

JFK killing revisited

JOHN COVERT

CYRIL Wecht is a forensic pathologist with degrees in both law and medicine. He's director of the Institute of Forensic Sciences at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh; and assistant professor of pathology at the University of Pittsburgh Medical School. He's also a recent past president of both the American Academy of Forensic Sciences and of the American College of Legal Medicine. Besides that, he's the Coroner of Allegheny County (Pittsburgh).

This August, Wecht became the second non-governmental medical expert allowed to view the items from the autopsy of President Kennedy stored at the National Archives.

In a recent interview, Wecht said he questioned the Warren Commission's findings even before his two days of research at the Archives. But when he came out his conclusion was that "The Warren Commission Report is totally untenable, unacceptable and absolutely incorrect as far as its findings on Lee Harvey Oswald and the single assassin theory."

The Kennedy family turned over numerous items from the autopsy to the Archives in October 1966, with the stipulation that none of the material be released to the public during the lifetime of Kennedy family members, and that after five years "recognized experts in pathology or related sciences" be allowed to view them.

The first "expert" granted permission to view the items was Dr. John Lattimer of New York. Lattimer is a urologist - a kidney and bladder specialist - whose only qualification seems to have been a consistent defender of the Commission's findings. Lattimer spent just three hours in the Archives last January and immediately afterwards released his conclusion that the autopsy items supported the Warren Commission's findings.

Wecht, then, was the first critic of the

Warren Commission Report to be allowed entrance, and this only after he spent nearly a year attempting to get permission from Burke Marshall, a law professor at Yale Law School who acts as an official representative for the Kennedy family. Wecht says he probably wouldn't have gotten permission at all if Marshall hadn't been prodded by others interested in the autopsy items.

When Wecht finally did make it to the Archives, on August 23 and 24, he said he discovered a number of autopsy items were inexplicably missing - most notably the preserved brain of the President and a number of microscopic slides of tissues removed from the bullet wounds. As far as we know, no one has explained the disappearances. But what remained at the Archives was enough for Wecht to confirm his doubts.

In our interview, Wecht recreated the scene at Dealey Plaza and Parkland Hospital in Dallas, and at the Bethesda Naval Hospital, where the autopsy was performed the evening of the assassination.

In Dealey Plaza, the President's car "had just made a right hand turn and was proceeding to an underpass when shots rang out. President Kennedy clutched his throat, Governor John Connally was struck, then Kennedy was struck in the head." By the time the President was brought to Parkland Hospital nearly 30 minutes later, he was already dead with the basics of "life" being preserved only by machine.

"Under Texas law the autopsy should have been performed in Dallas," said Wecht. "But there was much confusion, a lot of shouting and ordering going on, and eventually through ruse and other tactics the body was taken out a private door and put aboard Air Force One for the flight to Washington."

"Now, the autopsy at Bethesda Naval Hospital should not have been any cause for confusion. Unfortunately, instead of the time lapse being used to get the most qualified pathologists for the autopsy, the situation got worse."

Wecht said three staff doctors were given the task, only one of whom had experience with forensic pathology. "It was essentially a military undertaking. Admirals, generals, FBI and Secret Service personnel were present in the room to oversee the autopsy. The doctors acted as military subordinates."

According to records made at Parkland Hos-

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pital, Wecht said, doctors there noted two wounds: one, a huge gaping hole, on the right side of Kennedy's head, and the other a round circular hole in the middle front of his throat.

Doctors performing the autopsy in Washington, however, noted these wounds: the huge gaping hole in his head, a smaller hole in the upper back of his head, and a hole in his back six inches below shoulder level. This latter wound was puzzling because no exit wound was found for it, yet the bullet was not in the body.

"They concluded," said Wecht, "that the bullet which had entered his back fell out of the same hole onto a stretcher when doctors at Parkland administered pressure to the President's chest to revive his heart." And, indeed, a bullet had been found on a stretcher by a janitor at Parkland during the early evening of the twenty-second.

The wound in the throat was not even examined at Parkland because doctors had, in their haste, used the bullet hole to insert a breathing device into the President's throat. Thus, the Bethesda physicians noted only "an incision" in their report. "No one there had enough forensic experience to realize the incision was actually a bullet wound," said Wecht.

And so, Wecht went on, the doctors at Bethesda released the body for burial and gave their results: Kennedy had been hit twice, once in the back (the bullet of which fell out later from the same hole), and once in the head (the bullet of which fragmented). Nothing was said about the smaller wound on the head; and, of course nothing was said about the throat wound.

Wecht said the embarrassing part of the autopsy came the next day — after the body was already gone — when the doctors learned for the first time that there had also been a wound in

the throat. Rather than admit their mistake and re-examine the body, Wecht said the doctors made a "despicable" choice and "chose to be quiet about it."

