

*from oral history with Bill Cooper
WHL Louisville via Bill Cooper*

was . . . was Chief Justice [Lewis] Powell [Jr.] . . . not Chief Justice Powell, but Justice Powell from Virginia who is now sitting . . . sitting on the . . . on the [Supreme] Court. And just very curiously, I . . . I went over to see him last week. He had a friend who came to see me and who knew him and . . . and he said that he'd give anything if he could see him. Well, I called up over there and he said, "Come right on over." And then [there was] another one who was from New Orleans who'd been president of the [American] Bar Association. I can't remember his name right now. But there was always at least about three who were sitting in.

BILL COOPER: Wasn't this a . . . wasn't this a very difficult assignment for you, particularly having been a good friend of President Kennedy?

COOPER: Well, you had to dismiss that, you know, from your mind. It was a tremendous . . . we had a tremendous number of witnesses, but . . . but then you had hundreds if not thousands of depositions, affidavits [which were] taken throughout the country by district attorneys or by the C.I.A. or . . . not C.I.A., but F.B.I., and to read those took all your time. Now that . . . I think we were in session. I think we spent about six months and as far as being in the Senate at that time, you just as soon not have been there. We did not meet every day, but then at night I . . . I . . . I . . . I had to read those papers and I remember that was the same year, of

course, as the convention . . . '6- . . . you know, out at . . .
. out at San Francisco and I went to that and came back and I'd
had a very . . . I had a very bad cold and chest and so I went
to see a doctor. He insisted I . . . I . . . I stay in bed two
or three days. [chuckling] And yet they kicked all the time
because I read those papers all the time [chuckling] I was
there.

BILL COOPER: [chuckling] Oh, is that right?

COOPER: But it was a hard job. We went to Dallas
several times and, of course, went over the whole route from
the time he got off the plane, down the streets to the turn,
went through the school book depository, talked to the people
who were in there, went to the place where [Lee Harvey] Oswald
lived, went to the place where his wife lived, and went to the
hospital, of course, and talked to the people there and went to
the theater where Oswald was captured. Then later after he was
killed we, of course, went to the jail and saw what had
happened there, the situation. And on one occasion Senator
Russell called me and told me that he had not been satisfied
with the testimony of Oswald's wife. It was very curious. It
turned out there was quite a Russian settlement there in Dallas
and at the house of one of them is . . . a picture was taken of
Oswald holding his pistol, you know. And . . . but anyway, on
her first appearance Russell told me he wasn't satisfied with
it--her testimony--and he said he . . . he was going down there

. . . of course, he . . . brought it before the . . . commission and examined her. Of course, she'd have counsel. He asked me to go along with him which I did and we spent a day examining her and he did most of the questioning, of course. But you could not shake her a bit. I think my view was that she had nothing to do with it in any way and told all she knew and was a . . . had been treated very badly by Oswald. She came back again before the committee later on and I remember the difference in her appearance. When she first came she was a very simple looking woman, very nice looking, no rouge, no . . . no make-up. When she came back, of course, she'd gotten in the hands of some public relations fellow [laughing] and she was made up like she just come out of the beauty shop [chuckle--Bill Cooper]. But it was sad. I felt that she had . . . she must have had a sad . . . a sad life.

BILL COOPER: Where were your . . . where were the meetings and hearings actually held?

COOPER: What?

BILL COOPER: Where . . . where did you actually work in your . . .

COOPER: We worked . . .

BILL COOPER: . . . your sessions?

COOPER: . . . at the . . . up . . . up past the Senate office buildings at the headquarters of the . . . of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. They had a quite nice building up

there and there was a large room and some of the . . . one of the witnesses, who was the first one down there to write about the assassination, and . . . and his . . . Oswald's mother employed him, I think, free because he tried to use that as a reason for sitting in [chuckling] in our meetings. He's written a . . . I mean, he's made . . . he's been living on it ever since and we had him before us and he could not verify a single thing. Somebody told him.

BILL COOPER: Well, there's been a great deal of . . . of talk, of course, about the Warren Commission findings, particularly the finding that Oswald acted alone in the . . .

COOPER: Yes. Yes.

BILL COOPER: . . . assassination attempt and then several books have been written challenging that . . .

COOPER: Yes.

BILL COOPER: . . . that theory. The House of Representatives later conducted their own . . .

COOPER: Yes.

BILL COOPER: . . . investigation. How . . . how do you react . . . as a member of the Commission, how do you react to . . . to all of those things?

