

Mr. Edwin McDowell  
New York Times  
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Dear Mr. McDowell,

I have just received copies of your review of the Lifton book and that of James Conaway in the Washington Star. You quote Professor Robert Blakey as describing the book as "just absurd." Rather than condemnation, this is praise. It is much worse.

In terms of scholarship, and carefully and deliberately disguised, there is nothing of any consequence that can be considered factual that was not published earlier, for the most part more than a decade ago. Virtually none of it is credited, to make it appear that Lifton is bringing these well-published facts to light for the first time. Conaway says, for example, that Lifton "examines every shred of evidence several times over and at the very least is a comprehensive narrative of assassination fact." He also is impressed with how good Lifton is "with data." Actually, he omits fact which disproves his commercialized conjectures and he examines no shred of evidence that is not well known and well published. The Dick Daring bit, attributed to the agent's desire, is designed to mask the unoriginal nature of all but his sick and totally untenable conjectures.

If among all those so-called experts you report that Macmillan hired there had been a single authentic subject expert rather than experts with no subject-matter knowledge, Macmillan would not have published the book with all the Hippodraming it engaged in.

There are several key points in the Lifton fabrications that can be examined with ease. He alleged a conspiracy on Air Force 1, which left the body unattended. All were at the LBJ swearing in. If you compare those who were at the swearing in with those on the plane you find a large number besides General "c"ugh who were not at the swearing in. Not mentioned by Lifton. Manchester's Death of a President is one source. The official and published White House pictures are another.

Lifton makes on that the body was kidnapped at Andrews Field, offloaded on the

opposite side. Under klieg lights? With some 3000 witnesses, none of whom saw it? All those spectators on the fence side of the field saw nothing but there was something to see?

Essential to his concoctions is the spiriting of the body into the "ethesda medical installation through the back gate. The most cursory check, which he does not report, would have disclosed that it was both locked and without a guard to open it.

Then there is all that hanky-panky with the body, alleged, with some fumbling over minor discrepancies in time. Lifton makes a big deal over the alleged kidnapping of the corpse between the time it got to the back door of the hospital, a little after 7:30 p.m., and the beginning of the cutting, at 8:00 or 8:15 p.m. But nowhere does he report the taking of the X-rays and those pictures which also had to be taken before there was any cutting. The reason is obvious: if Lifton had reported these well-known facts, that certain procedures were essential before any alteration of the body, he'd not have been able to perpetrate this monstrous ~~fake~~, he'd have had no theory to commercialize and his great efforts for all those years would have been exposed as what they are, an enormous nothingness.

The record is clear, uncontradicted and uncontradictable: those X-rays and pictures were taken, as they had to be. (What kind of forensic expert did Macmillan hire if he was not aware of this?) Lifton likewise is aware of this.

Of course there is much more that is very <sup>4</sup> wrong about the book. But if any one of the things I report above ~~is~~ true - and they are all true - then a great disservice has been done the nation and all the justified and legitimate criticism of <sup>the</sup> official account of the assassination is undermined.

Lifton's book is indistinguishable from a spook "black book" because it serves those ends and only those ends, save for making him a phoney Dick Daring.

Unfortunately, most of the press <sup>does</sup> ~~do~~ not make an effort to obtain independent confirmation of such works.

None of the reasons offered for withholding copies until publication is tenable.

The concerns that led to the legal expert are of libel, as Lifton himself complained to me.

There was no likelihood of any effort to get an injunction against publication because in his wholesale and unjustified defamations Lifton is careful to name no names. (He complained to me about Macmillan's insistence that he remove some and rephrase parts.)

It was all promotional and nothing else.

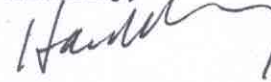
When you were told who had been offered the book in advance of publication Newsweek was omitted - apparently because they ~~also~~ <sup>have</sup> an in-house expert who recommended having nothing to do with the book.

As for that Lifton unique "discovery," an obvious error in an FBI report, I first read it when I "discovered" that record in the spring of 1966. I later published <sup>it</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>(as Lifton does not do)</sup> the entire record in facsimile and I am not alone in writing about <sup>the</sup> ~~an~~ alleged surgery long before Lifton. Some "discovery" indeed!

Lifton is not without conspiracy theories. He revised them until he could get published. In 1966 he told me that Brown & Root (buzzword for LBJ) had dug tunnels throughout Dealey Plaza and the shooting was from a papier-mache tree. In 1968 he told me that the conspirators, LBJ and Dean Rusk, met in secret throughout Texas. (He also had it with LBJ and Allen Dulles.) In December 1966 Esquire credited him with the tunnel vision.

I agree with Conaway - "Best Evidence is a disturbing book."

