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November 26, 1978

THE BRONSON FILM: WHERE IT CAME FROM

At the opening two months ago of the House Select Committee's September hearings on the JFK assassination, Chairman Louis Stokes, JFK Subcommittee Chairman Richardson Preyer, and Chief Counsel G. Robert Blakey all spoke confidently of the thoroughness of the investigation whose outlines they were about to present. All the important documents, films, photos and witnesses, they said, had been found and fully examined to the extent that this was possible within the committee's limits. And especially this was true, they said, in regard to the physical evidence bearing on "the mechanics" of the shooting.

The world may therefore wonder why the Bronson film, possibly the most important new physical evidence to surface since the period of the crime itself, is only now being brought to light. And why the existence of this film should come as such a total jolt to the House Committee and its $5-million-dollar staff, when the FBI document that led citizen investigators to the Bronson film has been in the Select Committee's possession for over a year.

Here is how the Bronson film reached public awareness.

Earlier this year, more than a hundred thousand pages of formerly classified FBI documents on the JFK case were made public as a result of suits brought by Harold Weisberg, Paul Hoch and other critics under the Freedom of Information Act. These documents had reportedly already been made available to the Select Committee.

This deluge of previously unseen raw intelligence data confronted the critical community with a serious research burden. A few people could not read it all, at least not in the time period of the HSCA's work, and it seemed important that any new discoveries be put before the Committee's investigative machinery. Yet the informal community of assassination scholars and Warren Commission critics had no internal organization capable of coordinating the work of many readers widely separated from one another.

So an informal network of readers was set up in which the first readers identified and pulled all documents that were of any possible interest and passed them on to others for more careful scrutiny.

The document that began the search for the Bronson film was FBI memo 89-43-518, November 25, 1963, from SA Milton L. Newsome to SAC, Dallas FBI Field Office. It was first spotted and pulled by researcher Robert Ranftel working in the AIB's FBI-document reading project. Ranftel then sent this and several thousand other documents to researcher David Lifton in New York. Lifton then relayed the material to Paul Hoch in Berkeley for cataloging. Hoch attached a catalog number and identified documents of special technical interest to each of several downstream readers, to whom they were then forwarded. The FBI memo in question thus reached Sylvia Meagher in New York, who consulted with Jerry Policoff as to the best next step to take to track the lead down. Through Meagher and Policoff, the FBI memo reached reporter Earl Golz of the Dallas Morning News. Golz then developed the lead. He found Bronson (in Oklahoma), contacted and interviewed him, secured the actual film, and got it to the photolab of Robert Groden, whose optical-enhancement techniques may have revealed a previously unseen second figure in the sniper's nest. Except of course for newsman Golz and Groden (Groden has a consulting contract with the HSCA), none of these researchers were institutionally supported in their work. Each one--Ranftel, Lifton, Hoch, Meagher, Policoff--is an independent volunteer who does the work because of a belief in the importance of the issue and a concern for the country's welfare.

As will unfold over the next few months, more vital new information on the president's assassination is yet to come out. The Bronson film is not the last sensation. Indeed the whole case may indeed now be in the early stages of a full-blown eruption. The consequences of such an erruption are hard now to predict, mainly because so much will depend on the attitudes of thosein a position to help or to obstruct the continuing investigation. They alone can decide whether or not the continuing effort to expose the conspiracy responsible for the president's death will be carried out by a broad national front of interests uniting in a cause of simple truth and justice, or whether on the contrary, as is still the case, serious investigation will remain the task of a small group of independent citizen critics who must still fight tooth and nail for every new piece of information. If we can make solving the mystery of the president's murder a task for the government as well as for the people, instead of a task in which the two are set against each other, then the searching out of the truth could be a healing national venture. If we cannot, and the JFK case continues to reflect a smaller civil war, then the coming home of the truth will only bring us greater pain.

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