

# Los Angeles Times Magazine

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## COVER:

Gene Autry at his new Western Heritage Museum in Griffith Park. Photograph by Michael Garland / Onyx. Story on Page 8.

## FEATURES

### TRUE TO THE WEST

BY GROVER LEWIS

The story of the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum has been, as the Western ballad goes, a long, long trail a-winding. The "Singing Cowboy," media baron and California Angels owner, now 81, first envisioned a Western attraction on the site of Melody Ranch, where many of his movies and television shows were shot. That dream was destroyed in 1962 when much of the Placerita Canyon ranch burned to the ground. But from its ashes has risen a \$34-million, 140,000-square-foot museum that will open Tuesday in Griffith Park. Its eight galleries, with exhibits designed by a Disney special-effects team, house 16,000 artifacts, making it a world-class showcase for Western lore.

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### HIS J.F.K. OBSESSION

BY LEE GREEN

In 1966, on a whim, David Lifton attended a lecture about the John F. Kennedy assassination. His casual interest in the subject grew into a preoccupation, then an obsession that pushed him to write a 1981 best seller, "Best Evidence." Lifton has paid for his fixation: He gave up his education and job to devote himself to proving a sinister and incredible murder-conspiracy theory.

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### PRIVATE LIVES: HAVE YOURSELF A MAIL-ORDER CHRISTMAS

BY MARGO KAUFMAN

Adventures in Catalogueland, where newly discovered cravings can be satisfied toll-free, 24 hours a day, at the drop of a credit card number.

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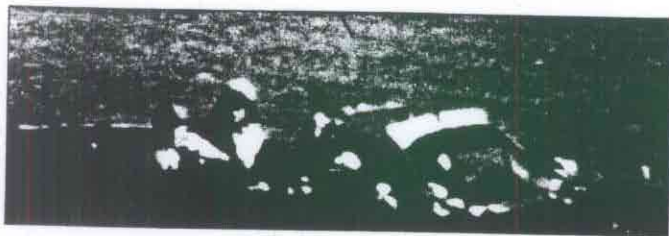
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# His J.F.K. Obsession

For David Lifton, the Assassination  
Is a Labyrinth Without End

BY LEE GREEN



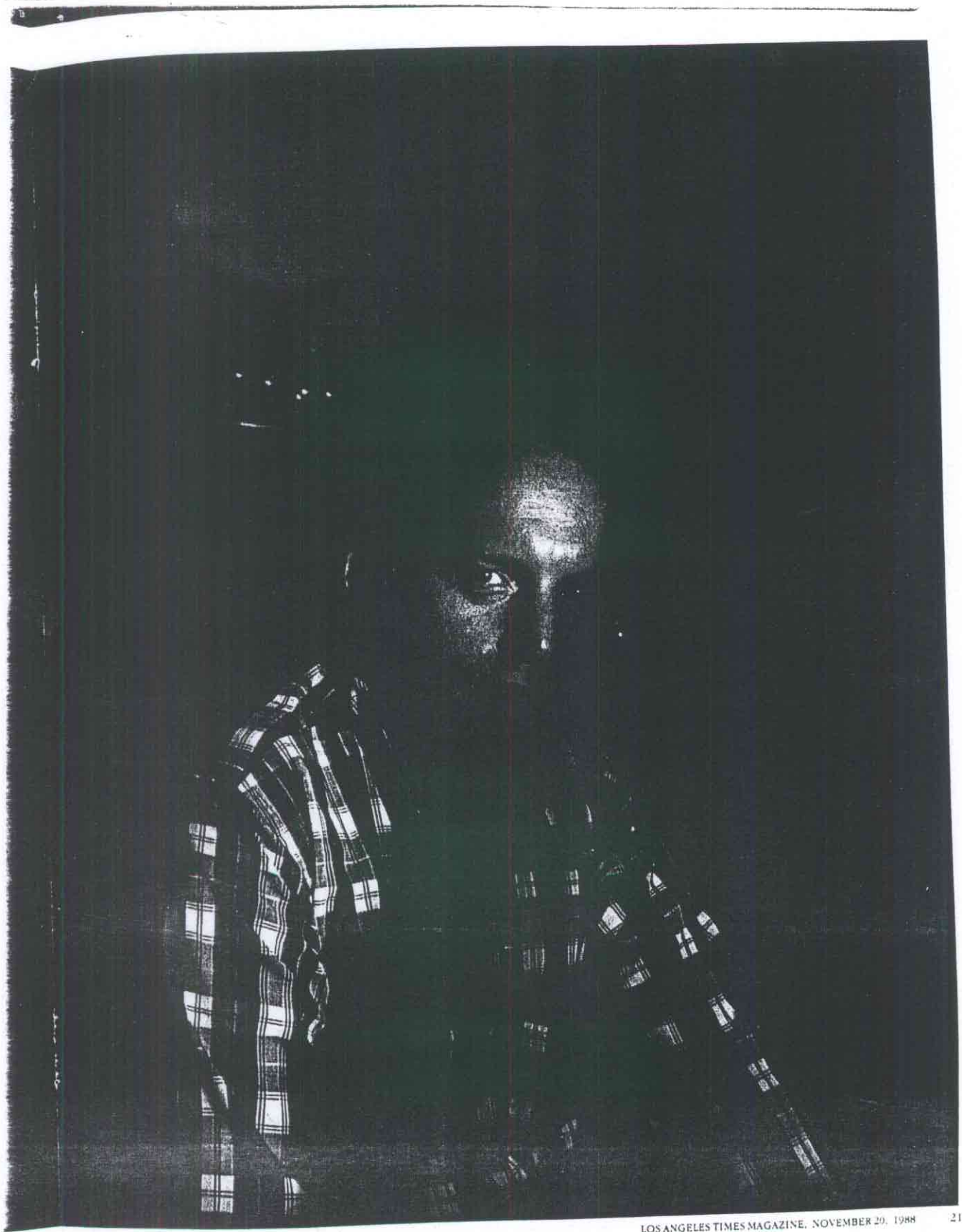
ON A SUNDAY morning in February, 1971, David Lifton sat quietly on a stainless-steel autopsy table in the morgue at Bethesda Naval Hospital near Washington. Could this be the table on which John F. Kennedy had lain just six hours after he had been shot in Dallas? Lifton wondered about that as he glanced around the antiseptic, windowless room and tried to envision the grim proceedings that occurred there the night of Nov. 22, 1963.

