THE TRUTH ABOUT THE ASSASSINATION

By CHARLES ROBERTS

Warren Report Critics Spread Hazy Doubts

(Second in a series of six articles excerpted from "The Truth About the Assassination", newly-published study by an eyewitness reporter of the controversial questions surrounding the murder of President Kennedy.)

When the Warren Commission presented its 888-page report to President Johnson on September 24, 1964, most Americans heaved a huge, collective sigh of relief. For ten months a panel of seven distinguished citizens, headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren, had studied the most shocking crime within living memory — and now its verdict was in.

After viewing 3154 exhibits and studying the testimony of 552 witnesses — culled from some 26,550 interviews by the FBI and Secret Service — the Commission has found that "the shots which killed President Kennedy and wounded Governor Connally (of Texas) were fired by Lee Harvey Oswald."

It had concluded that Oswald also killed Dallas Police Patrolman J. D. Tippit. But it had found "no evidence that either Lee Harvey Oswald or Jack Ruby was part of any conspiracy, domestic or foreign, to assassinate President Kennedy."

CONFIDENCE BOLSTERED

To a nation that had been exposed for nearly a year to rumors that Oswald was "framed," that Oswald and Ruby were mere pawns in a vast conspiracy, the calm and reasoned Warren Commission Report was a comforting volume. It was reassuring to be told by that respected and impartial panel that President Kennedy's mindless murder was the work of an unbalanced misfit rather than a squad of hired killers. The country might be sick — and not just from grief — but at least it had not spawned a whole apparatus of plotters, Left Wing or Right Wing, audacious enough to murder a President.

Confidence in the findings of the Commission was bolstered two months later with the publication of its Hearings — the 26 volumes of testimony and exhibits on which it based its conclusions. In those 54 pounds of bluebound books there was ample evidence, not only of Oswald's guilt, but of the fact the Commission had not merely tried him in absentia. Functioning as a fact-finding body rather than a court of law (a distinction that worked to its advantage but which its critics refuse to acknowledge) it explored more theories, tracked down more leads, and listened to more rambling witnesses, expert and illiterate, than any body of its kind in history.

But two years later the climate of American opinion had undergone a dramatic and disquieting change. By the fall of 1966, one reputable pollster found that nearly two thirds of all Americans doubted the Commission's conclusion that Oswald acted alone.

ANTI-WARREN BOOKS

The doubt was attributed partly to a sense of frustration that Oswald was never brought to justice — a mixed sense of guilt and unease about Dallas. But it was attributed in larger measure to a new phenomenon in American literature — a growing five-foot shelf of anti-Warren books.

Beginning with Thomas Buchanan's 'Who Killed Kennedy?', printed in Britain even before the Warren Commission submitted its report, a dozen books had been published, each rejecting the Commission'a findings and most posing different theories of the assassination. Suddenly a whole army of amateur sleuths had taken upon itself, some out of honest misgivings, others for fun and profit, the task of demolishing the Commission and its conclusions.

The new theories posed ranged in improbability from Buchanan's (a Texas oil millionaire decreed the deaths of Kennedy and Khrushchev to gain control of the world oil market) to Edward Jay Epstein's mild-sounding conclusion in his book 'Inquest' ("there is a strong case that Oswald could not have acted alone."). In between were such works as 'The Oswald Affair,' by Leo Sauvage, a Frenchman who believes Kennedy was killed by

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Critics Spread Doubts

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Southern racists, and 'Whitewash,' by Harold Weisberg, a Maryland poultry farmer who apparently disbelieves everything in the Warren Report but the page numbers.

