

BBC Panorama 3/6/78

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SENATOR

John  
Sherman  
Cooper

Well first when I came back I did go and see Senator Russel to get what information he had. He had about the same information that I had, he had just been called by the President. I didn't talk to any of the others who had been chosen.

Of course the atmosphere in the country was one of absolute shock and sorrow. I think that almost anybody who was alive at that time. You would ask him "Where were you on the day when the President was assassinated you could get the information" I remember precisely where I was when I heard the news.

There was a pall of sadness all over the country, the shock of the assassination and of course culminated with the fact that of his youth. The great feeling of affection that was held and the great appeal he had, particularly I think for young people and for me also because I served with him in the Congress for at least six years.

Rumours at that time, I think there were so many rumours that started at that time immediately after his assassination, millions saw on television the killing of Lee Oswald by Ruby. It happened I didn't see it but millions saw it.

Of course the news came out immediately that he had been a defector to Russia and then of course all kinds of speculation began at that time and we started our proceedings very quickly. The President established the Commission a few days after the assassination.

INT

What do you think the President felt at the time. Why do you think the Warren Commission was so necessary at the time?

SENATOR

Well a very peculiar situation existed

in U.S. law then and that is that the Federal Government really had no jurisdiction over a case involving the murder, assassination of a President of the United States. There was no law against it. There was a law against threats against him so it was really a case of the jurisdiction in the State of Texas.

There had been rumours that the Congress would start its investigation and I think that he must have decided and of course I read that he decided that best to have one Commission from the country at large, it turned out mostly from the Congress to conduct the investigations.

INT

Do you think that the President also felt that there was a danger that the assassination of President Kennedy could lead to a world war?

SENATOR

No. I don't think that. A lot of this is looking back of course but looking back and thinking of the trouble we had had with Cuba in the preceding years, the Bay of Pigs, the Missile Crisis continuing odd occasions with Cuba. I didn't think of it at the time but if the facts had not been developed I think correctly a wide opinion had risen in this country that President Kennedy had been assassinated through some plot culminating from Cuba, Castro, I think it would have caused a great outcry. I don't think it would have caused a war - no.

INT

How much pressure was there on you as a Committee to reach the conclusion which Assistant Attorney Katzenbach wrote to you to say 'It is essential to convince the American people that Oswald was the assassin acting alone' How much pressure was on you to reach that conclusion.

SENATOR

He didn't say that exactly. He was writing I think to our Chief Counsel and to the staff,

of course it would be relayed to us but I don't he said that exactly. He kept urging speed, speed, speed. I would say first that we did not pay any attention to him not that he wasn't a decent man but President Johnson certainly never put upon us the slightest pressure in any way and we had already decided. We were an independent group. We had as our chairman the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States Justice Warren. We knew what our duty was and we had already talked over these things that we would pursue to the last possible thread, any possibility that might throw light on this situation. There was no pressure upon us at all, never. I can assure you of that.

INT But you say that Mr. Katzenbach kept on urging speed, speed, speed. Why did he do that?

SENATOR I don't know in fact I can only recall two maybe I am wrong of all those volumes of communications. You know it would take me several years to read them. All I can say is that we knew about it but it had no influence upon us at all.

INT Why was the Warren Commission Report so badly indexed?

SENATOR Well it was a tremendous job in the first place and when you think that the Commission itself examined about 100 witnesses, not quite, members of the FBI, Secret Service. Examined several thousand witnesses and all made reports. In addition every agency in the United States government which had any possible connection with the matter, such as the State Department, of course it is concerned with Oswald's efforts to get to Russia, the fact that he was in Russia.

The Treasury Department because at that time it had jurisdiction over the Secret Service the FBI, CIA , Naturalisation Service Justice Department. We had reports from all over . Then we did instruct our staff that they should not just accept those reports at face value. The staff which was fairly large, I think about 15 members were divided and they analysed the reports from every department, then they would call back if necessary the members of those departments for explanations, for further reports and in some cases they examined reports themselves.

It is a fact that contrary to statements today that we didn't have files, we did have files.

INT

But you didn't have your own independent investigators,

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INT

The Commission never had its own independent investigators why did you use the FBI?

SENATOR

I think again you have to consider the time and the time which the investigation took place.

Now years later a different attitude about the FBI and the CIA in some quarters of the United States. At that time the FBI had been in service for as I can recall since 1908 or something like that, had established a good work as an investigative service. Its duties were internal. It at times had been the hero of the young people of this country. Mr. Hoover was getting old, there was some disagreement at times about his continuation in office at the head but no one removed him and he had just been selected by President Kennedy again and by his brother Robert Kennedy under whose jurisdiction he served. There was no reason for us to go and get a new investigative force. They had people all over the country some 70 regional staff, something like that. I can't remember the figure, thousands of employees trained, had a good reputation.

The CIA was intended to work of course on foreign intelligence and again at that time it had a good reputation, a thing which brought about difficulties. The CIA as you know chiefly over Watergate, and that has been recent.

