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LIFE & T

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Was Kennedy kill

ON NOVEMBER 22 1963 President John F. Kennedy's car drove along Elm Street in Dealey Plaza, Dallas, followed by a car full of armed security men. Shots were heard; Kennedy died. A rifle belonging to Lee Harvey Oswald was found on the sixth floor of the Texas Book Depository on the plaza. Oswald denied the assassination and was murdered by Jack Ruby. Those facts, and few others, are undisputed.

THE official inquiry, the Warren Commission, heard 489 testimonies in 1964, many of them contradictory. In the light of such confusion, the ballistic evidence assumed immense importance. In 1967 CBS News invited eleven marksmen to a reconstruction. One of them,



Howard Donahue (left), was able to match Oswald's shooting, but he began to have doubts about other aspects of the Warren findings. Then, by chance, he came across a detail that offered a

radical solution: Kennedy had been shot, by mistake, by one of his own bodyguards.

BONAR MENNINGER, in this extract from his book *Mortal Error*, takes up the story of Donahue's discovery.

Donahue froze. The hairs flew up on his neck. He was reading William Manchester's account of the assassination, *The Death of a President*. Right in the middle of the page, right in front of his eyes, was what he'd been looking for for so many years:

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"From the rear of the follow-up car Agent Hickey raises the barrel of the AR-15 and points it about aimlessly."

The gun . . .
The Colt AR-15 is the civilian version of the M-16, the automatic rifle that was used as the primary American infantry weapon in Vietnam. The high velocity gun is well known for the explosive nature of the light-weight bullets it fires: they disintegrate on impact. An AR-15 bullet would thus cause exactly the type of massive head injury sustained by President Kennedy — the type of injury that Donahue knew Oswald's bullet, with its full metal jacket, could not have caused.

Donahue quickly turned to the index. Henderson, Hendrix, Henry, Henslee . . . Hickey. There was one other reference to the agent in the book, on page 134. Donahue turned to it. Manchester described the passengers in the follow-up secret service convertible codenamed "Halfback" (see diagram on page 4). Agent Sam Kinney, at the wheel; Emory Roberts, Halfback's commander, next to Kinney; two agents on each running board; two Kennedy aides in the jump seats. And, sitting in the right rear seat, Agent Glen Bennett, with, next to him, Agent William Hickey in the left rear. On the seat between them lay an AR-15 .223 automatic rifle, with a muzzle velocity so powerful that should a bullet strike a man's chest it would blow his head off.

God, Donahue thought. The left rear seat! Here was the missing piece . . .

Donahue reorganized his data. He ruminated, speculated. What did he have? He knew, from his years of research into the trajectory of the fatal shot, the one that hit the President's head, that the

bullet could not have come from the Book Depository. The angles of entry and exit did not match. He remembered the line he had drawn on his plan of the shooting. The line had gone back from the President's head to where Donahue thought the fatal bullet had come from. He had abandoned his theory, in the absence of a weapon that could have fired the shot. The line passed over the left rear seat of the secret service car.

Now, Donahue had the weapon. Nine witnesses — including Hickey himself — had said that the gun was in Hickey's hands just after the last shot. More important, two of the witnesses had said it was in his hands the instant the shot was fired. And one had seen the agent stand up and fall over about the time the shot hit home.

Donahue once more studied the pictures of the scene. Hickey had clearly heard the first shot. Sitting on top of the seat back, he had already spun completely around and was staring up toward the book depository. The other agents were just starting to turn. In a second or two, the follow-up car had gone a little further and the oak tree that had obscured Hickey's view was cleared. At that point, Hickey must have seen the barrel of Oswald's gun. He had to. He was looking right at it. And Oswald fired again.

Donahue built up his theory. So Hickey reached down and grabbed the AR-15 off the floor, flipped off the safety and stood up on the seat, preparing to return fire. But his footing was precarious. The follow-up car hit the brakes or accelerated. Hickey began to swing the gun around to draw a bead on Oswald, but he lost his balance. He began to fall.