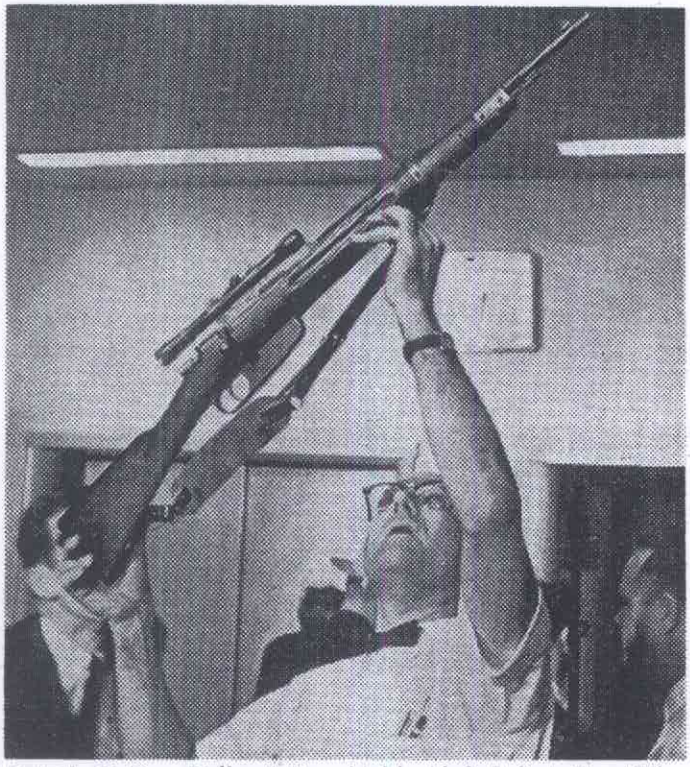
Several authors held that Oswald was framed, a fall guy for reactionary interests (including variously FBI, CIA and Army types). One insisted that the assassin, still unknown, fired from a manhole (since filled in) on the grassy knoll and escaped through a storm sewer. Others theorized that Kennedy was killed by a stranger impersonating Oswald. A Texas group maintained the assassin fired from a papier-mache tree, built especially for the occasion and removed afterward. A Texas editor, Penn Jones, Jr., weighed in with a volume called 'Forgive My Grief' attributing 18 "mysterious" deaths that followed Kennedy's murder to a nationwide plot to wipe out persons connected in any way with the assassination.

BIG CONSPIRACY

The best-seller of them all was Mark Lane's 'Rush to Judgment,' a book that embraces almost every theory contrary to the Warren Commission findings. Lane, who sought unsuccessfully to defend Oswald before the Warren Commission, insists (or sometimes only implies): That Kennedy was killed by two or more gunmen as part of a conspiracy involving both Ruby and Tippit; that Oswald was framed by means of "planted" evidence; that Navy doctors, Dallas policemen, and almost everyone connected with the case joined in the conspiracy; and that the Warren Commission deliberately suppressed and distorted evidence to fit a preconceived verdict that Oswald was the lone assassin.

The fact remains, however, that while many theories have been advanced, no new evidence that could possibly alter any findings of the Warren Commission has been produced by anyone since the Commission closed its books in 1964.

The idea that President Kennedy was shot by an assassin firing from the grassy knoll ahead and to the right of his car, rather than from a window of the Texas School Book Depository, is remarkable in two ways: (1) It is the favorite theory among all those advanced by critics of the Warren Commission Report, and



Det. J. C. Day, Dallas Police, Holds Aloft Bolt-Action Rifle With Telescopic Sight Used in JFK Assassination
(AP Wirephoto)

(2) it has the least evidence to support it, evidence that is based entirely on the testimony of eyewitnesses.

Shortly after the assassination, early theorists who had never viewed Dealey Plaza, such as Thomas Buchanan, zeroed in on the triple underpass, directly ahead of Kennedy's car, as the most likely spot from which an assassin (other than Oswald) might have attempted an ambush. (The triple underpass is a viaduct through which three streets—Commerce, Main, and Elm—pass under the railroad tracks leading into Dallas' Union Station. Kennedy's car was proceeding toward the underpass on Elm Street when he was shot.

