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The JFK conspiracy theory

By Shanin Specter

The House Assassinations Committee was charged with informing the American public, once and for all, of the facts of the murders of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Yet, it appears their report will only exacerbate the very problems the committee sought to eradicate: lingering public concern and doubt over these watershed events of the troubling 1960s and mistrust in the ability of the government to find an answer to the argument over who killed John Kennedy.

The big story of the House report is the conclusion that President Kennedy was "probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy." What is the evidence for this conclusion? The only hard evidence of a second gunman is the results of a complex acoustics study.

The study was conducted on a scratchy recording that was made when a police motorcycle whose microphone was stuck open transmitted the sounds of the assassination to the police radio tape at the Dallas police headquarters. The study concluded that of the dozens of impulses on the tape, four of these impulses represent shots fired at the presidential limousine: the first, second and fourth from Oswald's lair and the third from the grassy knoll. From this, the conspiracy conclusion was born.

Although the acoustics study is a scientifically-derived body of data, there is little precedence indicating how to contextualize this arcane evidence in light of the other evidence. That is, without the benefit of the application of similar studies in the past, how do we evaluate its possible defects and judge its relative weight among all the evidence?

The other evidence is sharply inconsistent with the acoustics study. Neither a second gunman nor his gun was seen by the more than 100 persons in position to see. His identity or possible involvement with Oswald has never been discovered.

No known impact was made by the bullet upon the presidential limou-

sine, its occupants or anyone or anything else, even though its target was only about 25 yards away. Although this series of non-entities does not prove there was no second gunman, it does put into perspective the quantity of evidence of a conspiracy.

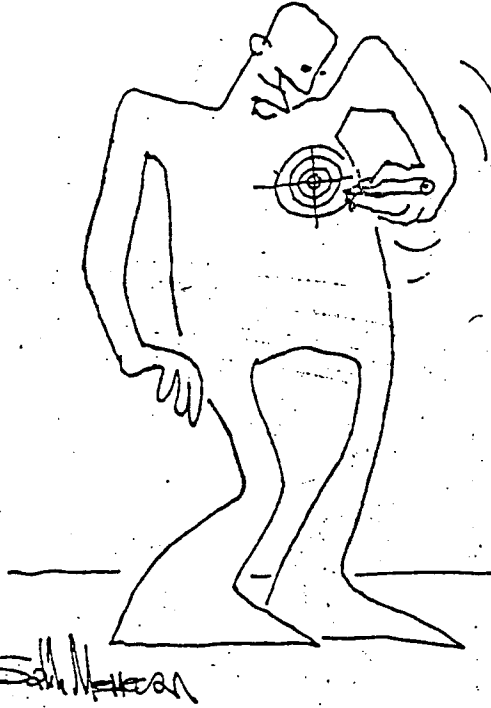
It is interesting to note that the evidence that Oswald acted alone is so strong that the House Committee's draft final report, written before the testimony of the acoustics experts, stated that "there is insufficient evidence to find there was a conspiracy."

While the evidence of a conspiracy is tenuous, the evidence that Oswald was the assassin is irrefutable. To the

committee's credit, they conducted a series of ballistic, photographic, forensic and trajectory studies that prove that President Kennedy and Governor Connally were struck by exactly two bullets, both fired by Oswald.

It should be noted that these studies were precisely those sought by critics of the lone assassin viewpoint. Thus, though the committee's conclusion was "conspiracy," the preponderance of its findings, including affirmation of the single-bullet theory, are consistent with the Warren Commission's findings.

Furthermore, the term "conspiracy" has unwarranted ominous impli-



y doesn't hold up

cations. The term conspiracy has widely varying meanings, most of which connote an institutionally based effort. For this, there is no evidence. While collusion to break the law is, in legal terms, a conspiracy, the purpose of the House Assassinations Committee was to inform us on the facts of the assassination. By the use of the term conspiracy, the committee does a disservice to the understanding of the American public.