We had no reason to doubt the ability or the truthfulness of CIA.

The actual protection of the president was under the jurisdiction of the Secret Service

which was under the Treasury. It was a small group of men, very able group of men. It turned out later they had not been very well trained ~~xxxxxx~~ in co-ordination with the FBI or CIA but it was necessary to get to work upon the facts, it could disappear, evidence could be lost and everything happened so quickly that when you think that according to the time that President Kennedy was assassinated at 12.30 on November 22nd and hardly an hour later, Oswald was in custody and a number of matters that occurred at that time. You just had to go to work.

In fact we did have our independent investigators too. I have just said that we directed our staff who were a very good group of able lawyers, they are still a group of able lawyers now years later. They had the duty, not just to accept the statements of the FBI, the CIA at first hand but to raise them, analyse them and to go back to the original files.

Also in the expert testimony that we had they were'nt all FBI men, we did have some and a weapons test. The medical expertise we had and even in the arms, they were'nt the regular people they had outside people. There was no alternative. We had been staggering along for months and some people, you would have had to investigate all of them,

INT But are you saying that at that time, you saw no reason not to trust the FBI?

SENATOR I have a reason to trust them.

INT But your view has changed since then?

SENATOR No it hasn't changed. The FBI?

INT Yes.

SENATOR No I still think the FBI as a whole  
- I am not going to speak for every individual  
in it - but it has had bad days but I think as a  
whole it is a good institution for investigation.

INT Do you now know that both the CIA and the FBI  
withheld information from you?

SENATOR I have read about it, I have been asked  
directly. Did the Commission know at the time  
of this session that information was being  
withheld by the FBI, the CIA or any official  
of the government of the United States?  
Or anyone who had knowledge? My answer was 'No'  
because we knew of no information that was  
being withheld from us .

INT But you do know that now?

SENATOR I can't say I know it . I can say that I  
have read . You see I am a lawyer and I used  
to be a judge and I still kind of hold to the  
idea that until something is proved it is an  
allegation. Now allegations have been made  
before the special committee on Intelligence,  
that information was withheld from us by the CIA  
and very important information and the  
Committee closed down its hearings but asked  
that it be continued . I have no reason to  
doubt that what they found was not true.

I read that some officials in the CIA had a  
plan of operation during those days to  
assassinate Castro, a covert operation and that  
Castro had had information about it and had  
made a threat to retaliate. Whether that is  
true or not I do not know but as I said if it  
were true it was never told to us. We had no  
reason to know of any such plans.

INT But don't you think you should have been told  
in view of Oswald's obvious connections with  
Cuba and with Castro?

SENATOR

Of course I think everything should have been told. I want to again insist which at times I believe some people in this country and abroad think that perhaps the Commission themselves were conspirators, that we were not willing to hear the whole truth and that our purpose was not to find the whole truth, absolutely foolish. I don't mind to speak for my own self, it is further from my own viewpoint, the whole view of the matter and I hope it will be my character against such an idea and I know it was the same for every member of the Commission.

Of course we should have been told if there was such information.

INT

But how do you feel now, now that the Senate Intelligence Committee has revealed that there were these plots between the CIA and the Mafia to kill Castro. How do you feel now about your own findings of the Warren Commission? Given that you were't told.

SENATOR

In the first place you know I am not one who favours any such plans by the CIA or any intelligence agency of the United States. I don't believe that whatever another country does we should engage in such activities. Other countries do it. We know they do it.

We should have been told if it occurred. Again I would say from a legal viewpoint if it had been proved, but that is beside the point. If even the rumours were there, if the stories were there we should have been told because it would have given us an opportunity to go deeper into our questioning of the CIA and try to reach the facts.

I will only say this though that even if this occurred, if threats were made to kill Castro or planned and Castro said 'I may retaliate' it does not affect the fact. There has been no proof to affect the fact.



that Oswald was a killer of President John Kennedy and it does not prove that there was a conspiracy between the CIA or anyone else and Oswald or anyone else., except it would have lead to a more complete investigation.

INT

In view of the fact that you now know there wasn't such a complete investigation do you favour now a re-opening of the investigatiojn into the death of President Kennedy?

SENATOR

I make the same answer to that that I have made to many many people.

INT When the Warren Commission actually was meeting were you unanimous in the decisions you reached on that report or were there differences of view within the Commission itself?

SENATOR Which were inevitably glossed over in the final report.

No they weren't glossed over. I've tried to say we were an independent group of people, we knew each other. We were all selected separately and we weren't particularly close as persons. We were already determined as to what we would do, yes there were disagreements. I think the most serious one that comes to me most vividly of course was the question of whether or not the shot struck President Kennedy. There were of course two shots but one of those shots, the first shot went through President Kennedy and through Governor Connolly who was sitting on the jump seat in front of him.

INT

The so called single bullet theory?

SENATOR

Single bullet theory.] My idea was that there were only two bullets. One bullet went through both President Kennedy and Governor Conolly and the second bullet of course really killed President Kennedy. The first shot wasn't necessarily fatal. It was towards the top of his skull.

