Agony of history: Sunday, 1964

Sunday Bulletin

Justice Warren made secret visit to Dallas

The talk on the Washington-to-Dallas executive jet was desultory: each of the some ten passengers was pretty much wrapped up in his own thoughts this Sunday morning of June 7, 1964; the U.S. Government plane, out of Andrews Air Force Base, was speeding towards one of the more critical reenactments in the Warren Commission inquiry into the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Aboard, in this page of history coming to light now with the new congressional probe into the killing, was Chief Justice Earl Warren and a half dozen or so of his investigators, including Philadelphia DA-to-be Arlen Specter.

Warren, an avid baseball fan, occasionally roused himself from his reverie to josh Specter about the faltering Phillies, just then blowing the National League lead to Warren's homestate San Francisco Giants.

But otherwise, there was a general sense of quiet reflection, a feeling of finally "putting it all together," the so-called "single bullet" theory.

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Sifting through voluminous Q&A, test firings into animal carcasses, cadaver hands from the Baltimore morgue, and heads, necks and chest made out of gelatin, goat flesh and hide, Specter had concluded Mr. Kennedy and Texas Governor John B. Connally had been hit with the same

Adrian Lee

6.5 mm bullet from Lee Harvey Oswald's Mannlicher-Carcano rifle.

The bullet that had plunged into the back of Mr. Kennedy's neck had emerged from his throat (nicking his necktie knot), to smash into Connally's back, out his chest and into his right wrist.

If, in the reenactment to come at the Texas School Book Depository, the single-bullet theory didn't satisfy Earl Warren, then the credibility of the "second assassin" theory, already preoccupying the Sunday supplements, would be considerably enhanced.

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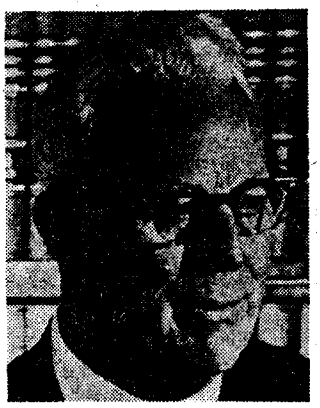
Even to indicate the mere possibility that Mr. Kennedy and Governor Connally had been hit with separate bullets, instead of the lone bullet of Specter's theory, was to suggest one of two alternatives:

To get all the shots in, Oswald would have had to have started firing before



Chief Justice Warren
. . . a sense of humility.

the President's limousine emerged into clear view from under the thick leafy canopy of the live oak in front of the Book Depository — quite unlikely for a marksman of Oswald's obvious competence and patience.

Either that, or else not only Oswald but an accomplice was at work that day. Which, of course, conjures up all the images Warren report critics have tried to project — a second gunner firing from the "overpass . . . the grassy knoll . . ." The whole skeptical, confused bit.

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So with a sense of history in the making, the jet set down in Dallas, amid considerable secrecy: Warren wanted no publicity; he wanted, simply, to stand where Oswald had stood, to see for himself the oak tree, to visualize the presidential limousine emerging at 11.2 miles per hour, from under the foliage, to imagine the clear, uncluttered target Mr. Kennedy and Governor Connally presented, the President in back, Connally just in front of him, in a jump seat.

Specter had been allotted five minutes to explain his single-bullet theory to Warren — there was a good deal else to do that day: retrace Oswald's flight from the Book Depository (this with Warren stopwatch in hand, the media still unaware he had left Washington); take a statement from Jack Ruby, in jail, which finally alerted the media.

But first, downstairs at the Book Depository, the weekend maintenance crew broke out a big carton of "Rolling Readers," a dice-like learning game in which kids cast seven small plastic blocks and try to make a sentence out of the words on top. Oswald had put a carton of like size and contents to murderous use: he had dragged it to the 6th floor window above as an arm rest, to steady his aim, shortly before he opened fire.

The maintenance workers wanted Chief Justice Warren to autograph them. And he did, one boxed set for each worker, then, methodically, one for each of his investigators.

The trivia of history perhaps; but, said Specter the other day, it suggested not only Warren's patience but a sense of humility. For them all, Chief Justice Warren and the workers crowding around for his autograph, the assassination had been a common agony, a shared experience. For all the power and prestige of Mr. Warren's position as head of a branch of government coequal with Mr. Kennedy's, the workers' sense of shock and loss could be no less than his own.

