcible removal of Kennedy's body from Parkland Hospital and Dallas against the opposition of Dallas officials and Texas law -only hours before - because, they said, Mrs Kennedy was determined not to leave her husband's side.

It seems that the restrictions imposed on the autopsy doctors by their armed-forces superiors may have been motivated, at least in part, by the influence of the "family." Whether Finck used "family" to mean only Robert and Jacqueline Kennedy and by extension their immediate relatives or intended a broader membership, including the Kennedy aides, the so-called Irish mafia, was not made clear when the autopsy doctor testified in 1969 and supplied information not solicited by or supplied voluntarily to the Warren Commission in 1964. For what ends the "family" would have exerted influence is unclear but may have an as yet undisclosed connection with the Kennedys' repeated public assurances they accept the findings of the Warren Commission, and remains a closely held secret.

However that may be, "family" influence may explain only the fact of the division of custody of the autopsy evidence and possibly also the sequence of its deposit in the National Archives in which process of restitution the "family" followed Burkley by a year and a half; but would not, in and of itself, make clear why the Burkley photographs were separated from the rest of the autopsy evidence and are still not available for study. Perhaps a clue lies in the nature of the photographs themselves. They are, you wrote, "important for the determination of the path of the bullet which struck the President's back." One recalls that Burkley failed to inform the autopsy doctors in Bethesda, his medical colleagues and fellow officers, their colleagues in Parkland Hospital in Dallas a few hours before had performed a tracheotomy by extending an anterior neck wound; and failed to make reference to these passive activities of his in his Report. But Burkley, it appears, was not altogether a silent, if sporadic witness of the autopsy any more than he was in the emergency room in Parkland Hospital where he corrected the resuscitative team of doctors who were administering the wrong blood type to Kennedy (Burkley Report, Exhibit 24 1126, Hearings, Vol. XXII, p94). Bethesda autopsy consultant on wounds, US Army Col. Pierre Finck identified Burkley as one of three individuals who were the immediate source of such information as the number of shots fired a few hours before in Dallas ("three"), and the publication of a press photograph of a "rifle disappearing (1) into a window on an upper floor of the nearby Texas Schoolbook Depository Building" (Finck transcript, pp99-100, 114), which duly appeared in the official autopsy report (Warren Report, p539). (To fully appreciate Burkley's contribution read the laughable account of the Commission's decision "at least two shots were fired" and its conclusion "that there were three shots fired" ~~Warren Report, pp110-111~~ on pages 110-111 of the Warren Report)

The autopsy was concluded at 11 p.m. on November 22, 1963. Some time during the following day Burkley, who had carried Dallas Dr. Kemp Clark's death certificate for Kennedy, filled out in Burkley's presence, to Washington, issued a second certificate giving the cause of death as a gunshot wound of the head; locating a wound in Kennedy's posterior back at about the level of the third thoracic vertebra, i.e. lower than the autopsy location in the neck ("above the scapula"), and, you wrote to me, "in substantial disagreement with the autopsy photographs (letter of November 14, 1974); and omitting reference to the path of the back-wound bullet through the chest cavity. And this remarkable death certificate, like Dr. Clark's presumably unremarkable death certificate, has not been published. Nor does Burkley's Report, which is dated November 27, 1963 at 8:45 a.m., and which includes his asking Clark for the "necessary papers" (Ex. 1126, Vol. XXII, p95), make mention of his execution of a second set of "necessary papers." Is there a connection between secreting the autopsy photographs of the interior of the chest cavity and the purposeful neglect of Burkley's death certificate? Why should the first exercise you and the second lead ^{you} ~~you~~ be unmoved? Why do you regard discussion of the Burkley death certificate as "futile polemics?" I assure you I am not as rigid as Dr Lattimer.

On the day after Burkley wrote his death certificate the autopsy doctors signed an official autopsy report; so they testified. It was delivered to Dr Burkley who collected the autopsy protocol. On November 26, 1963 Burkley gave a copy of an autopsy report to the Secret Service along with "notes of the examining doctor" (Commission Document NO. 37 or 370 in the National Archives-Accessories After the Fact, Sylvia Meagher, p.135). On December 5, 1963 the Secret Service conducted "on-site tests" in Dallas, which failed to demonstrate "how the President could be shot in the front from behind" (NY Times, 12/6/63-Accessories, p135). On December 18, 1963 the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported "the Parkland Hospital doctors had been interviewed by the Secret Service and informed of the autopsy findings; and that contrary to their previous, early, definitive observation Kennedy's anterior neck wound was one of entry, they conceded it was or could be a wound of exit" (Accessories, p135).

