

Stamm to Weisberg Oct. 19, 1967
(on Speed of Zapruder Camera)

Dear Mr. Weisberg,

It was a pleasure to speak with you over the telephone last week. Perhaps there will be occasion for us to meet before long. An exchange of ideas would be helpful to me and possibly, also, to you.

I realize, as you explained, your time is preempted by your research, writing, business correspondence, and personal matters. I understand your reluctance to extend your correspondence. And I would not ask you to do so in writing to me if I did not feel the matter I want to discuss with you is important to both of us. I believe that on reflection you will think so too.

I have read carefully "Photographic Whitewash," as I have its two predecessors and everything I could get on the assassination of President Kennedy from Nov. 22, 1963 until today; and as I expect to do when I receive a copy of your forthcoming "Oswald in New Orleans." Because I immediately recognized the assassination as a political murder and Oswald as its intended scapegoat, I have no difficulty in agreeing with your emphatic assertions the killing was the work of a conspiracy and the Warren Commission was a painter in whitewash of government agencies and in blackwash of Oswald. But, as is inevitable among men, I disagree with other points and am unclear about still others. One in particular troubles me. I hope you can clarify it.

The problem I would resolve is the operating speed of Zapruder's camera at half after noon on Nov. 22, 1963. This is, obviously, a crucial point. The Warren Commission, we know, accepted the FBI's test finding the camera ran about 12% faster than its nominally normal speed of 16 frames per second; 18.3 frames per second is the figure given in the Report. As you have made clear, the Commission made no effort to verify this finding by questioning Zapruder about the speed of his camera or in any other way although that datum formed the basis for estimating the speed of the Presidential limousine on Elm Street and had a vital bearing on the possibility of three shots having been fired by one gunman from the easternmost window on the sixth floor of the TSEB. The camera speed was pivotal for the Commission's theory of the assassination and I believe you are justified in berating it for its dereliction in making no effort to establish the point by adducing whatever evidence was available and which could have been developed by investigation animated by a desire and a need to find and reveal the truth.

You contended also in "Photographic Whitewash" Zapruder's camera was operating at slow-motion speed of 24 frames per second. Of course, if this were so all the calculations made on the basis of a speed of 18 frames per second were invalid, as you noted, and the the Commission's theory of the assassination is destroyed on this ground alone, as you asserted. Your contention derives from the Dec. 4, 1963 report of FBI agent Robert M. Barrett of his interview with Zapruder, reproduced on

page 141 of "Photographic Whitewash," in which he wrote Zapruder "stated his camera was fully wound, was set, manually, on maximum zoom-lens. The camera was set to take normal speed movie film or 24 frames per second." "normal speed movie film or 24 frames per second" is a self-contradictory statement inasmuch as normal speed on that camera, as you noted, is 16 frames per second. But which part of Barrett's statement is in error? The use of the word "normal" to describe slow-motion speed of 24 frames per second? Or "24 frames per second" to concretize normal speed? One cannot tell from the equivocal statement in Barrett's report at what speed Zapruder's camera was running on Nov. 22, 1963. Yet you wrote, "Zapruder actually told FBI Agent Robert M. Barrett on December 4, 1963, that he did take slow-motion pictures" ("Photographic Whitewash" p 18). And for emphasis you underlined those words.

You may be correct; the camera^a may have been operated at 24 frames per second on the 22nd of November, 1963; Zapruder may have so informed Barrett; and Barrett may have meant to say so. But the fact remains Barrett's statement is equivocal and does not bear out your flat and unqualified assertion he did say Zapruder told him the camera was running at slow-motion speed. In truth, we don't know what Zapruder told Barrett about his camera's speed, and we don't know what Barrett meant to say, and even what he did say. As evidence his testimony is meaningless with respect to the camera's speed of operation on the day in question.

