

13 August 1969

Dr. Cyril H. Wecht  
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Dear Cyril,

Many thanks for sending me Don Olson's paper on the photographic evidence in the JFK assassination, of which I had not known previously. Olson did write to me some months ago to inquire where he might get a copy of my out-of-print Subject Index to the WR and H & E, but that was my only contact with him.

I have read the paper with interest and mixed feelings. It is well-organized, well-written, and, at first glance, well argued. I agree with the introductory comment by Olson that the WC was working from an inaccurate base of photo analysis, although I believe there is ground to suspect that the inaccuracy might have been somewhat more than merely inadvertent. And I agree of course that it is certain, and has been indisputable for a considerable time, that the exact events did not occur as they are described in the WR. I do not agree with Olson, however, when he points out that "the first shot...was an extremely difficult shot if fired from the alleged position of the assassin," since that statement fails to take account of the important work done by Bob Forman of Wisconsin State University on the trajectory of the bullet that entered the upper back and (according to the WC) exited at the Adam's apple. It fails to take account also of more recent work on the path of the first bullet (CE 399, the stretcher bullet, according to the WR) by Robert Cutler, which rules out completely the southeast corner window.

Of course, Olson has restricted himself to a severely circumscribed area of examination, and he may not even be aware of the findings made by Forman and others which, to some extent, makes Olson's study anachronistic in part.

Turning to his array of evidence, the main pillar seems to be the argument that accurate correlation between the Willis slide no. 5 and the Zapruder film places the first shot some ten or more frames earlier than the WR estimated, on the basis of Shaneyfelt's erroneous triangulation. Lillian Castellano originated and elaborated this thesis, in even greater detail, back in 1965. Olson has, however, made a lucid and succinct presentation of the Castellano material, for which he deserves credit.

I am inclined to agree with Olson also with respect to Mrs. Kennedy's movements. Indeed, I made the same argument in July 1965 in a paper giving my observations and impressions upon first examining the Zapruder color slides at the Archives, although I placed her sharp turn toward the President a few frames later than Olson does.

The analysis of the President's own movements, and in particular of the abrupt change in the position of his right arm, was made some time ago, too, by Ray Marcus, if I remember correctly. What is new and interesting in Olson's paper is the study of Linda Willis, in support of an earlier first shot; the hitherto unseen unnumbered Commission document recording Connally's opinion of a hit by frame 190; the significance of the Secret Service reconstruction in relation to the other evidence; and the acknowledgment by Itek of its error in estimating the distance covered by the car between the Willis and Betzner photographs.

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On balance, then, I believe that Olson's paper does make a positive if minor contribution to the historical and evidenciary record by synthesizing with clarity and logic the original work of a number of first-generation critics as well as the author's own related findings. My most serious reservation is, as mentioned already, that the paper takes no account of Forman's important study and similar work which bears on the source and timing of the first shot.

It is interesting to recapitulate the circumstances in which the theory of a first shot at about frame 186 was first suggested, and the permutations it has since undergone. If memory serves, it was Alexander Bickel writing in Commentary magazine in the summer or fall of 1966 who offered the hypothesis in a frank attempt to salvage the lone assassin while being forced to relinquish the single-bullet theory. Bickel's criticism of the Warren Commission in that article was almost as cutting as his criticism of the WR critics and he was ready to strip the Commission of every pretension except the possibility that Oswald was not, as pronounced, the lone assassin. Thus he could conceive of a mistaken reconstruction of the number and timing of the shots, so long as they came from the same lone perpetrator using the same lone rifle of whatever brand.

Bickel's theme was picked up by Wesley J. Liebeler in the public debate of 9/30/66 in which I participated, with the result that he almost strangled in his own rope. This is reported in a footnote in Accessories (I don't have a copy handy, to cite the page) which does not begin to convey the hilarity of the spoken words, with which Liebeler got so snarled up that what began as his elucidation of the merits of an earlier shot ended as a reaffirmation of his faith in the wholly discredited single-bullet theory.

Subsequently various other advocates of the lone assassin and the sanctity of the WR conclusions (if of nothing else in its voluminous record) made heroic efforts to validate an earlier shot linked to the hapless same lone assassin, but these hard-working individuals (Jacob Cohen, Curtis Crawford come to mind) have long ago lapsed into silence.

Olson does not, of course, link the earlier shot to Oswald but at least suggests the possibility of a "second assassin" while leaving only an implication about the identity of the "first assassin." That restraint, that moderation, combined with the commendable hyper-objectivity of tone and style, should confer considerable appeal on the paper if it is submitted for publication to some prestigious journal of criminal science or law or optics. It is certain to be treated with respect in such quarters, and that is all to the good.

If you have no objection, I will send copies of this letter to Mssrs. Olson and Turner. Please let me know.

Warm personal regards,



Sylvia Meagher  
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P.S. Any prospect that you will be in New York soon?