His interest was far beyond ghoulish curiosity. For almost six years, he had painstakingly pursued a personal inquiry into the Dallas tragedy and its chaotic aftermath, and now the inquiry had led him to Bethesda. It had also led him to a startling conclusion. Lifton had decided that the Kennedy autopsy report, a document crucial to the Warren Commission ruling that

the President had been murdered by a lone gunman firing a high-powered rifle from behind and above the motorcade, was a work of fiction. History was skewed here, Lifton thought as he sat on the perforated table top. "I had the feeling I was sitting atop a chessboard on which, seven years earlier, a crucial game had been played," he later wrote.

Kennedy's death had changed his life. Lifton's research became, eventually, the 1981 best seller, "Best Evidence," a personal account of his investigation into the J.F.K. assassination. And to this day, the assassination is the centerpiece of his existence. This month he presented his iconoclastic views to college audi-

*Lifton has spent years scrutinizing evidence such as the Zapruder film, above, eyewitness accounts and autopsy reports.*





ences in New York, Alabama, Ohio, Texas and Oklahoma. On Tuesday, the 25th anniversary of the tragedy, he will speak in California at Cal Poly Pomona. Of course, Lifton is not alone in espousing a conspiracy theory. Americans have recently been exposed to a spate of television assassination specials, from Jack Anderson's "American Expose: Who Killed J.F.K.?" to a "Nova" probe titled "Who Shot President Kennedy?" The

on the night the Kennedy autopsy was performed behind those closed doors at Bethesda, Lifton went dancing.

Then, on Lifton's 25th birthday, almost a year after the assassination, purely on a whim, he attended a lecture by Mark Lane, an outspoken lawyer who argued forcefully against the government's version of how Kennedy met his fate. The lecture piqued Lifton's interest. Casual interest grew into preoccupation, then metamor-

You can't just have these thoughts, your files, your research and your concepts. You have to tackle the process of writing every day."

Lifton tied himself to an IBM Selectric for a year and produced a manuscript that proved unmarketable. New York literary agent Peter Shepherd advised him to rewrite the book in the first person so that it would read less like a legal brief. Reluctantly, Lifton agreed, and he moved into his parents' house in Rockaway Beach, N.Y., to undertake the task. It wasn't lost on him that while other people were raising families and pursuing careers, there he was, sitting in the room he grew up in, writing a book that might never see print. "That was a very, very bleak period," he says.

