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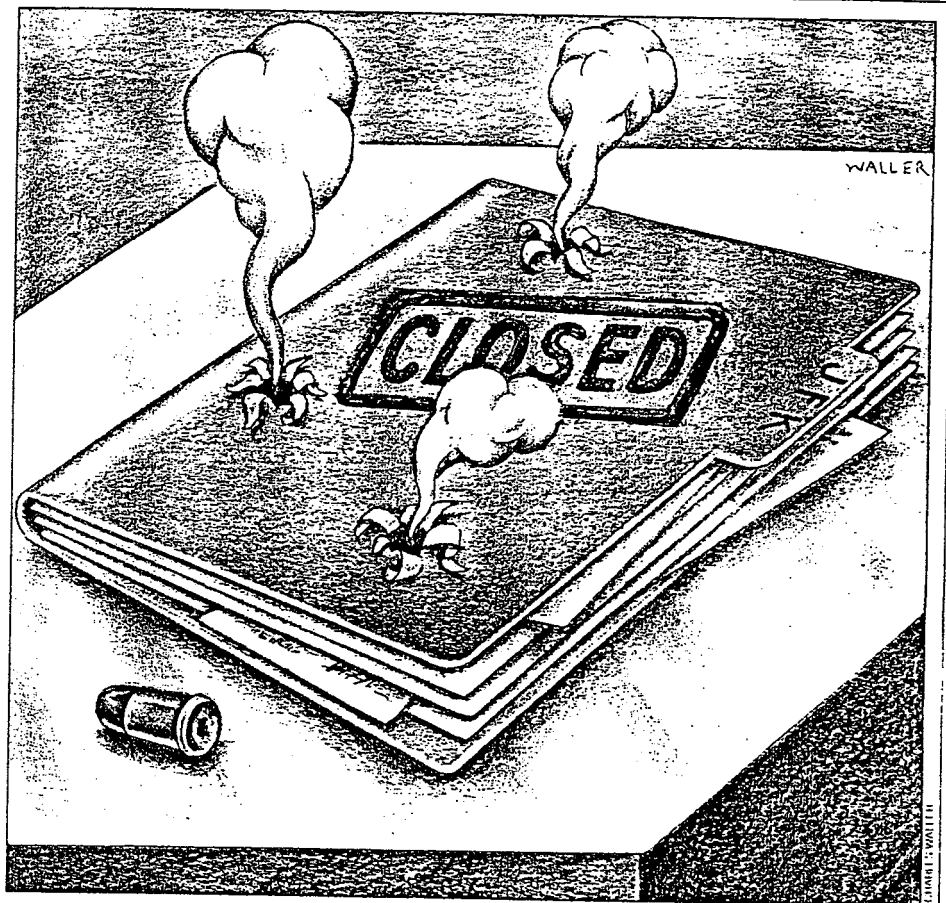
JAMA KNOWS BEST

The medical journal called the JFK case closed — and the verdict went unchallenged

BY WAYNE S. SMITH

The supermarket tabloids will feed forever on Kennedy assassination theories without worrying as to whether there is any evidence to back them up. Such indifference to the facts is hardly surprising in the sensationalist press. More surprising was a recent episode in which the establishment press, without even examining the evidence, was prepared to declare the case closed simply on the word of *The Journal of the American Medical Association*.

In the spring of 1992, George D. Lundberg, *JAMA*'s editor, and Dennis L. Breo, a *JAMA* staff writer, interviewed James Humes and J. Thornton Boswell, two of the pathologists who thirty years ago performed the autopsy on President Kennedy at the Bethesda Naval Hospital. In the resulting article in the May 27, 1992, *JAMA* — handed to reporters at a press conference on May 19 — Breo asserted that the pathologists had at last put the matter to rest. "The scientific evidence documented during their autopsy," he stated, "provides irrefutable proof that President Kennedy was struck by only two bullets that came from above and behind..." and thus "proves the 1964 Warren Commission conclusion that



Kennedy was killed by a lone assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald."

Not a single press account questioned these assertions or pointed out that several of the pathologists' statements to *JAMA* contradicted their previous testimony to the Warren Commission and to the House Select Committee — indeed, contradicted the autopsy report itself.

One can only speculate as to the cause of the remarkably unchallenging response of the establishment press. Conceivably, reporters and their editors had simply had enough of the whole conspiracy-theory game, popularized by the movie *JFK*, and were relieved when a prestigious medical journal, acting as a kind of tribunal, handed down its verdict. In any event, the nation's major dailies accepted the *JAMA* version at face value.

In a May 20 editorial, for example, *The New York Times* maintained that all discrepancies regarding the nature of President Kennedy's wounds had now been put to rest, though "conspiracy buffs remain free to contend all they please that other would-be assassins fired at the President (and missed)...."

