

Connally Takes Bullet Pieces to Grave

6/18/93 By George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writer

Former Texas governor John B. Connally was buried in an east Austin cemetery yesterday after a frantic and unsuccessful effort to get family permission to extract bullet fragments left in his body almost 30 years ago.

FBI officials in Dallas had recommended that an attempt be made to recover the evidence and settle a long-standing controversy about whether Connally was hit by the same bullet that wounded President John F. Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, just before Kennedy was killed by another bullet that tore into his skull.

Dallas FBI agent Oliver B. Revell said he feared that a barrage of lawsuits would be discomfiting to the Connally family in the years ahead unless the fragments were recovered. "We hate to intrude into the family's grief," Revell said a few hours before the final graveside ceremonies, "but it's going to happen sooner or later. I'm afraid the family is going to be harassed on this until it's resolved."

The "single bullet" or "magic bullet" theory was crucial to the Warren Commission's findings that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, killed the president and wounded Connally as the two men rode together in a motorcade through downtown Dallas.

Connally's family and friends were upset and angry about the last-minute hubbub over the bullet fragments, which began Wednesday with requests from Kennedy assassination researchers urging the Justice Department to step in. A spokesman at Justice said officials attempted to contact the family yesterday morning after receiving the FBI recommendation but were unsuccessful.

"It's really offensive," said George Christian, a longtime Connally friend and once his press secretary. "Nobody in the Connally family that I know of ever heard of these fragments."

Revell said there was a fragment in one of Connally's thighs and perhaps some traces in a wrist. The nonprofit Assassination Archives and Research Center urged Attorney General Janet Reno on Wednesday to secure the fragments and compare them, using neutron activation analysis and other sophisticated tests, with the nearly intact bullet the Warren Commission said the pieces came from. The bullet was found on a hospital stretcher and was believed to have dropped out of Connally's thigh.

"If the family would agree and we can examine those under current technology," Revell said, "we could do one of two things. We could say, 'Yes, indeed, this was the bullet [that hit both men] and there is no basis for saying there were additional shots. But if the mass and metallurgy don't match, we've got a different ballgame.'"

Some bullet fragments were extracted from Connally's wrist at Parkland Hospital in 1963. Tests in 1977 for the House assassinations committee matched several bits with the "pristine bullet," but questions about the authenticity of the pieces arose because they did not have the same weight as fragments tested years earlier—and inconclusively—by the FBI. The FBI's fragments disappeared.

Connally's body lay in state in the state capitol for two hours yesterday morning and then was carried across the street to First United Methodist Church, where he and his wife, Nellie, were married 52 years ago.

Among those at the funeral service were former president Richard M. Nixon, Treasury Secretary Lloyd Bentsen, and Texas Gov. Ann Richards. Lady Bird Johnson delivered a eulogy, remembering that "John was always the 'can do' man, as Lyndon would say." Twenty years ago, Connally delivered a eulogy for her husband, former president Lyndon B. Johnson.

Special correspondent Elizabeth Hudson in Austin contributed to this report.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

A trooper salutes as the body of former Texas governor John B. Connally is carried to lie in state at the capitol in Austin.