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A CRITICAL REVIEW OF AUTHOR ROBERT GRODEN'S THE KILLING OF A PRESIDENT

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Review Outline:

I. Factual Errors

II. Editing Criticisms

III. Subjective/Interpretative Criticisms

Summary Comments:

1. The book is a pretty good general overview of what likely happened in Dallas, in regard to shot direction and sequencing, and eyewitness reactions afterwards.
2. However, the book's discussion of the medical evidence is inadequate/incomplete. Groden does not recognize the historically documented Parkland-Bethesda divergence in location/size of the President's head wound(s).
3. Inadequate photo attribution and labeling leaves the reader (particularly knowledgeable readers) confused and frustrated on occasion; this is a particularly serious shortcoming in a book which is primarily a photographic compendium of assassination material.
4. The official documents reproduced are very good choices...particularly NSAMS 55, 263, and 273; the Warren Report executive session transcript excerpts, and the CIA "press guidance memo" are very good choices also.
5. OVERALL GRADE: B-.

I. FACTUAL ERRORS

(1) On page 9, Bill Moyers is described as "the President's press assistant...". He was actually Deputy Director of the Peace Corps under Sargent Shriver, and also served as the President's advance man for the Austin leg of the Texas trip. Additionally, Moyers was not the person who instructed that the limousine bubbletop not be used during the Dallas motorcade, as Groden claims.

(2) On page 138, Groden states that Guy Bannister was "found dead of a gunshot". All other known sources state that Guy Bannister died of a heart attack.

(3) Page 191 displays a beautiful enlargement of the Willis slide showing Black Dog Man behind the retaining wall on the grassy knoll. On page 192, Groden prints 2 photos of Hugh Betzner's Black Dog Man, but mistakenly states that the 2 Betzner photos are an "...enhancement of the same photo...", i.e., the Willis slide, which is simply and grossly untrue. It would have bolstered the case for Black Dog Man if Betzner's photo had been correctly attributed (i.e., independent verification of the same photographic subject). I wonder if Groden made this "error" on purpose? By that I mean I wonder whether Time-Life (still) owns the rights to the Betzner photo??? It was published by Time-Life as late as 1988 in the Life in Camelot book.

II. EDITING CRITICISMS

(1) Although many of Groden's Z-film frames are numbered, not all of the Zapruder film frame reproductions are identified by frame number. This is a surprising omission, since virtually every analysis of the Z-film refers in detail to specific frame numbers. The book would be a more precise (and therefore more useful) tool in the analysis of the Zapruder film if all frames shown throughout the book were labeled by frame number. In some cases, Z-film captions do not appear to match the action in the Z-film frame.

(2) Page 208 should specify that the photo on the right of the text is cropped, and that the photo below the text which is uncropped is an enlargement of the photo on the right.

(3) The caption on page 214 states that NSAM 273 reversed JFK's plan to withdraw troops from Vietnam, but the particular page of NSAM 273 reproduced by Groden on page 215 fails to show the text of the paragraph (#6) which has been interpreted by some as killing troop withdrawal. Groden and the editors should have reproduced the entire document, and might have also compared it to the original draft version...such a comparison would have shown that another section of the document is actually escalatory, when compared to the draft (specifically, covert actions against North Vietnam assisted by U.S. forces). Anyway, the unfortunate result of failure to include paragraph #6 is that on page 214 Groden makes a provocative statement about the subject of a photo exhibit on page 215, which is then unsupported by the incomplete text of the photo exhibit itself.

(4) The man-hole cover photo reproduced on page 41 is printed backwards, and does not show the bullet strike (so is therefore of no consequence). The color photo of the manhole cover of page 70 is the pertinent one showing the bullet strike, and is also the proof that the photo on page 41 is printed backwards.

(5) The TSBD color photos on pages 62 & 158 are not credited...is this view the Tom Dillard photo or the James Powell photo?

(6) See photos on pages 149 and 157...which man is Bernard Barker and which man is Henry Rothblatt? I am confused.

III. SUBJECTIVE/INTERPRETATIVE CRITICISMS

(1) Page 193 shows an enhanced/enlarged detail from the Mary Moorman polaroid photograph, then states that it "...also verifies the existence of Black Dog Man." This, however, is only one of several possible subjective interpretations. Other researchers (namely, Gary Mack and Jack White) have made a persuasive case on film (in The Men Who Killed Kennedy) that the shadowy figure in the Moorman enlargement on page 193 is really serviceman Gordon Arnold, who when photographed was filming the motorcade as Badge Man fires a shot past his left ear. This alternate explanation assumes that by this time Black Dog Man has ducked down behind the retaining wall.

(2) Page 30-31 shows an enlargement of the Altgens photo. Groden interprets the figure in the second floor window (beneath the fire escape) as an assassin. However, other researchers interpret this figure only as a bystander/witness, and point to photographic evidence of a rifle barrel in the 3rd floor window of the DAL-TEX building, directly above the second floor window cited by Groden. (I refer here to the window directly above the fire escape, as opposed to the window directly below it.) It would have been better if Groden had mentioned both possibilities, instead of lending "certainty" to his speculations on pages 31, and 184-185. Perhaps there were even assassins in both floors in the DAL-TEX!

(3) On page 40, the drawing indicates that the TAGUE curb strike came from DAL-TEX; on page 41, the text indicates it "could have come from the DAL-TEX or the Depository." Groden might have mentioned another, very likely possibility...that the TAGUE curb strike was a ricochet which first struck the cement base of the manhole cover on the south side of Elm Street...and that if so, this shot originated from the roof of the Dallas County Records Building.

(3) Groden's chapter on Medical Evidence (pages 73-89) is badly flawed because it fails to recognize a "before" and "after" (i.e., Parkland-Bethesda) dichotomy in the descriptions of the President's head wounds. I believe that such a dichotomy is now an established part of the historical record, regardless of what one thinks it means, or how it came about. Groden's excellent color photos (video and film stills) of witnesses describing a rear exit wound (head) on pages 86-88 are in conflict with the much more massive head wound shown in Groden's head sculpture on pages 80, 83 and 84. On the one hand, Groden wants to describe some autopsy photos as fake, but on the other hand, he wants to use the huge wound at the top of the head in other photos (pages 82, 84 and 85) to justify his head sculpture, even though no Dallas witness saw any damage to the top of the President's head. Groden never explains how he gets from the eyewitness photos (pages 86-88) to the larger head wound in his sculpture (pages 82, 84 and 85). In actuality, the eyewitness photos on pages 86-87 support the dichotomy in observations described by David Lifton, whom Groden indirectly debunks on page 88.

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