Sincerely,



Harold Weisberg

cc: James Conaway

Perhaps a few of the many examples of Lifton's goodness with data, as Conaway sees it, of how he "examines every shred of evidence several times over," can be helpful.

Lifton pretends that the President's brain was spirited away during the autopsy and that instead of a stillborn baby on a hospital cart, that was the disguised brain. Manchester times the passing of that cart, with the stillborn, at before any cutting began in the morgue and hence it could not have held any autopsy materials even if it had come from the morgue, as it hadn't.

To promulgate his case of a shell game with caskets, Lifton makes a big thing of his representation that there was no corpse of a colonel for another casket and seeks to support this by alleging that the colonel was not buried in Arlington, as had been reported. To make this appear to be credible he had an associate call Arlington cemetery and ask if a colonel had been buried the next day. He claims the response was that nobody was buried the next day. Inference, the stories were false.

The falsity is Lifton's. He fails to inform that the next day was a Saturday and that there were no burials at all at Arlington on Saturdays.

## New Book on John Kennedy Death Quietly Issued

By EDWIN McDOWELL

For several days, the Macmillan Publishing Company has been moving 75,000 copies of a new book, "Best Evidence," about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, into stores across the country without the publicity that publishers usually give to what they regard as an important book.

The author, David S. Lifton, is a 40-year-old New Yorker who graduated from the Cornell University School of Engineering Physics in 1962. He spent 15 years investigating the assassination and showed aspects of the work to 21 publishers before Macmillan gave him a \$10,000 advance for the book. The study advances a conspiracy theory that bullet wounds suffered by Mr. Kennedy were concealed by surgery.

According to Robert G. Blakey, formerly chief counsel of the special House assassinations committee, the Lifton theory is "just absurd." Mr.

Blakey, a University of Notre Dame law professor, said he and his staff pursued that path with their own forensic pathologist and interviewed the doctors in Texas and the Bethesda (Md.) Naval Hospital autopsy personnel. None of them, he said, lent support to Mr. Lifton's thesis.

Because of the controversial nature of the book, Macmillan says it has had the book examined for potential factual errors by in-house counsel, an outside law firm, a forensic pathologist and a neurosurgeon, all of whom the publisher declined to name. Such examinations are unusual in the book industry, where the prevailing attitude is that factual responsibility is primarily the author's.

The company also commissioned a 22-minute film interview with four of the witnesses quoted in the book, such as a funeral attendant-ambulance driver in Dallas and a Bethesda medical technician, explaining that Macmillan wanted to guard against the witnesses recanting later.

This is not first time a publisher has distributed a new book with no advance promotion. Last spring, for example, St. Martin's Press did so in distributing 80,000 copies of "Will: The Autobiography of G. Gordon Liddy," saying that it did so to preserve the news impact of the book and to obviate any potential restraining order.

### The First to Know

Albert B. Litewka, president of Macmillan's general-books division, who designed the Macmillan strategy, said the same reasons applied to Macmillan's methods. He said the main purpose was to keep people away from the witnesses and to forestall possible injunctions against publication of the book. He said that The New York Times, Time magazine and ABC News's "Good Morning America" were the first to be informed of the secret.

He conceded that the secrecy aspects were intended in part to call attention to the book. "But we wanted to have it thoroughly vetted," he said, "and since it was so big a book, we wanted to be sure we were on safe legal grounds, and that took a lot of time."

The book contends that President Kennedy's body was stolen, that surgery was performed on his wounds and that bullets were extracted from his body between the time he was shot in Dallas and the time the official autopsy was performed six hours later at the Naval medical center.

In addition, the author argues that there was a conspiracy to support the single-assassin theory, but other than saying that the Secret Service was involved, he does not say who else was or for what purpose.

