10

The Commission's Conclusions

As Commissioner Ford put it, "Conclusions were the work of the Commission."[1] The staff conducted the investigation and drafted the report, but in the final analysis the Commission had to reach the conclusions and take the responsibility for them. There were five main conclusions.

First, the Commission concluded that the shots came from the Texas School Book Depository. This conclusion was based on medical evidence which showed that at least two of the shots came from the general direction of the Depository; on the testimony of eyewitnesses who saw a rifle in the sixth-floor window of the Depository; and on the fact that the murder weapon and three cartridge cases were found on the sixth floor of the Depository.[2] Although this evidence in itself did

not exclude the possibility that other shots came from a different source, it constituted ample proof that shots had come from the Depository.

The second conclusion concerned the sequence of events and presented a difficult problem. It will be recalled that the film of the assassination showed that the President and Governor Connally were hit less than two seconds apart, and that rifle tests showed that it was physically impossible for the murder weapon to be accurately fired twice within this period of time. Thus, either both men were hit by the same bullet or there had to be two assassins. Norman Redlich, Arlen Specter, and other members of the staff took the position that the Report had to conclude that both men were hit by the same bullet.[3] There was, however, no substantial evidence which supported this contention, and there was evidence that all but precluded the possibility that both men had been hit by the same bullet.[4]

The Commission was thus confronted with a dilemma. If it disregarded the evidence that Connally could not have been hit by the same bullet that hit Kennedy, and if it concluded that both men were hit by the same bullet, the credibility of the entire Report might be jeopardized. If, however, the Commission concluded that both men were hit by separate bullets, the single-assassin theory would be untenable in terms of the established evidence and assumptions.

In the "spectrum of opinion" that existed on this question, Ford said he was closest to the position that both men were hit by the same bullet, and Senator Russell was furthest away.[5] In fact, Russell reportedly said that he would not sign a Report which concluded that both men were hit by the same bullet.[6] Senator Cooper and Representative Boggs tended to agree with Russell's position. Cooper said, "I, too, objected to such a conclusion; there was no evidence to show

both men were hit by the same bullet."[7] Boggs said, "I had strong doubts about it [the single-bullet theory]," and he added that he felt the question was never resolved.[8]

Both Dulles and McCloy said that they believed the most reasonable explanation of the assassination was that both men were hit by the same bullet.[9] The Commission was thus more or less evenly split on this question, with Ford, Dulles, and McCloy tending toward the conclusion that both men were hit by the same bullet, and Russell, Cooper, and Boggs tending toward the conclusion that both men were hit by separate bullets.

McCloy said that it was of vital importance to have a unanimous Report. He proposed, as a compromise, stating merely that there was evidence that both men were hit by the same bullet but that, in view of other evidence, the Commission could not decide on the probability of this.[10]

There then followed what was described as "the battle of the adjectives."[11] Ford wanted to state that there was "compelling" evidence that both men were hit by the same bullet, while Russell wanted to state merely that there was only "credible" evidence.[12] McCloy finally suggested that the adjective "persuasive" be used, and this word was agreed upon.[13] The Report states:

> Although it is not necessary to any essential findings of the Commission to determine just which shot hit Governor Connally, there is very persuasive evidence from the experts to indicate that the same bullet which pierced the President's throat also caused Governor Connally's wounds. However, Governor Connally's testimony and certain other factors have given rise to some difference of opinion as to this probability but there is no question in the mind of any member of the Commission that all the shots which caused the President's and Governor Connally's wounds were fired from the sixth floor window of the Texas School Book Depository.[14]

The question was thus left open by the Commission.

Third, the Commission concluded that the assassin was Lee Harvey Oswald. This conclusion was based on seven subconclusions: (1) the murder weapon belonged to Oswald; (2) Oswald carried the weapon into the Depository; (3) at the time of the assassination Oswald was at the window from which the shots were fired; (4) the murder weapon was found in the Depository after the assassination; (5) Oswald possessed enough proficiency with a rifle to have committed the assassination; (6) Oswald lied to the police; and (7) Oswald had attempted to kill General Walker.[15]

The most compelling of these subconclusions was that Oswald's rifle was used in the assassination. This fact, together with evidence that Oswald had had the opportunity to commit the assassination, made for a strong case against Oswald. The only other possibility is that another person used Oswald's rifle, but Oswald's subsequent actions—leaving the scene, shooting a policeman, and resisting arrest—certainly were not the actions of an innocent person.

The other subconclusions, however, were based on less substantial evidence. Subconclusion (2)—that Oswald carried the rifle into the Depository—was no more than a plausible assumption;[16] (3)—Oswald's presence at the window—was supported only by "probative" evidence (e.g., Brennan's identification); (4)—the presence of the rifle in the building—merely reinforced (1); (5)—Oswald's rifle capabilities—was based on extremely dubious evidence;[17] (6)—that Oswald lied to the police—had little value as evidence since, purportedly, no record of Oswald's interrogation statements was kept; and (7)—Oswald's attempt to kill Walker—was based mainly on the testimony of Marina Oswald.