According to the various films that were taken, the time limit for the shot would have made it much easier for two shots at the President or for Oswald to be able to fire three shots and we had experts who testified that in their view, they were both firearms experts and medical experts that one shot did strike both President Kennedy and Governor Conolly.

You know it is common, we had just gone through the Korean War and World War II before where people were hit by a bullet and don't know it

for some time but I heard Governor Connolly testify very strongly that he was not struck with the same bullet and I could not convince myself that the same bullet struck both of them although there were experts who said it could .

INT

You mean you yourself were'nt convinced about the single bullet theory?

SENATOR

\*not

No I wasn't, neither was Senator Russel and I believe Congressman Barr, I can't recall at the moment but I know that Senator Russell and I were\*convinccd and that we said we would not agree for that to be declared as a finding of the Commission and I don't think you will find it in the summary of the Commission as a determinative statement.

INT

Well it seems to come out quite strongly from the C mmission's report that they accept the single bullet theory.

SENATOR

I don't think so when you read the whole report. In several places it shows that there were three shots. In several places it says that one shot struck Prresident Kennedy, Connolly was struck then , the first shot was the one which took off the top , an awful thing of President Kennedy's skull but we left that I would say rather open.

INT

Were there other matters on the findings of the Commission where you and Senator Russell and Congressman .....disagreed with what was actually finally written?

SENATOR

No I think that on the whole there were very little disagreements upon the facts that were discovered and which were placed before us by witnesses and by our staff.

For example one of the writers, well known, who was writing there just fascination, it hardly

I knew them by reputation and I met of course all of them . I'd never met Mr. Rowley the Secret Service man. I can't imagine a more honourable man than Douglas Dillon . I had the same opinion of John McKorm. We had no reason to believe that what they told us was not the truth.

If they were operators, as they call them, underneath who were carrying on the covert organisation - operations as we now speak of in Cuba. We have no knowledge of it. I don't know how we could have found it if it was concealed from us.

As I said a lot of people now say that the recent FBI report 40,000 words, it should have been 40,000 more but we ourselves are probably responsible for the fullest investigation.

I think the staff brought to us every controversial question which we discussed. There was not much disagreement on issues except as I said the bullet issue. There was always running throughout this the question as to what was - could have happened in the Soviet Union - was there any connection between Oswald's stay in the Soviet Union and anything that might have occurred when he got back, if anyway he was an agent, either intelligence for them or could have been in a conspiracy.

After a trip of Oswald's to New Orleans and also from statements he made before in Dallas on fair play for Cuba because we knew that he was trying to get to Cuba and those questions came to mind but we were not able to find out any information about him.

One might argue at the time that perhaps we should have continued for a longer time, now I myself am speculating. I felt at the time that we had found out all that was possible

PANORAMA - KENNEDY

ROLL 35.

341 Take 1.

INT Senator do you accept the single bullet theory?

SENATOR No I did not at the time and I still hold that opinion.

The single bullet theory simply was that one of the bullets passed through President Kennedy, not the fatal bullet and then passed through Governor C....'s back, traversed his chest and ended up in his arm I think, his wrist and we had expert testimony and we had Governor Connolly's strong testimony.

INT Could you tell me in one sentence, what did you feel about the single bullet theory?

SENATOR Well I felt that theoretically it would have made it much easier to say that the shot only preceded from the Texas Depository you know, taking into account the time limit and the motion pictures that we had but considering the fact that Connolly's strong testimony and considering the fact that three cartridge shells had been found, were found in the window from which the shots came and that three bullets were found I consider that that testimony was stronger than the one bullet theory.

INT But at first you didn't accept the single bullet theory?

SENATOR No and I still don't

INT You still don't accept the single bullet theory?

SENATOR

No you mean one bullet shot both President Kennedy, no I never. I told you that I didn't agree with it and neither did Senator Russel and that was a kind of general agreement that it was possible but upon the basis of the testimony of the experts, considering the time limits. We had experts who simulated the firing who said that there was ample time for the three bullets to be fired. There were those, as I have said, that said a person could be shot. Governor Conolly was and wouldn't know it for a fraction of a second or maybe more than that. It was controversial and we realised it was possible one way or the other.

I had to make a judgement and my judgement was that there were three bullets and just not two.

INT

But if you didn't accept the single bullet theory, doesn't that throw doubt on the whole findings of the Warren Commission which were based on the single bullet theory.

SENATOR

No it wasn't based on the single bullet theory. There was a great volume of testimony I mean you consider that there was a cartridge and a chamber which he could press immediately and it was less than 100 yards, about 120 feet the first shot and the whole three shots less than 100 yards and the velocity of the rifle was over half a mile.

There were all kinds of testimony that could support the two bullet, I mean the one bullet theory so it doesn't destroy the idea of the whole findings were wrong.

I have to repeat again that of all these theories that have been advanced I have never yet heard one person, I may have missed