Also on December 18, 1963 the NY Times cited a source "fully acquainted with the results of the autopsy" which included attribution of the anterior neck wound to "a metal or bone fragment from the fatal head shot" (Accessories, p135). Five days later, on December 23, 1963 FBI Director Hoover declared the FBI and the Warren Commission had received the "official autopsy report" (NY Times, Nov. 26, 1966 - JFK assassination: 'a prolonged and willful cover-up,' Cyril H Wecht; Modern Medicine, Oct. 28, 1974). This "official autopsy report," not then published, defined the anterior neck wound as an exit wound resulting from the passage of the bullet entering the back of Kennedy's neck. But one month after receipt of the "official autopsy report," the Warren Commission, sitting in executive session, the transcript of which had been classified "top secret" until 1974, discussed the content of an autopsy report describing the anterior neck wound as the consequence of a fragment of a bullet. (Portrait of the Assassin by Warren Commissioner Gerald R Ford, which was copyrighted in 1965, made use of the classified material developed in the executive session of January 27, 1964 but made no reference to the ~~autopsy report~~ "official autopsy report" discussed secretly on January 27, 1964; nor to its incompatibility with the "official autopsy report" appearing as Appendix IX, pp 538-539, of the Warren Commission Report and as Commission Exhibit 387 in Hearings, Vol. XVI, pp 978-979, both published in the early fall of 1964).

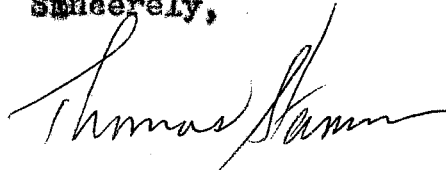
It is almost certain the Commission considered two conflicting autopsy reports evolved from differing "interpretations" of the medico-ballistic evidence, which reflected the influence of adversary interests and pressures in the investigation and on the Commission. Further research may identify the institutional protagonists, their representatives and agents, and their roles in the manipulation, fabrication, and concealment of evidence. It is always thus when confronting a governmental frameup. In the meantime, inasmuch as we have irrefutable proof Kennedy was killed by an inflicting ambush, it is necessary to elaborate a hypothesis to explicate the connection between the fabrication of evidence in Dallas and the manipulation and concealment of evidence in Washington. Does not the etiology of the official autopsy, ~~which~~

report, whichever one it is, suggest that the problem of the anterior neck wound, for the Commission, developed from the necessity, for the Commission, to eliminate evidence of a shot fired from in front of Kennedy's limousine? And, in view of the late April 1964 date of the formulation of Speeter's single-bullet theory of the wounding of Kennedy and Connally which, incidentally as you noted, the Commission accorded only the value of probability, is it not in order to consider the medicoballistic evidence of the back wounds as molded by the Commission's need to limit the number of shots fired to three, the number of bullets which hit their targets to two, and their impelling source to the gun in the sixth floor of the Texas Schoolbook Depository Building?

Is it not apparent, also, that by whatever road we enter the treacherous quagmire of the medicoballistic evidence in the JFK assassination we become aware of a busy, knowledgeable, ghostly presence, moving in the shadows, whom the Commission, with greater wisdom than Macbeth displayed, did not evoke as material witness either in person or by deposition or affidavit. I give you George Gregory Burkley, doctor of internal medicine and cardiology, admiral in the navy medical corps, presidential physician, gallant family friend of the Kennedys, assassination activist who, probably in reward for many meritorious services, was retained by Lyndon Johnson as White House physician from the end of 1963 to the end of 1968; now honorably retired and, who knows? awaiting a call to reveal what he knows. Who will be truth's and history's clarion?

I meant to ask questions about the head wounds, but this letter is already overlong. May we discuss them at a later date? Perhaps we should meet.

Sincerely,



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