For their part, George Lardner and David Brown of *The Washington Post*

noted approvingly that the *JAMA* interviews had addressed "loose ends that have perplexed and inspired conspiracy theorists for years," and described the *JAMA* piece as "an unqualified endorsement of the Warren Commission conclusions...."

Sandy Grady, a syndicated columnist for Knight-Ridder Newspapers, described the pathologists' statements as definitive, but lamented that they probably would not stop "the torrent of conspiracy theories," since more people would see the movie *JFK* than would read the fine print in the *JAMA* articles.

And so it went. Newspaper after newspaper and columnist after columnist accepted the *JAMA* findings without further inquiry. But had the journal really presented "irrefutable proof" that Kennedy was hit by only two shots, both fired from above and behind?

No, far from it, as any good investigative journalist would have discovered after the most perfunctory examination. For example, Humes and Boswell told *JAMA* that one bullet struck the president in the back of the neck, exited the throat, and then struck Governor Connally. This was the famous "magic" bullet on which the validity of the whole

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Warren Commission report rests.

But even if the bullet struck the back of the neck — and there is massive evidence to the contrary — how could the pathologists *know* it exited through the throat? They did not dissect the neck or in any other way trace its path through the body. They did not even examine the wound in the throat, which they believed to be nothing more than a tracheotomy incision. It was only the next morning, after learning from the doctors in Dallas that the tracheotomy had been performed over a bullet wound, that they supposedly concluded this must be the bullet's point of exit. In other words, this was simply supposition, not irrefutable proof.

Further, other evidence explodes the supposition itself. The death certificate signed by Admiral George Burkley, the president's personal physician, placed the entry wound not in the back of the neck but in the back itself, to the right of the third thoracic vertebra, or about six inches lower than where Humes and Boswell would now locate it. Dr. Boswell's own autopsy diagram, which was signed and verified by Admiral Burkley, also shows the wound to have

been in the back, not the neck. Dr. John Ebersole, the attending radiologist during the autopsy, and other personnel in the autopsy room confirmed that location. Finally, the bullet hole in the back of the president's suit coat is well below the shoulder line — i.e., fully consistent with the death certificate and the autopsy diagram, but not with what Humes and Boswell now claim to have been the entry point in the neck.

How does *JAMA* explain this discrepancy? It doesn't; it ignores it.

What difference does it make whether the wound was in the neck or the back? All the difference in the world, for if the bullet was fired from above and entered the back below the shoulder line on a downward trajectory, it could not possibly have exited through the throat wound, which was fully six inches *above* the entry wound. And if not, the "magic-bullet" theory — and with it the Warren Commission report — goes up in smoke, for if the throat wound was not an exit wound, then it was one of entry, and that necessitates a gunman firing from in front.

Among the dozen or so other jarring aspects of the *JAMA* interviews is the

fact that Dr. Humes is quoted as saying he believes the "magic-bullet" theory — that is, that a single bullet "struck Governor Connally immediately after exiting the president's throat."

But this is a complete reversal on his part. The pathologists had told the Warren Commission that they did *not* believe the single-bullet theory and had gone into some detail as to why they did not. Ought not reporters have noted and called attention to this reversal, and to the other discrepancies? One would think so, but none did.

This reluctance to question *JAMA*'s version of events was again in evidence when, a few days after the *JAMA* press conference, Jerrol Custer and Floyd Riebe, two Navy technicians who had taken the autopsy photos and x-rays at the Bethesda Naval Hospital, held their own press conference. They confirmed earlier allegations that the photos and x-rays sent to the Warren Commission were not the ones they had taken; they were, in Custer's words, "fake x-rays."

Those revelations, of course, undercut the "definitive" nature of the *JAMA* account. Readers of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* wouldn't have known that, however, since neither paper printed a word of the Custer-Riebe allegations. Nor did they cover the June 17 press conference in Washington, D.C., at which Dr. Cyril Wecht, a highly respected forensic specialist, took issue word by word with the *JAMA* interviews. They did not even print op-ed pieces or letters to the editor that challenged the *JAMA* accounts.

One can understand the press's impatience with the lingering assassination story: there are so many conspiracy theories out there that one instinctively wants to avoid the whole thing. It is harder to understand why some of the nation's leading papers should be so reluctant to ask obvious questions simply because a single source asserts that the case is now closed.

In the meantime, this lack of basic reportorial skepticism only plays into the hands of the wilder-eyed conspiracy buffs. "You see?" they say. "It's not only the FBI and the CIA and the AMA that are in on the conspiracy. The establishment press is in on it, too!"

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