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HEADLINE: Bullet fragments sought from Connally's body JFK assassination researchers want tests

BYLINE: Steve McGonigle, Washington Bureau of The Dallas Morning News

DATELINE: WASHINGTON

BODY:

Several longtime critics of the Warren Commission report asked Wednesday to remove bullet fragments from the body of former Texas Gov. John Connally.

Mr. Connally was wounded in the Nov. 22, 1963, assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas. The JFK researchers argue that scientific tests on  
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fragments still lodged in Mr. Connally's wrist and thigh will prove that more than one assailant fired on the presidential limousine in Dealey Plaza.

In letters to Attorney General Janet Reno and Texas Gov. Ann Richards, the researchers asked for help in allowing the fragments to be removed from Mr. Connally's body before its scheduled burial in Austin Thursday.

Dr. Cyril Wecht, a Pittsburgh pathologist who has long ridiculed the government's single-bullet theory of the assassination, said the fragments are crucial evidence in an unresolved murder case and should be preserved.

"We're not talking about something that is ghoulish or gory or disfiguring," Dr. Wecht said. "Any skilled surgeon can go in, take a few X-rays, locate the pieces, make small surgical cuts and remove them."

Dr. Wecht said he hoped that the Dallas County district attorney or medical examiner in Houston -- where Mr. Connally died Tuesday of pulmonary fibrosis -- would order that the surgical procedure be done as quickly as possible.

"I'm not real optimistic that this is going to happen, but I do want you to know that this is not a ploy," Dr. Wecht said.

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Neither Dallas District Attorney John Vance nor Harris County medical examiner Joseph Jachimczyk returned calls.

Dr. Wecht was among eight physicians who joined in a letter from the Assassination Archives and Research Center to Ms. Reno. He also cosigned a letter from the Dallas-based JFK Information Center to Ms. Richards.

Carl Stern, the attorney general's chief spokesman, said Ms. Reno had referred the letter through her deputy to the FBI, which sent it to the Dallas field office "to make a judgment on the matter."

Neither Buck Revell, special agent in charge of the Dallas FBI office, nor

Bill Cryer, a spokesman for Ms. Richards, said the governor had not seen the letter from the Dallas group and would not take any action if she had.

"That's something that the (Connally) family would have to deal with," Mr. Cryer said. "Certainly we would not want to be involved with it."

Julian Read, a spokesman for the Connally family in Austin, said he was unaware of the researchers' requests and would have "absolutely no comment."

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Mr. Reed said Mr. Connally's funeral is scheduled for 2 p.m. with burial in the state cemetery about an hour later.

According to the Warren Commission report, one bullet passed through the president and into Mr. Connally's back. The bullet exited through his chest, passed through his right wrist and went into his left thigh.

The same bullet was later found lying on a stretcher in the emergency room at Parkland Hospital, the commission reported. The bullet was only slightly damaged, a factor that has fueled criticism of the report.

Mr. Connally said several times that he believed he and Mr. Kennedy were struck by separate bullets. However, he shied away from saying that he believed there had been multiple shooters or a conspiracy.

Dr. Wecht and Jim Lesar, president of the Washington-based assassination research center, said X-rays taken at Parkland of Mr. Connally's wounds clearly showed that bullet fragments remained in his wrist and thigh.

Dr. Wecht contended that a neutron activation analysis, a scientific procedure used in ballistics studies, would show whether the fragments left in Mr. Connally were fired from the same weapon used to kill Mr. Kennedy.

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The procedure would take less than an hour, Dr. Wecht said, and would not prevent the family from displaying the body in an open casket ceremony.

Although Dr. Wecht offered sympathy for the Connally family, he said the importance of the evidence should outweigh privacy concerns.

"It has to do with criminal justice. It has to do with a very, very important part of American history," he said. "And you cannot allow personal feelings to enter into this."