Even after Lifton completed the revision and received a contract from Macmillan in 1978, he kept researching and revising. "No, David," Shepherd said, "there has to be a rational relationship between means and ends. Look at all the years you've spent on this. You must publish. You can't just keep on going with this investigation, and Macmillan is not going to publish a 1,200-page book." Albert Litewka, Macmillan's president of general books between 1980 and 1982, quipped that Lifton would probably be making corrections at the bookstores. By the time "Best Evidence" finally became a tangible reality, Lifton was a fixture at Macmillan's New York offices, shepherding the book with proprietary license usually reserved for literary luminaries.

IT'S NOT AS THOUGH Lifton intended to let his initial curiosity become a labyrinthine quest. In late 1966, when he quit his job to pursue his investigation full time, he envisioned devoting maybe half a year to it and had no plans to write a book. But as the 25th anniversary of the assassination approaches, the Warren Commission critic-cum-author is more immersed in the case than ever. He has written a screenplay based on his book, he is writing a second book expanding on his assassination theory (his first book has been reissued and includes previously unpublished autopsy photographs), and he is producing a home-video documentary based on "Best Evidence."

The thing is, Lifton is a sucker for

## As the 25th anniversary of the assassination approaches, Lifton is more immersed in the case than ever.

Assassination Archives and Research Center in Washington lists more than 100 books whose theses are at odds with Warren Commission conclusions. But Lifton's findings speak to him in a way that they have spoken to no one else. Lifton, now 49 and never married, living in a small West Los Angeles apartment, has invested virtually his entire adult life in a postulation that fairly begs to be rejected if not ridiculed. For instance, Andrew Purdy, an attorney for the House Select Committee on Assassinations that investigated the J.F.K. and Martin Luther King Jr. slayings in the '70s, listened to an explanation of Lifton's theory at a party several years ago and exclaimed, "Now that's what I call a conspiracy!"

There is no accounting for the vicissitudes of life that send us on tangents unforeseen. In 1963, Lifton was a 24-year-old UCLA student working on an advance degree in engineering. He wanted to be part of Kennedy's plan to put a man on the moon, and he worked nights as a computer engineer at North American Aviation, then the prime contractor for the Apollo space program. Politics did not interest him;

phosed into obsession. And for the better part of the past 23 years, Lifton has devoted himself to figuring out exactly what happened during those six shattering seconds in Dallas.

IN 1966, IN his budding zeal for investigating the assassination, Lifton neglected his studies at UCLA and was dismissed. He quit his aerospace job and asked his parents for financial support, a request that he would renew several times. Thus began Lifton's immersion into the assassination. Making ends meet with some free-lance technical writing, a few magazine articles and odd jobs, Lifton embarked on a mission that would necessarily crowd out life's other options: He never got his Ph.D., and America went to the moon without him.

His longtime friend Patricia Lambert, a writer and editor, acted as Lifton's conscience. In the summer of 1975, nearly 10 years into his odyssey, he still hadn't written a word. "It was still in the form of file material, conclusions, memos, but not a manuscript," he recalls. He says that Lambert, who was later hired by Macmillan Publishing to help edit "Best Evidence," would tell him: "David, you have to create a manuscript.

*Lee Green's last story for this magazine was "The Pioneer Ultra-Athletes."*



puzzles. He loves a good mystery. As a kid growing up in Rockaway Beach, he read every Erle Stanley Gardner mystery he could lay his hands on. There is something about his mind, a compulsion to analyze to exhaustion, as anyone who has read the 755 pages of "Best Evidence" can attest. "If you say 'Good morning' to him," an acquaintance says, "he'll say, 'Is it? What exactly do you mean by good? And how can we be sure it's morning?'"

But he has merely examined the evidence, he will tell you, and followed it wherever it has led. Unfortunately for Lifton, it has led him to an elaborate theory that, in the view of many, defies credibility. His thesis:

Conflicting physical and circumstantial evidence notwithstanding, Lee Harvey Oswald was a patsy who never fired a shot.

The real shooter, or shooters, he says, fired not from Oswald's so-called sniper's nest on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, *behind* the motorcade, but from the grassy knoll *in front of* the motorcade.