And the barrel happened to be pointing toward Kennedy's head. And the gun happened to go off. And the bullet struck with the "sickening sound of a grapefruit splattering against the side of the wall," according to Dave Powers, a Kennedy aide who was in the secret service car. Plausible, Donahue thought. It was plausible.

But how plausible? If this was true, why did no one see it? Donahue thought he knew. There were ten men in the follow-up car. Two agents each were standing on running boards on both sides of "Halfback".

Hence, when Hickey stood up, he must have been partially obscured from view by agents on either side. Furthermore, it was reasonable to assume that everyone who wasn't diving for cover was

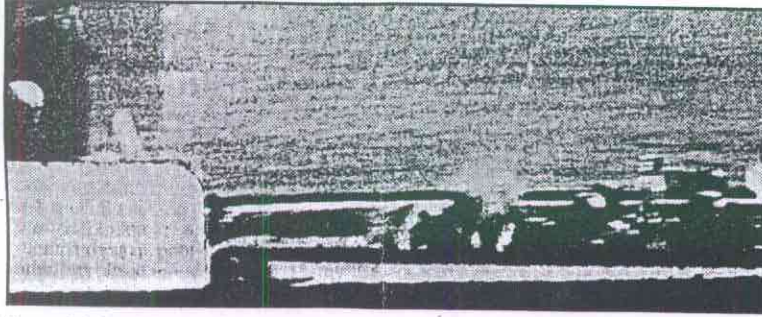
watching the presidential limo, not the secret service follow-up car. Then, when people realized what was happening, they saw Hickey with the gun — after the shot was fired and after he'd got back to his feet.

But what about the dozen or so people on the flyover above Elm Street? They were looking straight down at Hickey. Wouldn't they have seen the muzzle flash if the AR-15 had fired? Donahue knew the answer was no. ARs and M-16s are equipped with a flash suppressor on the tip of the barrel. A bluish flame from the gun would have been visible only at night or twilight. It was high noon in Dealey Plaza. The sun was blazing.

Surely, though, someone would have heard the AR go off?

They did hear it, Donahue realized. They just couldn't pinpoint the location of the shot in the terror and confusion of the moment. What was it that the Warren Commission memo contained about the sounds of gunfire? A shot actually makes three sounds: the muzzle blast, the noise of the bullet as it travels through air, and the noise of the bullet's impact on the target.

Likewise, the memo said, not much credence should be placed in where witnesses believe the shots had come from, since "if a bullet travels faster than the speed of sound, the acoustics are such that an observer at right angles to the path of the bullet may perceive



Kennedy's head bursts after an impact typical of a thin-jacketed bullet like the AR-15's

the shot to have been fired from a site *somewhere opposite to him.*"

A phenomenon like that might explain why some witnesses thought the bullet came not from the depository to the motorcade's right side but from the grassy knoll in front of it — testimony that had long been highlighted by conspiracy theorists who believed in a second gunman. The siren in the follow-up car was turned on immediately after the shot and its wail may have had a disorienting effect on bystanders. In any case, the buildings on three sides of Dealey Plaza undoubtedly made the area one vast echo chamber.

Donahue returned once again to the archives. He found the testimony of Austin Miller, a railway employee who had watched the motorcade from the flyover.

Investigator: "Where did the shots sound like they came from?"

Miller: "Well, the way it sounded like, I would say from right there in the car."

Royce Skelton, another witness who had watched from the flyover had told the Warren Commission he believed the shots came from around the President's car. Donahue paused at the recollection of Mary Elizabeth Woodward. She was standing on the north side of Elm Street, in front of the grassy knoll and nearly adjacent to where Kennedy was when the final shot hit. "There was a horrible ear-shattering noise coming from behind us and a little

to the right," Woodward had said.

Woodward's location of the shot may have been off, but if she had heard an AR-15, her description was right on target. An AR-15 .223 round, by virtue of its high velocity and high muzzle pressure, does make an extraordinarily loud crack; louder and sharper than the report from a gun like Oswald's.

