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Mystery of JFK's 'Second Brain'

By Gary L. Aguilar

"Back and to the left, back and to the left."

Possibly, the most haunting scene from Oliver Stone's movie "JFK" was the repeated description by prosecutor Jim Garrison of President Kennedy's head jerking "back and to the left" as the fatal bullet struck on Nov. 22, 1963.

For millions of Americans, that image from the Zapruder film raised logical doubts about the Warren Commission's finding that Kennedy had been killed by "lone-gunman" Lee Harvey Oswald firing from the rear.

Common sense led many to believe that the impact of a bullet from a high-powered rifle would drive the victim's head away from the point of impact, rather than have the head snap back toward the bullet's path.

In other words, many Americans couldn't understand why a shot from the rear had not forced Kennedy's head forward. What they saw was the head going "back and to the left."

This layman's sense of physics supported a theory that the fatal shot -- by official count the third shot -- had come from the famous Grassy Knoll or another location in front of the president's car and, thus, suggested the presence of another assassin.

Numerous eyewitnesses also claimed that they heard one or more shots from in front of the limousine. The doctors who treated Kennedy at Parkland Hospital in Dallas added more support to the theory of a frontal shot. They believed the hole in Kennedy's throat was an entrance wound and that damage to the back of Kennedy's skull marked an obvious exit wound.

But federal authorities prevented a state autopsy by seizing Kennedy's body after he was pronounced dead. The body was rushed to Air Force One and returned to Washington. There, a

chaotic nighttime autopsy was performed at Bethesda Naval Hospital.

Experts would later bemoan the sloppiness of the crowded examination. "Where bungled autopsies are concerned, President Kennedy's is an exemplar," commented New York coroner Michael Baden when he reviewed the work for the House Select Committee on Assassinations in the 1970s.

Nevertheless, the official autopsy proved pivotal, since the Bethesda doctors contradicted the observations of the Parkland doctors.

The autopsy concluded that the hole in the throat was an exit wound from a non-fatal shot -- not an entrance wound -- and that the fatal bullet entered the bottom of Kennedy's head from behind and blasted off part of his skull as it exited from the right front.

The conclusion supported the case against Os., a.J. who was located in the Texas School Book Depository, behind the president's limousine.

But the autopsy itself might have been influenced by the investigative certainty already hardening around the initial reports on the case.

"Three shots were heard and the president fell forward," the autopsy report stated, drawing from the initial crime-scene accounts. The doctors seemed unaware that Kennedy's head actually had snapped backward.

The autopsy findings had their own ripple effect, forcing other judgments that were needed to make the facts conform to a "lone gunman" shooting from behind Kennedy's limousine.

There were bizarre tests with experts firing bullets from Oswald's gun into gelatin-filled skulls to see if they might jump toward the gun. Instead, they flew away from the gun.

One physicist fired bullets from a hunting rifle into melons and detected a slight reverse jet effect; that is, movement toward the rifle. But when another scientist used bullets and a rifle matching Oswald's, the reaction disappeared.

The most notorious corollary to the



President & Mrs. Kennedy: Dallas

autopsy findings was the "magic bullet" propounded by Warren Commission staff investigator Arlen Specter, now a U.S. senator.

Given the slow reloading time of Oswald's bolt-action rifle, Specter postulated a seemingly implausible path of the second shot, which inflicted the first wound piercing Kennedy's neck. The bullet then supposedly tore through Texas Gov. John Connally's body, smashing a rib, fracturing a wrist and penetrating his thigh.

There were always doubts about the "magic bullet," however. The Zapruder film showed a perplexing lag between Kennedy clutching his throat and Connally's reaction to having his wrist shattered.

Connally and his wife both rejected Specter's strained theory and insisted that Connally was hit by a different bullet than the one that pierced Kennedy's throat -- indicating a second gunman. (The first shot is believed to have missed the motorcade altogether, ricocheting off the street and slightly wounding a bystander.)

So, given the strange path of the "magic bullet" and the troubling backward head snap, the forensic judgment about the location of the head wound was crucial to support the "lone-gunman" solution to the case. The head wound was the hard evidence.

But with little press attention, that official verdict has come under serious new doubt following the release of documents by the Assassinations Records Review Board. The review ended on Sept. 30 after compiling some 4.5 million pages of government records.



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Yet, perhaps, the most startling discovery became public only on Nov. 9. Douglas Horne, the board's chief analyst for military records, reached a shocking conclusion: that a brain other than Kennedy's had been substituted in the autopsy photos.