UNDERPASS THEORY

In their eagerness to prove Oswald was innocent, or at least that there was a conspiracy involving other gunmen, they were encouraged, no doubt, by those early newspaper reports that there was a hole in the windshield of the President's car and that a doctor at Parkland had said there was an entrance in the President's throat.

It was, to them, an open and shut case: A mysterious killer had fired from atop the railroad overpass (or from under it), and the only thing holding up a solution of the crime was the fact that Texas officials—and perhaps federal officials, too — were part of a murder conspiracy. Thus, there was a "triple underpass theory"—to which Mark Lane himself once subscribed — before there was a "grassy knoll theory."

The triple underpass became untenable as the perch for a gunman, even in literature, as evidence began to accumulate. None of the approximately 15 men on the overpass, including two policemen, had seen an assassin there. Neither had anyone in the approachinng motorcade. When the "hole" in the winshield of the President's car turned out to be nick on the inside of the glass, the notion that a shot had been fired from directly ahead of the President collapsed. And so did the underpass theory.

But out of a deposition—and later the testimony—of one man who witnessed the tragedy from the overpass a new theory was hatched. Or, as one of the critics of the Warren Report, Edward Jay Epstein, put it, the "theoreticians then moved slightly over to the right and crept onto the grassy knoll."

SAD JOURNEY

One of the few facts about the Dallas tragedy undisputed by critics of the Warren Commission Report is that President Kennedy was nearly dead when his car arrived at Parkland Hospital.

As the President's blood pressure failed and a cardiac monitor indicated his heart was failing, Dr. Malcolm Perry, attending staff surgeon, and Dr. William Kemp Clark, chief of neurosurgery, administered external heart massage. This, too, failed. At about 1 p. m. Dr. Clark pronounced the President dead.

Following his death, and a bitter dispute between White House and local officials over whether his body could be removed from Texas without an inquest, the President's body was wrapped in a hospital bedsheet, placed in a bronze casket, and returned to Washington aboard Air Force One—a sad journey that, like most things connected with Kennedy's death, later became a matter of controversy.

The fact that the President died in Texas, was removed without an inquest, and the autopsy to determine the cause of his death was conducted at the Bethesda, (Md.) Naval Hospital 1200 miles away, laid the foundation for a needless misunderstanding as to the the nature of his wounds. There has never been any doubt as to which wound proved fatal. The neck wound was tolerable; the shot that tore his brain and exploded the right side of his skull was insurvivable. But the fact that the Texas doctors who first treated the President took no part in the autopsy and, in fact, were not consulted until the following morning by the Bethesda autopsy team, created an atmosphere of confusion.

SEEDS OF DOUBT

The confusion was compounded by the fact that two of the Texas doctors held a press conference at Parkland Hospital, barely an hour after the President's death and long before they fully comprehended what had happened to the President. It was further complicated by the fact that the three patholoists who conducted the autopsy at Bethesda began their task unaware there had been a bullet hole in the President's throat before the tracheotomy was performed. It was then prolonged by the refusal of the Navy and the Warren Commission to make public the autopsy findings until the Warren Commission submitted its report nearly a year later.

Although the communications gap between the Texas and Bethesda doctors was finally closed, and although the confusion in the public's mind about Kennedy's wounds was amply explained — and, to most reasonable men, dispelled — by the Warren Commission Report, critics of the Commission have found the Dallas-Bethesda mixup a fertile field in which to sow seeds of doubt.

Because the Texas doctors spoke first and spoke, as they later admitted, without having seen two bullet holes in the President's body—because they spoke before any scientific effort had been made to analyze the President's wounds—some Warren critics have pounced upon their early, offhand remarks in an effort to prove that one or both of the bullets that struck Kennedy were fired from some place other than the Texas School Book Depository. This would either exonerate Oswald or establish that he had an accomplice. To do this the critics have tried hardest to prove that the wound in President Kennedy's throat was an entrance wound.

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