Donahue wondered. Did Hickey do it?

It wasn't as if he wanted to believe an accident had taken place in Dealey Plaza. He would have much preferred to find some piece of evidence that would have made it impossible. So far, he'd found nothing of the sort.

What did he know?

He knew Hickey was seen with an AR-15 the instant the final shot hit home. He knew one witness saw him fall over. He knew the AR-15 fired rounds encased in a thin copper jacket that upon impact, rupture to allow the bullet to disintegrate for maximum injury. He knew the bullet that hit Kennedy's head had shattered in exactly this fashion. He knew Oswald's bullet could never have performed in such a manner. He also knew that many people in the motorcade smelled gunpowder as they passed through Dealey Plaza and that Oswald was too far away for the smell to have come from his gun. And he knew that two witnesses thought the shots came from around the President's car.

Finally, he knew the bullet's trajectory led straight to Hickey

and his gun. As far as he was concerned, this was an unshakable ballistic fact. The bullet that hit Kennedy in the head came from the left rear. From the follow-up car. From the AR-15. Donahue was virtually certain. But still he paused before he published. To accuse someone of accidentally killing the President of the United States was a hell of a thing to do. A bodyguard, no less . . . Donahue

shuddered to think of the torture the man must have endured. Then again, he thought, nothing he or anyone else could do would change what happened. The only thing left was to be out with it.

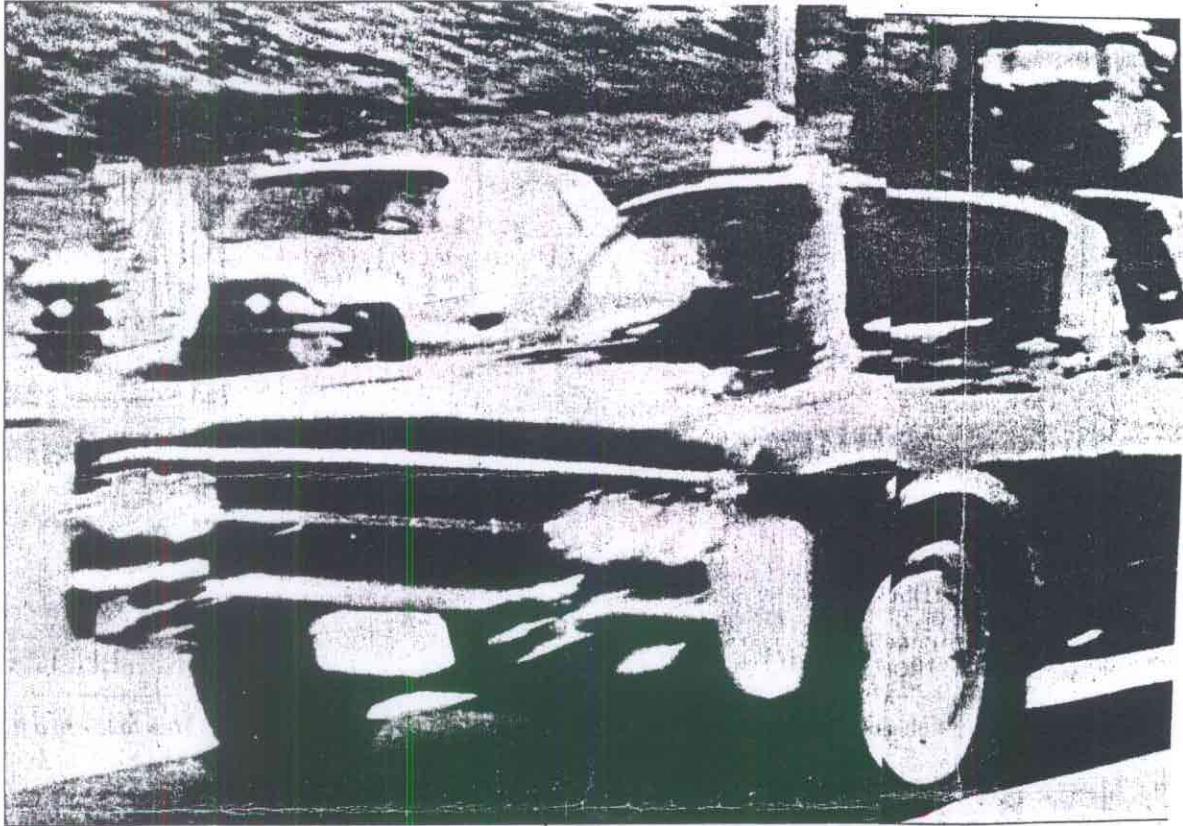
"I started out on my investigation with no preconceptions," Donahue said. "If anything, I was trying to prove the Warren Commission correct. And after I made my discovery, I tried very hard to prove it wrong. I wanted to be wrong. But I found nothing to indicate that I was.

