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PUBLISHING  
By Hilary Mills

## 'Evidence': Case Study In How to Sell a Book

The wounding of President Reagan last week rekindled memories of President Kennedy's assassination and the subsequent investigation by the Warren Commission, whose findings didn't resolve that case to many people's satisfaction. Scores of conspiracy-theory books on the Kennedy assassination have been published over the years with middling success; as it happens, a recent volume on the subject has gained unprecedented visibility and — in the eyes of some critics — notoriety.

The book is *Best Evidence: Disguise and Deception in the Assassination of John F. Kennedy*, by David S. Lifton. Ed Magnuson of Time magazine called it "preposterous." Thomas Powers in New York magazine wanted to know what Macmillan's excuse was for publishing it. James Conaway, in a more even-handed review in *The Washington Star*, called it an "outlandish proposition."

Despite this, the book — which concludes that John Kennedy's body was surgically altered between the time it left the Parkland Hospital in Dallas and the autopsy in Bethesda Naval Hospital, thus proving a conspiracy — has become a national best seller since its publication on Jan. 13. It is No. 5 on the New York Times best-seller list this week.

The success of the book, despite widespread negative critical reaction, may be a testament to the nation's interest. But it may also indicate that a house can actually create a best-seller — no matter what its content — if enough time, money and strategy are put into the publishing effort, and if the key players are willing to overcome personal cynicism about the project and play professionally with the rest of the team.

According to its in-house March newsletter, Macmillan knew early in the game that in order to publish Lifton's book successfully it would have to "... overcome a nearly universal reflexive visceral reaction to the book: 'Oh no! Not another crazy Kennedy book. They never sell.'"

The president of Macmillan Publishing, Jeremiah Kaplan, signed the book three years ago — after a number of other publishers turned it down — not because he necessarily agreed with Lifton's theory, but because Lifton's personal story, an obsessive odyssey of 15 years tracking the facts, "sets the book apart from other books on the assassination. I thought it would sell."

In addition, the house's new president of general books, Albert Litewka, formerly a group officer for W. Grace and a newcomer to publish-

ing, thought the book "broke new ground" when he read it last summer. Litewka decided to set up a carefully coordinated editorial, production, marketing and advertising campaign. It would be a campaign, says the newsletter, "that might have invested more time and effort into *Best Evidence* than any other book in Macmillan's recent trade history" — and a six-figure advertising and promotion budget to boot.

Six months before actively promoting the book, Litewka had prepared detailed plans for *Best Evidence*, and team meetings began to take place as early as last summer. Most of the key people in the team were also new: Marketing Director Charlie Hayward, Publicity Director Diane Rowe and Sales Director Bob Gales. All agreed the book should be shrouded in secrecy because lawyers were checking the manuscript right up to the last moment before it went to the printer. There was danger the book might be discredited in the press, and it seemed to be a good marketing strategy to surround the book with an air of secrecy.

The plan was to follow this republication secrecy with an immediate, concentrated burst of attention in the media, backed by a coordinated advertising campaign. But in order to build up advance sales with booksellers, Macmillan thought up a unique promotion device: a slide show and tape presentation that offered some information about the book but not too much, and later a 22-minute film that featured Lifton's key witnesses and a more detailed look at their evidence.

Armed with this slide show, Macmillan approached book clubs last summer, and the Book-of-the-Month Club took *Best Evidence* as an alternate for January after seeing the show and reading a confidential copy of the manuscript. This gave Sales Director Bob Gales and Regional Manager Norman Adell something to work with, but as Adell points out, the sales force spent a lot of time breaking down buyer resistance.

"Frankly," says Adell, "I was skeptical too at the beginning and so was the force. But Litewka and George Walsh [editor-in-chief] sold us on it and the slide show clinched it. The sales force really put their reputations on the line over this book." As it turned out, 56,000 copies were ordered in advance.

Publicity then got into the act, and Diane Rowe decided to treat the book as news. "This wasn't routine book publicity," she says, "this was a news break." Only selected media saw the manuscript before the Jan. 13 publication, and all were under embargo not to release anything before that date.

Time magazine broke its story on Jan. 12, calling Lifton's theory "impossible to accept as reality," and on Jan. 13 a press conference was set up in Washington, for which almost no one showed up. While Lifton was speaking in Washington, copies of the book were being delivered by messenger to major reviewers and other journalists in 18 cities across the country.

By Feb. 2, the first printing of 75,000 copies was sold out, 25,000 more were ordered, and then an-

other 17,500 in early March.

*Best Evidence* has indeed become a best-seller, but the final irony is that during the reprint auction held on March 3, no paperback house was willing to come near the "substantial six-figure" price Macmillan was looking for. In fact, most of them

didn't bid at all, which is unusual for an auction of a best-selling hardback. As a result, Macmillan will probably publish the book itself in a mass-market paperback edition — no doubt with a coordinated editorial, production, marketing and advertising campaign.