Supporting data is needed to validate your interpretation of Barrett's oracular report. I hoped you could have reported a conversation or correspondence with Zapruder in which he con-

firmed the slow-motion speed of his camera on that fateful day in 1963, although the evidentiary and persuasive value of such testimony so long after the event, dependent on memory, and influenced possibly by self-serving calculation, would be questionable. Nevertheless I was disappointed that you did not do so. But you did refer to the testimony of "the Commission's and the FBI's photographic expert, Lyndon L. Shaneyfelt" (p 17). The burden of his testimony, as you noted, is that when film taken with Zapruder's camera during the FBI-Secret Service reenactment of the assassination on May 4, 1964 was projected, it was seen to be "running at a faster speed." The projection time of the government's copy of the Zapruder film between frames 222 and 313 was five seconds and that of the reenactment film between the same frames was "about three and a half seconds" (Hearings V p 176). As you noted, the difference in time is about 30%, corresponding to the difference in time between normal and slow-motion speeds of Zapruder's camera.

It is truly remarkable that Commissioners McCloy, Dulles, and Ford who alone were in attendance when Shaneyfelt testified to the difference in film speeds of the same camera, on June 4, 1964, took no notice of the fact and did not inquire into its significance, at least as far as the published version of the testimony reveals. The omission is the more remarkable in view of Shaneyfelt's response to Counsel Arlen Specter's question earlier the same day when Ford, Dulles, and McCloy were also present: "How was the speed of the camera ascertained, MR. Shaneyfelt?" The witness answered: "We obtained from Mr. Zapruder, Mr. Nix, Mrs. Muchmore, their cameras for examination, and in the FBI

laboratory exposed film in all three cameras, aiming, focusing the camera on a clock with a large sweep-second hand. We then ran the cameras at the speed and conditions as described by the people who used the cameras. We ran through several tests of film and then after the film was developed it was studied under magnification, and frames were counted for a period of 2 to 3 seconds or for the full running time, and averages were taken...The Zapruder camera was found to run at an average speed of 18.3 frames per second. The Nix and Muchmore cameras were found around 18.5 frames per second" (V p 160). And no one, neither Ford, Dulles, McCloy, nor counsel thought to ask why or how the reenactment film ran faster! Was it stupidity or cupidity which accounts for their lack of official curiosity and interest?

Whatever the explanation, however, the faster speed of the reenactment film does not prove, as you asserted, that Zapruder's camera was running at slow-motion speed. Just the contrary. Taking "5 seconds which is what the time lapse was between frames 222 and 313 in the actual assassination film," gives us 91 frames in 5 seconds or almost exactly 18 frames per second; and "about three and a half seconds between 222 and 313" for the reenactment film is about 26 frames per second which is close to nominal slow-motion speed. If Shaneyfelt's testimony is valid, therefore, it signifies the reenactment film, for some undetermined reason, intentional or accidental, was running at slow-motion speed, not Zapruder's original film. Yet you cited Shaneyfelt's testimony in support of the opposite idea.'

In the absence of contrary evidence and reasoning I am inclined to the view Zapruder's film was running at his camera's normal speed on November 22, 1963. What reason would he have for taking film in slow motion on that occasion? It is not excluded that he did so either purposefully or unintentionally, but is it likely? Moreover, when I saw the film projected in the Archives in late summer, 1965, I was unaware of slow motion. True, I was unaware of the problem then. To boot, I have little knowledge of, and no practical experience in, photography. It is possible I missed something. You undoubtedly have more experience and knowledge in this field. And you have seen the film more times than I; and studied it closely. What did you see? Did you observe movement which appeared to be slower than natural? After you became aware of the difference in the speeds of the Zapruder and reenactment films did you, or were you able, to make a comparative study of them?

Unless you can persuade me of the accuracy of your contention I must continue to regard the problem of the camera speeds as a minor mystery yet to be solved. And to think your impeachment of the government's case on this ground is not valid.

Fortunately, however, the ambiguity surrounding this point does not diminish the crucial importance of the Zapruder film which contains within itself irrefutable proof the President was struck fatally from the "right front," as you put it, not from behind as the government asserted. Most critics of the Commission have been aware, or made aware, of this evidence, available to Commission friend and foe alike since the late summer of 1965,

but have not hammered the point with the necessary emphasis. It was good to come across it in "Photographic Whitewash," even though you based your criticism on the still frames rather than on the self-evident incontrovertible testimony of the film from which they are derived. But that is another and minor matter which can be discussed in the future, if you are willing. For the present I would like to dispose of the problem of the speeds of the assassination and reenactment films, if we can. It would strengthen the case for a conspiracy in the murder of President Kennedy.

Sincerely,

Thomas Stamm

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