"I do not believe George Hickey is to blame for what happened. He was a brave man trying to do his job. He was at the wrong place at the wrong time and fate stepped

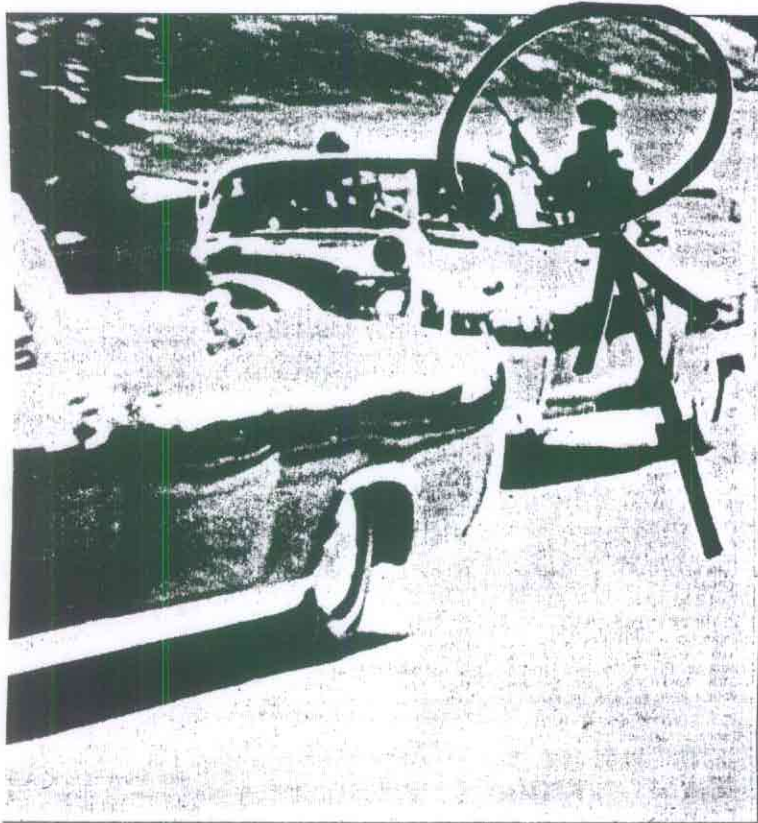
in, that's all. If we assume that someone in Washington knew what really happened — and it's hard for me personally to believe that no one knew — then I feel the government never should have kept this secret. It's always true that cover-up and deception breeds more deception. And then it breeds wilder and wilder scenarios by observers whose instincts tell them something isn't accounted for here, these stories we're being fed don't work. We should have put the Kennedy assassination to rest a long time ago."

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● On page 4 the book's American publisher explains his decision to back Donahue's research, and his attempts to get Agent Hickey, who lives in the North-east of the US, to respond. *Mortal Error* is published today by Sidgwick & Jackson at £9.99.



The limousine carrying Kennedy races to the hospital, followed by the secret service car in which George Hickey



(circled, partly obscured) holds the gun that may have killed the president