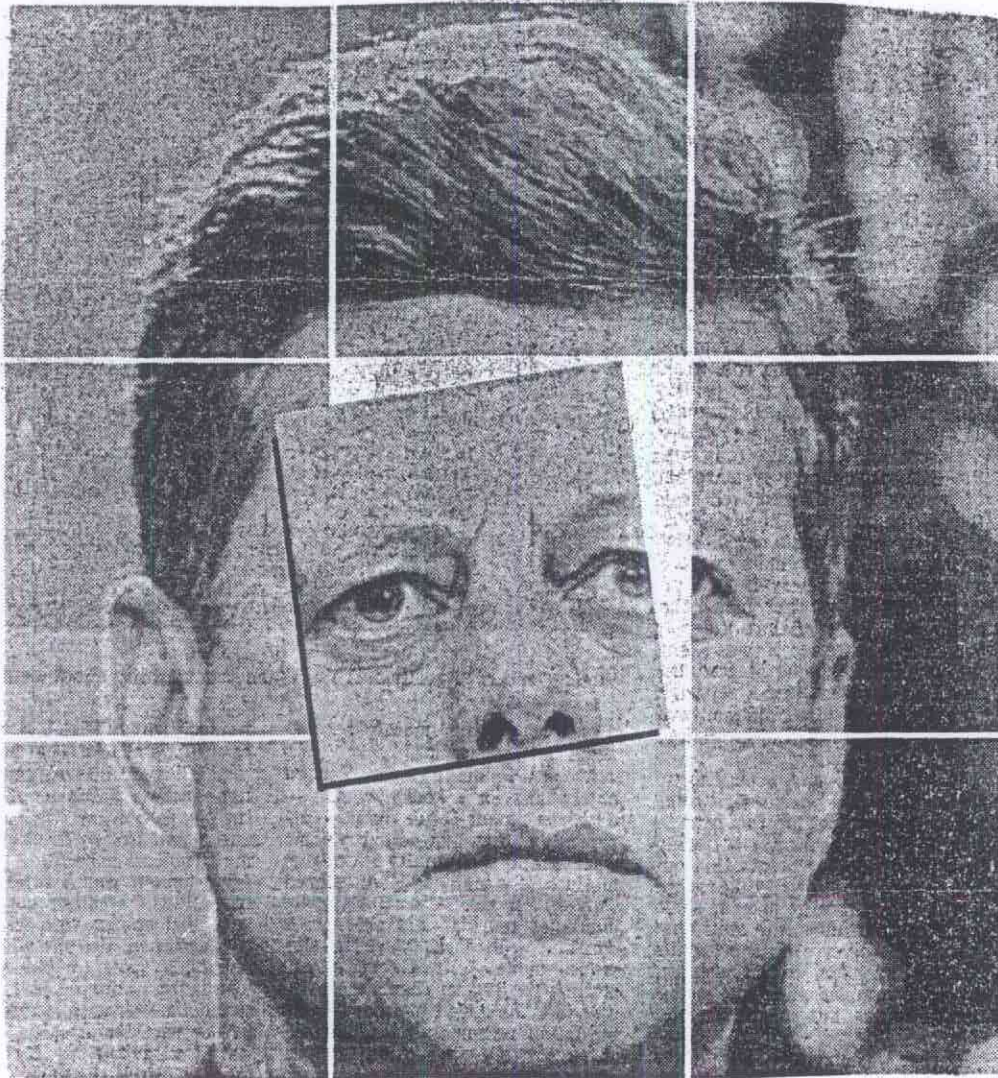
Among the measures Macmillan has taken to promote the book is the commissioning of a slide presentation for the Macmillan sales force that discusses the nature of the book but generally avoids specifics. Mr. Litewka showed the presentation several months ago to officials of the Book-of-the-Month Club, of which the book is a March featured alternate; the Literary Guild, and several book buyers. Book-store owners were invited to attend screenings at hotels around the country.

Mr. Litewka insists that his belief that the book will be a good seller cannot be construed as Macmillan's endorsement of Mr. Lifton's conclusions. "Given the complexity of the subject," he said, "no one can vouch for hundreds of thousands of facts and connections, nor can anybody be sure that new information won't come along to change it."

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The Washington Star

# Arts & Boo



## BOOK REVIEW

**BEST EVIDENCE: Disguise and Deception in the Assassination of John F. Kennedy.** By David S. Lipton. Macmillan. 747 pages. \$16.95.

By James Conaway

# JFK: A Shocking 'How Done It'

The murder of a president is a personal as well as an institutional disaster. No American is likely to forget the feelings of outrage, despair — and doubt — on first hearing the news of Nov. 22, 1963. Something was monumentally amiss in the country, and it went beyond the sight of a politician sprawled in his

wife's arms, or the subsequent photograph of a seedy Marxist pamphleteer gunned down in the basement of a Dallas jail.

"Conspiracy" became a metaphor for a broader cultural malaise; the facts have doggedly resisted attempts to prove and disprove its existence. But the assassination of John F. Kennedy spawned widespread skepticism, and a collective feeling of helplessness and anger. Many things have been attributed to it, from Vietnam to the rise of the Beatles.

America would probably be a different place today had Kennedy lived. A virulent strain of anti-establishment feeling already existed before President Johnson began to follow advice on Southeast Asia that his predecessor had resisted. Violent opposition to the war ushered in Nixon. Watergate led to the atonement represented by Carter, and his perceived ineptitude led to the accession of a stand-in for the popular notion of the American hero. But we have not had the real thing in the White House since Kennedy.