The easiest way out was to match up the wound six inches below the shoulders in his back and the wound in his throat. "But you couldn't very well have a bullet entering six inches below the neck, then make a sudden U-turn and exit out the throat," said Wecht. "So they simply altered the sketches that had pinpointed the wounds. I've seen the first sketches made of the wounds and they showed a wound six inches below the shoulder. I've also seen the holes in Kennedy's shirt and jacket and everything matches up. But in their testimony for the Warren Commission the doctors simply moved the hole up several inches" to make everything plausible. "Nobody challenged them. They said they hadn't drawn the first sketches to scale but now they could remember where the wound was. Every other hole, scar, incision and mark was drawn exactly. Only this hole was several inches off."

Wecht said that in December, 1966, he was allowed to view the Zapruder film of the assassination, which he did over 100 times in addition to examining blow-ups of each frame. He said that using this film, the FBI was able to gauge the length of time between the first and last times the President was struck, which turned out to be about six seconds. They also test-fired Lee Harvey Oswald's rifle (a single-shot, bolt-action Manlicher Carcano) and found that the quickest it could be loaded and fired — never mind aimed — was 2.3 seconds. This presented a bit of a problem in that four bullets apparently were fired, and the length of time between them purportedly was six seconds. Yet it would take nearly seven seconds just to get off that many shots.

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The results indicated it was "an impossibility that one person could have done all the shooting." Wecht said it was this contradiction that led to the Commission's "single" or "magic bullet theory — which affirmed that one bullet "entered John Kennedy's back and exited through his neck, went into Governor Connally's right back (breaking a rib), exited from his right chest into his right wrist where it shattered a large bone, then went into his right thigh, only to be found later on the stretcher at Parkland Hospital."

"Whatever needed to be done to correct their inconsistencies was done," Wecht charged, "because no one else knew what was going on and it was not until years later that private investigators had a chance to see the evidence."

Warren Commission exhibit number 399 is the bullet that was found on the stretcher at Parkland Hospital. Wecht says his examination of the Archive x-rays shows particles of metal in Kennedy's chest and also in Connally's chest — traces of the bullet that passed through them. This same bullet, according to the Warren Commission, was also supposed to have broken one of Connally's ribs and shattered a bone in his wrist. The bullet is a 6.5 mm. shell with an original weight of 161 grams. Two more inconsistencies presented themselves, said Wecht, because the bullet found at Parkland has a weight of 159 grams:

(1) According to the Commission's report, the bullet lost only two grams of weight in passing through both Kennedy and Connally and leaving traces behind in both;

(2) and after doing all this damage to both men, the bullet has "no deformities in its upper two-thirds at all and the bottom one-third shows only very minimal flattening with no loss of substance."

In addition, one small section of the base of the bullet was removed by the FBI for examination, which brings up the question of how the bullet could have lost any substance in passing through the two men and still weigh 159 grams after the FBI sample was removed.

Still another impossible consequence of the Commission's findings was that the bullet was moving from right to left as it passed through Kennedy, then had to turn abruptly in mid-air and go into Connally's right back (Connally was seated directly in front of Kennedy at the time). "Bullets only do that in comic books," said Wecht.

"There is not one forensic pathologist I have talked to who believes the Warren Commission findings," Wecht said. "And without the single-bullet theory, the Warren Commission conclusion of a lone assassin is destroyed. The evidence clearly indicates that at least more than one person was involved in the shooting.

Wecht claimed no special information about who the other assassin(s) might be, but implicated Dallas Patrolman J.D. Tippett as part of the conspiracy. According to Wecht, 45 minutes after the assassination Tippett, "Who was in a place he had no business being" (since all police had been ordered to Dealey Plaza), spotted Oswald walking down a street, "decided that he was the assassin," and went after him - only to be himself killed.

"J.D. Tippett was there to do a job that because of his failure, Jack Ruby had to complete two days later," Wecht said.

"By legal definition we're dealing with a conspiracy," he said. And who is behind it all? Wecht points to members of the CIA. He said it is a well-known fact in Washington that Oswald had been on the payroll of the CIA up to the time of the assassination. "The CIA has pulled bloody, cut-throat operations all around the

world," he said, "yet no one wants to believe that it could happen here."

Wecht's conclusions, as limited as they are, parallel former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's conclusions. Garrison (with whom Wecht has conferred on the assassination investigation) claims that a group of right-wing CIA members along with members of the Cuban exile community and others plotted and carried out the assassination, believing that President Kennedy was beginning a leftward drift that threatened national security, and was also considering an easing of relations with Fidel Castro.

Lee Harvey Oswald lived for 36 hours after the assassination. All that time he was being interrogated by federal, state, and local authorities. Yet, said Wecht, we are told that not one note, tape recording, or transcript was made in all that 36 hours of interrogation.

Yet the Dallas police force was reputed at the time to be one of the most experienced in handling homicide cases.

"Yet who listens to all that?" complained Cyril Wecht. His visit to the National Archives and his important findings resulted in a brief flurry of headlines around the country and little else. No one has come forth to challenge anything he has said, even his most damning indictments of the Warren Commission findings. Government policy seems to be to ignore the critics and hope they eventually go away.

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