Lifton also believes that Kennedy's body was stolen from its casket while on board Air Force One and secreted away somewhere, probably in the baggage compartment, for the trip to Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington. By the time the body arrived at Bethesda for the autopsy, it had been surgically altered to create a false representation of the crime, a forensic forgery. Specifically, bullets had been removed and wounds added or changed to indicate that Kennedy had been shot from above and behind—or where Oswald was located. Moreover, he says, bullets or bullet fragments from Oswald's rifle were planted at the Dallas hospital and in the President's limousine. Lifton's plot also includes a theory that Jacqueline Kennedy escorted a casket to Bethesda that was, unbeknownst to her, empty, while J.F.K.'s body arrived at the hospital in a different casket.

As for who was involved in this enormously complicated scheme and why—well, that's a little trickier. In "Best Evidence," Lifton implicates the Secret Service and makes clear his belief that at least some of the conspiracy's perpetrators were in the upper echelons of the federal government—probably, Lifton says, the executive branch. But he mentions no names,

## Lifton's Paper Chase

**S**INCE THE 1981 publication of his book "Best Evidence," David Lifton has continued to probe and write about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Though many readers and critics find his Byzantine conspiracy theory difficult to accept, no one can fault him for lack of research. The 49-year-old historian is nothing if not meticulous and thorough.

"Best Evidence" was the product of 15 years of research and writing—not to be confused with, say, two years of research and writing and 13 years of staring out a window. The paper chase was staggering, starting with the Warren Report and its accompanying 13,000-page, 26-volume assemblage of evidence and documentary exhibits. Lifton also obtained copies of the Warren Commission's working papers—interoffice memos and letters to investigative agencies. In search of witnesses and leads that the commission may have overlooked, he studied microfilm of all major American newspapers published from Nov. 22 through Nov. 25, 1963.

To construct a chronological flow chart of the events in Dallas and at Bethesda Naval Hospital, he analyzed the original, time-stamped AP and UPI wire copy and a tape of the Dallas Police Department's radio transmissions. He obtained thousands of pages of FBI and Secret Service reports and combed them for any shred of enlightening evidence. That he might better deal with the complexities and technical nature of the data, he consulted neurosurgeons, forensic pathologists and lawyers. He wore a path to UCLA's libraries to study "Gray's Anatomy," "Grant's Atlas of Anatomy," "Forensic Neuropathology," by Cyril B. Courville, the Armed Forces autopsy manual and a bat-

tery of legal texts on evidence.

There were even more ambitious treks. Twice Lifton journeyed to the National Archives in Washington, on one occasion spending six weeks listening to tapes of all Dallas radio news reports that were broadcast during the tragic weekend. "I relived the event in extraordinary detail," Lifton remembers. "I was deeply affected by those tapes, more so than when the assassination actually occurred."

Twice he visited Bethesda. He went to Dallas and retraced the motorcade route. He went to Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Texas and Washington to interview witnesses.

At the heart of Lifton's research have been his telephone interviews. He has questioned, among others, 10 of the 13 physicians and nurses known to have attended Kennedy in Dallas, two of the three Bethesda autopsy doctors, one of the FBI agents who wrote the "surgery to the head" autopsy report, autopsy medical technicians, autopsy photographers, at least five Secret Service agents and all eight members of the casket team that received Kennedy at Bethesda. Many of the individuals he interviewed were never questioned by the Warren Commission, the FBI or any other government investigators.

Lifton's fastidious diligence paid off with a factually ironclad manuscript that withstood uncommon scrutiny at Macmillan Publishing. "We were more rigorous with that book than with any book that we published in my tenure," says Albert Litewka, Macmillan's president of general books when "Best Evidence" was published. "To my knowledge, there never was one fact refuted publicly or privately. Nobody's ever come forward and disputed a word of it."

—L.G.



suggests no motives.

"Best Evidence" rose as high as No. 4 on the New York Times best-seller list. Macmillan distributed more than 100,000 copies in hardback. Dell's first of seven printings in paperback was 205,000. Lifton received more than 1,000 letters from admirers of the book, and a couple in Hawaii even flew him to the islands and put him up at their home for a week so that they could explore his notions further. The

Angeles Times Book Review was: Who really cares? Getting to the truth of the matter won't resurrect J.F.K.

