

LEVEL 1 - 1 OF 8 STORIES

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HEADLINE: Yet another JFK theory: an accident // Book suggests fatal shot came from Secret Service

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BODY:

Will the world accept the idea that John Kennedy's death was an unintentional homicide? That the bullet hitting him in the back of the skull came from the gun fired, inadvertently, by a Secret Service bodyguard riding in the car immediately behind the presidential limousine?

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Such is the thesis advanced by gun expert Howard Donahue in the new book "Mortal Error," by Bonar Menninger (St. Martin's Press; \$ 23.95). On logic - that is, consistency with the known facts in the case - Donahue's explanation is without rival.

The many other circulating theories, which have Lee Harvey Oswald firing three shots from a bolt-action rifle in less than six seconds, or which have various conspirators firing from various directions, have a huge flaw in common. They do not account for the ballistic evidence; Donahue does. An open-minded reader will find "Mortal Error" not just persuasive but highly persuasive.

But who still has an open mind? From filmmakers to other authors to site-visitors to fantasists generally, the public likes suspense. It likes heroes and villains. If there has to be a killing, then it wants murky-background assassination, not fumble-fingered accident. And the sum of Donahue's long, studious labor is lacking in all ideology, in all blame, in all meaning.

All meaning except that sometimes when the worst can happen, it will happen, at the worst possible time, in the worst possible way. And from the loaded gun comes, sometimes, the unexpected bullet.

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The public has, after all, considered Donahue's findings once before - and rejected them. In 1977, Harold A. Williams, editor of the old Sunday Baltimore

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Sun Magazine, started reading a Kennedy -in-Dallas story turned in by his senior staff writer, Ralph Reppert. Instead of one more time-wasting speculation, Reppert's account, based on interviews with Donahue, was both absorbing and credible. The story appeared May 1 and 8. The Associated Press compressed them into a single dispatch.

That was that. Readers soon put Donahue out of mind, preferring to think, luridly, about the grassy knoll, the high-level cabal. Interest now rose, now sank, but stayed high. Book followed book.

Menninger, then a Washington-area writer, heard a talk by Donahue and proposed turning his story into a book. The resulting manuscript profits from many small discoveries by Donahue since 1977.

The book, for the first time, names the Secret Service agent, whose last known address was in Maryland. The agent, it seems, went on afterward carrying out White House bodyguard assignments and later retired. Never commenting publicly on Kennedy -Dallas, he never denied lurching to his feet that noontime at the sound of gunfire from the nearby Texas Book Depository and, gun in hand, firing a shot.

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Now a denial may be forthcoming. The retired agent may enter the spotlight. Or someone from the media may find him. He may have convinced himself long ago that his gun, when it went off, was pointed upward, that its unusual projectile - designed to penetrate and explode, not penetrate and traverse like the one fired by Oswald - flew harmlessly off into the distance. It may also be that the Secret Service knows much more about the assassination than it has ever let on. Its reason for silence is obvious: For one of its own men to have shot the chief executive whose life he was there to protect would constitute the worst moment in the long record of the Secret Service.

Whatever follows, the public, as it assimilates this drastic rescaling of Nov. 22, 1963, will have one comfort to fall back on: Nothing about Oswald's status has changed. His presence, with that sniper's mail-order rifle, may still represent the fruition of the most elaborate, most sinister conspiracy since Rasputin was poisoned, shot and drowned.

Let everyone remember: Had the man in the window overhead not fired those two shots, one of them a miss, the other proven ballistically to have hit President Kennedy between neck and shoulder, exiting from the throat, the man in the left rear seat of the car directly behind, the man holding his own loaded weapon, would not have been impelled to struggle to his feet.

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James H. Bready, a retired editorial writer for the Baltimore Evening Sun, wrote this article for the Sun.

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