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All this unhurriedly, with his investigators, Specter among them, chafing, a bit fidgety: the day was half gone and they hadn't even made the window yet . . . Warren had turned thumbs down on a week in Dallas, even a weekend; one day was enough for it all: "You young lawyers take forever to get something done; it's why you fret and worry and go bald early. Look at me —" This with a gesture of his own thick white hair.

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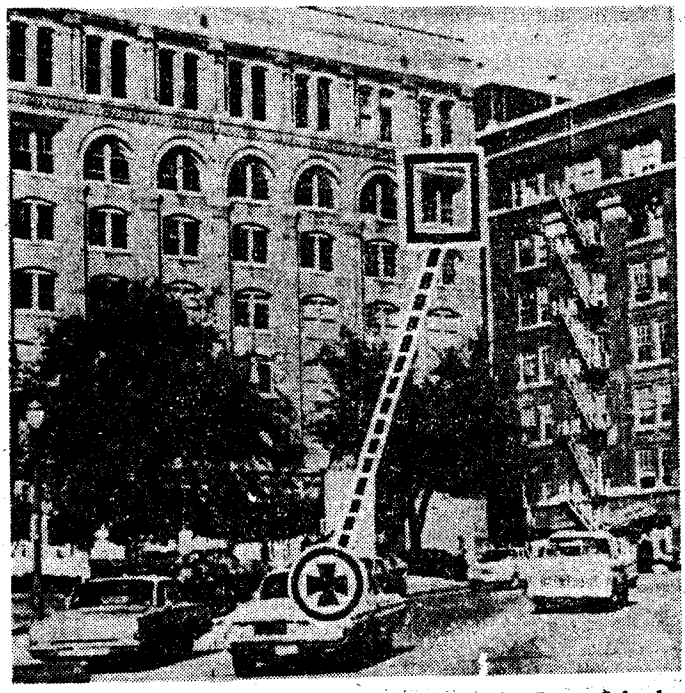

LEE HARVEY OSWALD'S line of fire from the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas.

Finally, the last Rolling Reader signed, Warren turned to Specter: OK, upstairs. He didn't ask a question once while they were at the window. Muzzle velocities, the Q&A with the Secret Service, the FBI ballisticians, the test firings, the angle of entry into Kennedy's neck coinciding with the angle of exit from Connally's chest. Standing behind Warren, Specter ran through it all. Still not a question as Warren gazed down Oswald's line of sight. The allotted five minutes stretched to eight . . . ten . . .

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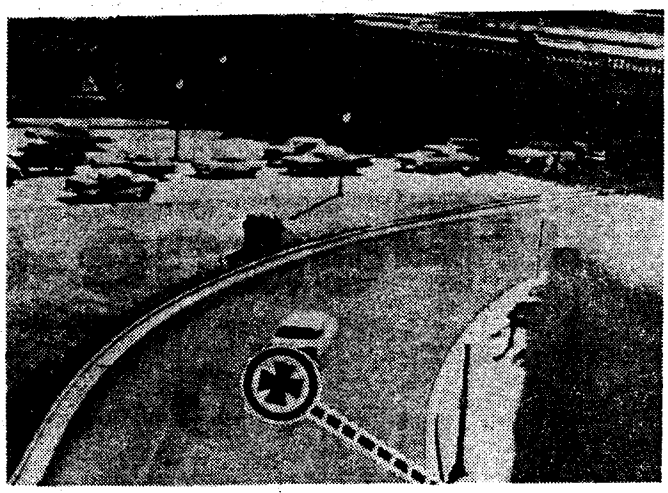
Had Warren already reached the decision he was later to announce? The single bullet theory was sound. If so, what was he thinking of as he stared silently to where the President's limousine had materialized from under the oak-leaf canopy . . . the crowds, the hurrahs, the tumult, the split second before the first shot?

Adrian Lee's opinion column also appears on Tuesday and Thursday.



CAR ON ROADWAY is at approximate spot where bullet from Oswald's rifle struck President Kennedy.

Senator Soaper says

It appears to us that debates will never replace other spectator sports since nobody is ever physically injured or thrown out of the game.

However either candidate feels about it, think of unemployment among the columnists if Washington were to ban lust.