**T**HE DOOR OF David Lifton's office in a commercial high-rise in West Los Angeles doesn't bear his name. "I don't want people around here to know who I am or what I'm doing," he explains in a tone that is, appropriately enough, conspiratorial.

## Lifton was perplexed by seeming irrelevancies in the Warren Report—Ruby's mother's dental charts, for instance.

same year the book was published, a Harris survey indicated that 80% of the American people believed that Kennedy's assassination was the result of a conspiracy.

There were also plenty of favorable reviews. The Orlando Sentinel Star went so far as to compare the book in stature and import to William L. Shirer's "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich." Other reviewers characterized Lifton's work as "meticulously detailed," "methodical and well-documented" and "a challenge to the Warren Commission." By and large, however, major-media critics were less charitable, damning the book for being "a shocking mishmash," "preposterous" and a "violation of every law of common sense and reason." CBS' "60 Minutes," ABC's "20/20" and NBC's "First Camera" all examined Lifton's thesis privately but declined to broadcast their findings. Time magazine ran a noncommittal two-page story, but Lester Bernstein, then editor of Newsweek, demurred, explaining, "Everything we turned up seemed to undercut the thesis." Harrison E. Salisbury ripped the book in the New York Times Book Review. The predominant theme of Kenneth John Atchity's critique of "Best Evidence" in the Los

Lifton is an intense man whose physique is that of a scholar, not an athlete, a man who has spent his life indoors, squinting at miles of microfilm and thousands of documents.

He was 35 pounds leaner and had more hair on his head in May, 1965, when he stood on Hollywood Boulevard one day and showed passers-by a photograph of the assassination scene and asked them to describe what they saw. The photograph was taken by an onlooker named Mary Moorman at the instant that the fatal shot struck Kennedy's head. Lifton saw it in a book, obtained the negative from the publisher and had an enlargement made. Like the character in Michelangelo Antonioni's "Blowup," he was transfixed by what he saw, or what he thought he saw, in the background: two mysterious forms on the grassy knoll, one crouching behind a wall, the other standing and holding something. A rifle?

As he honed his investigative skills, Lifton learned to distrust photographic enlargements as evidence. But in the days when he was absorbed in the Moorman photograph, just a year and a half after the assassination, he was haunted by the picture's eerie images. He knew that dozens of witnesses in

Dealey Plaza on Nov. 22, 1963, thought the shots had come from somewhere in front of the motorcade, from the grassy knoll. He knew also that a home movie shot by a spectator named Abraham Zapruder reinforced the notion that Kennedy had been struck from the front, not from behind, where Oswald was perched. "For reasons I still do not understand," he reminisced in "Best Evidence," "I found it impossible simply to shrug, say 'So what?' and go on with my life." Lifton took his income-tax refund to a Westwood bookstore, plunked down \$76 and bought the published records of the Warren Commission investigation—26 volumes containing 13,000 pages of testimony and documentary exhibits. "That's when it began," says Lifton, like Alice recalling her first step in Wonderland.

Like the scientist he was trained to be, Lifton approached the Warren Commission source material with thoroughness. He and other Warren Commission "critics," as the commission's detractors came to be known, lamented the fact that the 26 volumes inexplicably lacked an index, but Lifton whittled away at the mountain of material with unbridled purpose and anticipation.

Gradually it became apparent to him that the Warren Commission's conclusions correlated poorly with its own published evidence. Equally perplexing was the inclusion in the Warren Report of seemingly irrelevant information—Jack Ruby's mother's dental charts, for instance.

How, Lifton wondered, could the commission publish an FBI lab photo of Oswald's pubic hairs yet ignore the fact that two-thirds of the witnesses in Dealey Plaza who had an opinion on where the shots originated thought they had come from the grassy knoll?

As Lifton weaved his tortuous path through the commission's source material, he became increasingly befuddled by what he saw as inconsistencies and contradictions. No wonder the commission had so many detractors, he thought. At the core of the problem was an abundance of evidence seeming, to Lifton, to indicate that Kennedy had been shot from the front, which contradicted the Bethesda autopsy conclusion that the shots had come from the rear. There were about 12 doctors and nurses who attended the President at Parkland Me-



morial Hospital in Dallas, and nearly all of them stated in either medical reports, news interviews or sworn testimony that they believed Kennedy had been hit from the front. The Zapruder film seemed to show irrefutably that Kennedy was hit from the front. Why did the Bethesda doctors see things so differently? The question consumed Lifton.