COOPER: Well, I hold the position that I've held always. There were several questions in it which you . . . you wonder about. One, of course, [is] Jack Ruby killing Oswald. There's talk that they had some association, but we never could be sure

of it. Oswald . . . I mean, Ruby, of course, claimed that he had such great sympathy for Mrs. Kennedy [that] he didn't want her to go through a trial and he killed Oswald for that reason. It seems kind of skimpy, but nobody was ever able to develop anything else. We could never find anybody else that had any close association with him. He was a loner. And in the bo- . . . in the te- . . . when we went into the textbook depository there, we talked to the people in there and oh, they'd seen him that morning running through the . . . through to leave, after the shooting and, of course, up there where the . . . the window was, there were the cartridges, you know, and . . . and there was one thing which was disturbing. They did not take proper precautions about the parade. They published . . . published the route. They did have police along the streets, but maybe it wasn't as well done then as it is today. In matters like that today they have police, you know, sharpshooters and police, who are on the roofs of the buildings or in the windows and mingling through the crowd. As far as we could find out there wasn't anything like that at all and so he didn't have the necessary protection, which might not have made any difference. It's just like [Ronald] Reagan being shot with all those people around him and . . . but there were worse things. There was . . . the F.B.I. had followed Oswald for quite a while because he had been . . . there'd been some accusations that he had tried to kill another man there--a general [Edwin

Walker]--and then he'd gone, of course, to New Orleans and created quite a brouhaha there about the Cubans. And . . . and then he disappeared for a while and he . . . they later found out he had gone to a . . . he'd gone to Mexico, you know, to try to get a visa to Cuba and then went on to Russia, I guess. He came back to Dallas and he spent the night there at his wife's, but got up and left early before she was up. It appeared later that this F.B.I. man knew that he was back in Dallas and that he never notified the police or never covered him himself. Well, that . . . there was never any charge of conspiracy against this F.B.I. man, but no . . . no . . . nothing said about that or thought about it, but it was absolute negligence.

BILL COOPER: Looking . . .

COOPER: He might have been able to prevent it, you know.

BILL COOPER: Yeah. Looking back at it . . .

COOPER: But look at these . . . I haven't read all the books, but I read the main ones, and they'll say . . . well, some of the witne- . . . some of them we had before us, you know, and they could not prove any of it. They didn't have proof for any of it. We asked them about this, "Well, we talked to somebody who told us this," or something like that.

BILL COOPER: Did . . . did any of the people who have written . . . written books challenging the . . . the Warren Commission report at an- . . . have any those people ever interviewed you?

COOPER: No.

BILL COOPER: No?

COOPER: No. None of them. None ever came to see me. I've, of course, spo- . . . I spoke on it a number of times after that. I would be invited. [chuckling] I remember I spoke at Yale [laughing] and I could see that . . . that they didn't have much confidence in the Warren Report, the students [didn't]. I think I spoke at the uni- . . . there . . . some place in Kentucky, not the University [of Kentucky], but I remember particularly going to Yale [chuckling]. They got what they . . . the Yale Union they call it. They were all . . . they were very nice to me, but you . . . but questioned you very hard and that was all right, but the general opinion--they didn't have a . . . take any vote on it or anything like that--well, but you felt that they [chuckling] . . . they felt we hadn't done our full job. The next thing--and you mentioned it--was that later the House took it up, you know, the House of Representatives and there were just three of us left on the commission. Just Gerald Ford, who was the second House member, and John McCloy, who's still living in New York, and myself. And we were . . . they didn't subpoena us, they just asked us to come, so we . . . we went together one morning and were questioned and they were very nice to us and . . . but they asked tough questions, if they could, and they first came out with a statement that . . . in a way vindicating [chuckling]

our position and later somebody made some kind of motion and they passed some kind of resolution expressing doubt about it. So they were mixed up, too.

BILL COOPER: But they . . . they didn't reach any conclusions of their own though, . . .

COOPER: No.

BILL COOPER: . . . did they?

COOPER: No. They just kind of left it hanging like a lot of people have. At . . . at first they . . . the general opinion was that our report was . . . was . . . could not be challenged upon any proof they had, and then later they issued some kind of a statement that it wasn't a very . . . very conclusive.

BILL COOPER: Well, looking back on it, does . . . does it appear to you that any vital information was deliberately withheld from you by the F.B.I. on the . . .

COOPER: No.

BILL COOPER: . . . commission? You know, some . . . some have . . . have speculated that . . .

COOPER: Oh, yeah. They've . . .

BILL COOPER: . . . the F.B.I. did not come forth with all the information they had concerning Oswald's connections with Cuba and so forth.

COOPER: Well, of course, they speculated on that, but all we could do was to take their testimony and at that time,

you hadn't got to the place where we got to Watergate where [chuckling] you're asking for every paper and everything. And they gave very good reports of what Oswald had done, his record from the time he was a boy until he was in the navy, in Japan where he was in trouble and then his . . . and then the way . . . the way . . . and then going to . . . and what he said during that time and then when he went to Russia. And, of course, we had the reports from the embassy there in Russia, you know. They said he tried to commit suicide there, you know. And then he tried to become a Russian citizen and they didn't accept him and then he tried to revoke his American citizenship, but it wasn't accepted. And, of course, he ended up down in this town where he got a job and he was working when he met this woman and there was . . . there was questioning whether or not . . . why the Russians would let him out again.

BILL COOPER: Yeah.

COOPER: They . . . but they thought to do so so openly, that he would certainly then be watched always as a possible spy, which he was. He was watched from the very time he came back.

BILL COOPER: By the Russians, you mean.

COOPER: By the U.S.

BILL COOPER: Oh, by the F.B.I.

COOPER: Yeah.

BILL COOPER: Well, you've mentioned that . . . that during