In a 32-page report, Horne contended that a second brain was apparently used in one set of the photos to bolster the case for a shot from behind.

"I am 90 to 95 percent certain that the photographs in the [National] Archives are not of President Kennedy's brain," Horne told *The Washington Post* when asked about his report. "If they aren't, that can mean only one thing -- that there has been a cover-up of the medical evidence." [WP, Nov. 10, 1998]

According to Horne's findings, the second brain -- which showed an exit wound in the front -- allegedly replaced Kennedy's real brain -- which revealed much greater damage to the rear, consistent with an exit wound and thus evidence of a shot from the front.

Horne, a former Navy officer who also worked as a civilian employee at the Department of the Navy, noted that the second brain in the autopsy photos also revealed far less damage than Kennedy's brain would have sustained.

Horne's report cited the 1997 testimony of former FBI agent Francis X. O'Neill Jr., who was present for the Bethesda autopsy.

O'Neill recalled, "there was not too much of the brain left" and that "more than half of the brain was missing" when it was removed from Kennedy's skull and placed in a white jar.

O'Neill expressed surprise when shown the official autopsy photos depicting a brain with much less damage. "This looks almost like a complete brain," O'Neill stated in amazement.

O'Neill and funeral home employee Tom Robinson also told the review board that a large amount of tissue was missing from the posterior portion of the brain removed at the autopsy. That again would support the initial opinion of the Parkland doctors who saw evidence of a frontal shot.

The review board uncovered other evidence pointing to a later brain substitution. A 1965 document written by forensic pathologist, Pierre Finck, stated that the brain he saw at the autopsy

looked different from the brain he saw at a later supplementary exam.

But the review board could not conduct a new examination of Kennedy's brain because it disappeared sometime after the autopsy, one of the assassination's strangest mysteries.

According to some accounts, the brain was turned over to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy for burial with the dead president at Arlington National Cemetery.

But other witnesses testified that



Oswald & his bolt-action rifle.

pathologists retained it for further examination in late November or early December 1963 -- and that it disappeared later. Horne dated the brain's disappearance as sometime between April 26, 1965, and Oct. 31, 1966.

The records review board discovered other weaknesses in the autopsy record about Kennedy's wounds. As the review progressed, seven witnesses reported that autopsy photographs -- presumably including those of the real brain -- were missing.

John Stringer, the photographer of record at the autopsy and at a supplementary brain exam, was among those who disavowed the brain photographs that have survived in the official record.

Forensic pathologist Finck declared, too, that key photographs that he took of the internal and external aspects of Kennedy skull wound never made it into the official inventory.

Finck had argued the same point in

1978 when he appeared before the House Select Committee on Assassinations which was re-assessing the Kennedy evidence.

The damage to Kennedy's skull was a central feature of the House investigation as well.

The House panel listened to a phalanx of Parkland Hospital emergency physicians who reported that Kennedy's skull had suffered serious damage in the lower right rear -- technically known as the "occipital" region which is the part of the head that would rest on a pillow during sleep.

One account came from neurosurgeon Kemp Clark who examined Kennedy's skull wound before pronouncing him dead. At the time of the exam, Clark noted in writing that the wound was "in the occipital region of the skull. ... There was a large wound in the right occipito-parietal region from which profuse bleeding was occurring."

More than 20 other Parkland witnesses, many of them physicians, corroborated Clark's notations about severe damage to the right rear of Kennedy's skull.

The location of the most severe head wound was important to determine where a likely killer was positioned. If the major damage was to the rear of Kennedy's skull -- as the Dallas doctors said -- that would support a finding that the bullet entered from the front and exited through the rear, with the exit wound causing more severe damage than the entrance wound.

It is also possible that the bullet struck the side of Kennedy's head and blasted off a back section of the skull. In that case, there might not be an identifiable entry bullet hole. The photos which might have settled that dispute were among those missing.

In 1978, after re-hearing the conflicting evidence about the head wounds, the House assassinations panel sided with the Bethesda autopsy results -- and with the Warren Commission.

The existing skull photographs played a big role in the House decision, with House investigators reporting that all the Bethesda doctors had endorsed the primary head wound as being located in front of Kennedy's right ear.

"It appears more probable that the

observations of the Parkland doctors are incorrect," the House panel stated.

The House committee's conclusion, therefore, supported the notion that Oswald could have shot Kennedy from behind. That finding was a boost to Warren Commission defenders.