One day he found a sentence in an FBI report that not only reconciled the contradictions—at least in his mind—

evidence make it an almost impossible premise to accept. Surely the FBI report was in error, he thought. But once he began scrutinizing the assassination through this new prism—operating from the premise that Kennedy's body was altered before the autopsy—he discovered what he considered to be a startling array of corroborating evidence. One by one, the contradictions in the documentary record became reconcilable to Lifton; the pieces of the

viewed "Best Evidence," is: Wouldn't it have been easier to poison the President's soup?

Lifton says no. "Then it's clear that it's an inside job," he argues. "You implicate the White House."

OK, maybe not the soup. But surely there were tidier options than the scheme Lifton purports to have unraveled. "The plot was elegant in conception but bungled in execution," he says. "What was supposed to happen isn't what *did* happen . . . and that's why what did happen looked so chaotic and blundering."

What was supposed to happen in David Lifton's life isn't what happened either. "Best Evidence" was published by Macmillan in 1981 after 23 other publishers had rejected it. Lifton caromed around the country on promotional tours, but he was profoundly disappointed that his book didn't foment public outrage or a new investigation of the assassination, or even so much as an acknowledgment from the U.S. Justice Department.

And after the initial excitement, there was the inevitable letdown. "You come home and there are no messages on the answering machine and you don't know what to do the next day. It's over. It is over. And I said, 'What am I gonna do with the rest of my life?'"

He was further sobered by the 20-year reunion of his Cornell class. "It was like I had entered a time tunnel," he reflected recently. "I left at age 27 . . . and then the Cornell reunion was coming up. Everybody had gone out and gotten married and had careers and 2.3 children, and I had my book," Lifton recalls.

For a while, Lifton seemed to want nothing more to do with the investigation. But there is no trace of ennui or weariness when he talks about the assassination now. In fact, he speaks of the event with a certain wistfulness. "I've watched it go from journalism into history," he says. "I would say we were on the cusp a few years ago, or maybe we're still on the cusp. But there'll soon be a point when it's very clearly history."

Recently, an interviewer, after a lengthy discussion with Lifton about the bizarre course his life has taken to the exclusion of certain other experiences and accomplishments, asked the assassination scholar if he has any regrets.

"About what?" Lifton asked.

**'Everybody had gone out and gotten married and had careers and 2.3 children, and I had my book.'**

but also presented him with a new hypothesis. According to a report by two FBI agents who attended the autopsy and took notes on everything they observed, it was "apparent that a tracheotomy had been performed [in Dallas, when the doctors were fighting to save the President's life] as well as surgery of the head area, namely, in the top of the skull."

The last 12 words flew at Lifton. The Dallas doctors had operated only on the *throat*. If the Bethesda doctors had observed evidence of surgery to the *head*, Lifton decided, the body had been tampered with. And if the body had been tampered with, the autopsy report, upon which the Warren Commission's single-assassin conclusion rested, was meaningless. The "best evidence" had been defiled.

Lifton was stunned. "I was exhilarated, terrified. I wanted to vomit," he later wrote. The next day, he showed the report to former Warren Commission attorney Wesley J. Liebeler, a law professor at UCLA with whom Lifton had been polemically jousting over the assassination for the past year.

"David," Liebeler said, "do you realize what you've found? You've found new evidence!"

The frightening implications of that

puzzle fell into place. Now he was able to comprehend how the doctors at Dallas had apparently overlooked two wounds that were detected at Bethesda; how a 2- or 3-centimeter tracheotomy incision made by a doctor in Dallas could have grown to 7 or 8 centimeters by the time the body was examined at Bethesda; how the size of Kennedy's head wound as reported by doctors in Dallas in Warren Commission testimony could have been four times larger at Bethesda.

The most bizarre part of Lifton's theory concerns the movement of the corpse from Dallas to Bethesda. Lifton says that detailed interviews with individuals who handled the body at both places developed a scenario that has Kennedy being transported to Air Force One in an expensive 400-pound ceremonial casket and delivered to Bethesda in a cheap 150-pound shipping box. At Dallas, the body is wrapped in sheets; at Bethesda, it arrives in a zippered body bag. All of this, Lifton contends, bolsters his conclusion that the body was snatched and surgically altered to prevent an accurate forensic reconstruction of the murder.

The obvious question, raised in various forms by several critics who re-