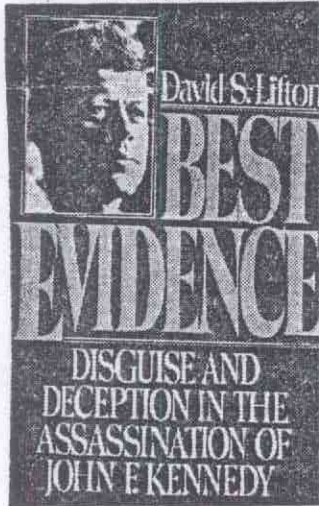
The assassination has been

kept alive, in part, by novels and exposes written in quantity about it. The latest of these is *Best Evidence*, a forensic brick remarkable both for its shocking thesis and for the revealed detail of an individual obsession. The author, David Lipton, spent 15 years on the project, supported by his parents and the conviction, based upon the Zapruder film, that Kennedy was shot from the front. "I had not approached the assassination as a political radical; what stuck in my craw was . . . a government pronouncement about the direction of the fatal shot that flew in the face of the laws of physics," Lipton writes.

He is either a paragon of concerned citizenry or a deluded zealot, depending upon one's point of view; he is certainly thorough. *Best Evidence* is a profix medical thriller that examines every shred of evidence several times over and serves at the very least as a comprehensive narrative of assassination fact and the

See JFK, D-10

*James Conaway is a journalist and novelist whose most recent book is World's End.*



# JFK: One More Conspiracy Theory

Continued From D-5

ory. Lifton decided that the Warren Commission was negligent, and that some members of government conspired in the murder of the president and the illegal transfer of power. Much of his evidence is compelling.

Lifton's theory, simply put — though nothing is arrived at simply in *Best Evidence* — is that Kennedy's body was surgically altered between the time it left Parkland Hospital in Dallas and the autopsy at the Bethesda Naval Hospital. He discovered testimony of FBI agents present that "surgery of the head area, namely, in the top of the skull" had already been performed, though not by the Texas doctors. "I was exhilarated, terrified," he writes. "I wanted to vomit."

Lifton believes that a bullet and bullet fragments were removed from the body and brain, that the head wound was enlarged and surgical wounds added to Kennedy's back, all to make it appear that he had been shot from behind. He designates a time aboard Air Force One when the corpse could have been removed from the casket, and cites the take-off of a helicopter from Andrews Air Force Base shortly after the casket — presumably empty — began its journey to the hospital by car.

He tells of terror and confusion among officials, of the use of a "decoy" casket, and of two different arrivals of the body for autopsy, once in a body-bag, once in a sheet as it had left Dallas. The first time, according to a witness, the cranium was empty; doctors who later performed the autopsy found that the brain did not have to be cut loose. Their observations about the wounds and the extent of damage were at odds with those of doctors and medical technicians in Dallas.

*Best Evidence* is a disturbing book. (I found myself choking up at a clinical description of the lesion in Kennedy's brain.) The ghoulishness and depravity of its implications will turn many against what is already an outlandish proposition. In my opinion, Lifton's theory is no more implausible than the contention that a single bullet killed the president, severely wounded John Connally and ended up in a pristine condition on a stretcher in a deserted hospital corridor.

The allure, if I may use that word, of Lifton's theory is that at a stroke it resolves most of the contradictory testimony of witnesses in Dallas and Bethesda, and obviates what has always been the primary objection to conspiracy — that it would have had to involve too many people, including members of the Warren Commission. But



Kennedy's auto, just after the shooting.

a few men with connivance in the executive branch could conceivably have done what Lifton contends.

Lifton is not as good with people as he is with data. A curious ambiguity surrounds his contacts with witnesses. Many deny both his findings and their role in them. The various investigators treat Lifton with what is apparently deference, but it is unclear whether they consider him a brilliant coeval, or a nut. I wondered why he did not press his conclusions more forcefully with members of the House Select Committee on Assassinations who never seemed to grasp their import.

*Best Evidence* is a "how done it" rather than a "who done it." It is obvious that members of the Secret Service would have had to be involved, for they had possession of the body and the evidence. Anyone who has ever seen the Secret Service operate knows of its autonomy, and the acquiescence of the powerful in its wishes; determined agents could have found a few unobserved moments, alone with the casket. If I were the president, I would ask my attorney general, or someone, to assign investigators with subpoena power to look at Secret Service records, and to ask why there occurred, as Lifton contends, a shake-up in the agency's command just prior to Kennedy's trip to Texas.

That is unlikely to happen. Lifton would undoubtedly describe our new administration as "Pattern One" — accepting of the official Warren Commission report and, by implication, the role of established authority over a dissident group of doubters; those who believe in the conspiratorial Pattern Two.

Pattern One may represent the truth, or an unconscious desire not to know it. If Oswald acted alone, then Kennedy's death was no one's fault. That's easier to live with than the alternative.

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