But the proof behind the House conclusion -- the interviews with witnesses to the Bethesda autopsy -- was kept sealed and thus unavailable for independent evaluation. That changed with the records review in the 1990s.

According to the newly released documents, the House committee misstated the opinions of autopsy witnesses. It is now clear that some Bethesda witnesses never ratified the photos showing the more severe wound in front of the right ear.

Indeed, some witnesses drew diagrams and made statements that supported the recollections of the Parkland doctors who said the more severe damage to Kennedy's skull was in the back.

In suppressed testimony, attending radiologist John Ebersole said "the back of the head was missing." FBI agent O'Neill asserted, "there was a massive wound in the right rear of the head."

Phillip C. Wehle, commanding officer of the military district in Washington, said, "the head wound was in the back of the head."

During the 1978 review, the full story about the conflicting autopsy testimony was not only kept from the public but from the House committee's forensic consultants. They were not given the actual testimony of Bethesda witnesses who described the severity of the rear head wound.

So, shielded from suspicions about the photos and denied direct testimony of autopsy witnesses, the House forensic panel reconfirmed the Warren Commission's key finding: that the autopsy fit with Oswald firing the fatal shot.

That conclusion seems far shakier today, with the disclosure about the "second brain" and the disappearance of many crucial autopsy photos.

It also remains unclear why the Bethesda autopsy doctors reached a conclusion about a shot from the rear if they, like the Parkland doctors, observed a more severe wound to the back of the head.

One possible answer is that the doctors were influenced by the early official information that the assassin was situated behind Kennedy. The autopsy might have been just the first step in making the "facts" fit with the fast-emerging "lone-gunman" theory.

To support that theory, the Bethesda doctors even drew a diagram which showed Kennedy hunched over in an exaggerated chin-downward position at the moment of the fatal shot. The position conformed with a shot fired from behind, entering the base of the skull and exiting the top right.

The problem with the diagram, however, was that it did not match Kennedy's actual posture. Based on Kennedy's real position, a shot from the book store depository could not have entered the base of his skull and exited the top of his head.

Though accepting the Warren Commission's shot-from-the-rear argument, the House committee still concluded that the president's death most likely resulted from a conspiracy involving more than one gunman.

For that judgment, the panel relied on other evidence, including a police dictabelt of noise during the chaotic assassination events.

Robert Blakey, chief of the House investigation, stated that he originally had accepted the Warren Commission's findings, but that he had seen too much evidence pointing to a conspiracy to remain a supporter.

"The final line" on the Kennedy assassination "is conspiracy," Blakey wrote. "On the issue of conspiracy, we have, I believe, drastically altered the verdict of history."

In the 1980s, however, President Reagan's Justice Department refused to reopen an official investigation of the Kennedy assassination. Some authors mounted well-received attempts to rebuild consensus for the lone-gunman conclusion, but public skepticism grew.

Then, in 1991, director Oliver Stone brought the issue to a head with his movie, "JFK." The fictionalized account featured the suspicions of a broad government conspiracy propounded by New Orleans prosecutor Jim Garrison, who was played by Kevin Costner.

The movie provoked howls of

protests from the Washington news media, even as a huge national audience flocked to see it. Despite the attacks, the movie gave new impetus to demands that classified documents from the case be opened to the public.

In response, Congress created the review board that began disgorging millions of pages of new material into the public record. The board, however, was not assigned to re-investigate the murder or to draw specific conclusions about the evidence.

Still, when the board shut down in September, the national news media was quick to point out that the new documents contained no clear evidence of a second gunman or a conspiracy to kill the president -- only revelations of bungling, hasty judgments and a cover-up of tangential secrets.

Then came release of the "second brain" analysis. Not only was the president's brain missing, but a government analyst had concluded that a second brain apparently had been substituted for it to falsify the autopsy records.

The disclosure had the potential to reshape the understanding of one of the century's most dramatic historical moments. But the major media's reaction to this breath-taking disclosure again was ho-hum.

The story of the "second brain" was assigned mostly to the inside pages, as in *The Washington Post* of Nov. 10. There was no serious assessment of what the analysis could mean to the official version of events and no strong demands for a follow-up.

But the alleged "second brain" cover-up adds to the suspicion that Kennedy's assassin might have escaped and that elements within the government obstructed the investigation.

Whatever the motives for a cover-up -- whether bureaucratic or more sinister reasons -- the key decisions seemed to have come from high levels of the U.S. military, the FBI and, later, the Warren Commission.

If the review board's work is followed up, one question should be: who might have introduced a "second brain" into the autopsy process -- and why? □

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