Beyond the need to place the acoustics evidence in proper perspective, there is a real question as to whether the evidence is dependable. While the acoustics experts were asked only to isolate which impulses on the tape were shots and whether their origin was the grassy knoll or the Texas School Book Depository, their conclusions imply a scenario of the assassination. That is, the tape provides a timepiece for the assassination.

The acoustics analysis holds that the second shot occurred 1.66 seconds after the first, the third 5.83 seconds after the second and fourth .82 seconds after the third.

Because of the Zapruder film, a motion picture of the assassination, was running at 18.3 frames per second and because President Kennedy was struck in the head by the fourth shot in frame 313, one can count backward and closely approximate the moments in the film when the other shots were fired.

If the acoustics experts were wrong about which impulses were shots, they stand a good chance of being wrong in stating which impulses were shots and from where they originated. Thus, if we are to accept this study — and with it, the conspiracy conclusion — then we must accept the scenario of the assassination it necessarily implies. There are three major problems with this scenario.

First, the committee has concluded that the second shot was the one that passed through both President Kennedy and Governor Connally. Although the evidence is irrefutable that one bullet did do this, it could not have been fired at this time. According to the acoustics study, the second shot occurred 6.65 seconds before the fourth.

A little multiplication and subtraction yields the conclusion that the second shot should have impacted at or near frame 191. A look at frame 191 and those surrounding it shows that Governor Connally's wrist was well above his chest, almost to his neckline, at this moment. But, the bullet exited approximately 4 inches below his right nipple and entered his wrist travelling downward. Fifteen or so frames later, Connally's wrist is substantially lower. It is at this point, or somewhat later, when Connally is obliterated from view by a sign, that it is likely he was shot.

Second, the acoustics study concludes that two shots were fired from the area of Oswald's perch within 1.66 seconds of each other. Unless

there were two gunmen firing from the window (a frighteningly complicating concept for which there is no evidence), we must conclude that Oswald fired those two shots.

FBI expert testimony to the Warren Commission indicated that Oswald's rifle could not be reaimed and re-fired in less than 2.3 seconds. Speaking before the House Assassinations Committee on Dec. 29, 1978, Chief Counsel Blakey said: "Preliminary tests are sufficient to cast into serious doubt the previously established time and intervals." That evening, the committee reached its conclusion. Blakey believed that tests not yet conducted would demonstrate that Oswald could have fired twice with a hit on the second shot within 1.66 seconds.

However, in an internal memorandum to committee members dated March 22, 1979, Blakey stated that of six test shooters, including "four expert marksmen," firing a total of 35 shells, "no one achieved this degree of proficiency." Thus, not only does it appear unlikely that Oswald fired twice with a hit on the second shot within 1.66 seconds, it may be humanly impossible to do so. If Oswald did not fire those shots, then the impulses thought to be shots were not shots. This simply negates the credibility of the acoustics study and its conclusions.

Third, a reconstruction in 1964 by the Warren Commission showed that between frames 166 and 210 there was an oak tree whose branches and leaves obscured Oswald's view of his target, except for a brief opening at frames 185-186. As was noted above, the acoustics study places the second shot at frame 191.

Thus, the acoustics study necessarily implies that Oswald fired blindly and hit his target. This illogical behavior is magnified when one considers that Oswald had an unimpeded stretch of approximately 100 yards and several seconds in which to kill the President, beginning a mere second later.

It seems clear that the necessary implications of the acoustics study are not consistent with a reasonable scenario of the assassination of President Kennedy. Thus, it appears doubtful that the acoustics experts were correct in concluding that a shot originated from the grassy knoll.

Why did the committee conclude there was a conspiracy? Congressman Robert Edgar, a dissenter from the conclusion, may have put it best when he said: "We did a great job up to the last moment, when in our focus on the acoustics we failed to give proper weight to other findings of the investigation."

(Shanin Specter assisted Congressman Robert Edgar in his work on the House Assassinations Committee. He is the son of Arlen Specter, the former Philadelphia District Attorney and counsel to the Warren Commission, which investigated the Kennedy assassination.)