



BO RADER/STAFF PHOTO

Howard Donahue holds rifle like Oswald's on left, and civilian version of military's M-16 on right.

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Author says friendly fire killed JFK

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Mannlicher-Carcano bullet shown left, M-16 bullet right.

It's a tale of two rifles.
 It's a tale of three bullets.
 It's a tale of a dead president, a still-grieving nation and a thousand unanswered questions.

But most of all it's a tale of a Towson man's obsession with finding the truth.

It's Howard Donahue's tale, contained in a soon-to-be published book titled "Mortal Error: The Shot that Killed JFK," by Bonar Menninger, which chronicles Mr. Donahue's long odyssey through the thickets of ballistic evidence, governmental obstructionism and what he views as media indifference.

The book embraces Mr. Donahue's conclusion that although Lee Harvey Oswald shot at and hit John F. Kennedy with a 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, the fatal bullet that destroyed the presi-

dent's skull came from another source.

Mr. Kennedy, Howard Donahue believes, was killed by friendly fire.

And in the book, he names the friend who fired, a Secret Service agent who was in the follow car in the Dallas motorcade and rose heroically to return fire on the assassin but instead accidentally triggered a round in the wrong direction.

This belief, needless to say, has invited immediate scorn. It puts Mr. Donahue at odds with both groups that have claimed proprietorship of the assassination.

David W. Belin, the former Warren Commission counsel who has emerged in recent years as the commission's most vocal defender, was quick to attack Mr. Donahue's thesis.

"The theory is, like all the others, just wrong. If you look at the

See DONAHUE, 2E, Col. 3

Marksman lays JFK death to friendly fire

DONAHUE, from 1E

record as a whole. It's clear that Lee Harvey Oswald shot the president, just as we concluded."

The U.S. Secret Service and the two Kennedy aides in the car have denied that a rifle was fired. Bob Snow, a spokesman for the Secret Service, said, "If I used the word 'ridiculous,' that would be the mildest thing I could say. I haven't seen the book, but know the general thesis."

He would not give out any information on the agent in question or his service or whereabouts, citing employee confidentiality.

Meanwhile, in Dallas, Larry Howard, director of the JFK Assassination Center and a firearms consultant on the film "JFK," called the idea "absolutely ridiculous." He claims the president was hit by at least three riflemen and the killing shot came from the grassy knoll.

But Howard Donahue, 69, can only smile: At least people are paying him some attention, when for years he has toiled in obscurity.

A former World War II bomber pilot with 35 missions under his belt and 19 combat decorations on his chest, he graduated from the University of Maryland in 1949 and for many years was a pharmaceutical salesman before pursuing his true avocation, firearms.

A dedicated hunter and firearms tinkerer, he operated a Towson gun shop for 12 years. In 1981, he closed the shop and has since earned his living as a firearms examiner, investigating gun accidents and testifying in court.

He has been pursuing his investigation since 1967, when he took part in tests with a Carcano rifle at the H. P. White Ballistics Laboratory near Bel Air. In that testing, filmed by CBS, he actually fired three times and hit three head shots on a moving target in less than the 5.8 seconds that most people take as the minimum time Oswald could have fired. But knowing how hard it was, he doubted Oswald, a mediocre shot, could have pulled it off.

Since then, Mr. Donahue has continued to amass information in support of his theory — or to destroy it. "I'm the only firearms expert who's ever investigated this," he says. "Everyone else is either a lawyer or an engineer or just an amateur."

An early version of his theory was published in 1977 in *The Sun Magazine*, to minor local acclaim but no national interest. He's been routinely dismissed by, among others, the House Select Assassination Committee of 1978, "60 Minutes" and the Kennedy assassination community. But with the determination of the

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HOWARD DONAHUE
Towson marksman

last succeeded in bringing his ideas to a mass audience.

His 15 minutes are here. His day in court has arrived.

"If I profit from the book," he says with characteristic directness, "it's only after I tried to give it away. I didn't get a cent from [*The Sun* in 1977] and I've been talking at colleges and talk shows for next to nothing. I tried to appear at the House Select Committee on Assassination in 1978 and was fluffed off, ignored. I was naive enough to think the government was really interested in what happened. Dopey me."

Approaches to other authors and Kennedy assassination "experts" went nowhere, until Bonar Menninger, a Washington reporter who now lives in Kansas City, Mo., heard of Mr. Donahue from a friend and gave him a call.

Mr. Menninger is a former reporter with the *Kansas City Business Journal* and the *Washington Business Journal*.

The Warren Commission concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, shot and killed John F. Kennedy. He missed with one shot, hit both Kennedy and Governor John Connally with a second, then fired the third shot that exploded the president's skull. The recovered fragments of bullets in the limousine can all be traced to his rifle. *False*

Mr. Donahue is not a conspiracy theoretician; in fact, he embraces many of the commission's controversial and much-ridiculed conclusions. But he believes that subtle ballistic evidence reveals that the head-shot bullet came from another direction.

Here is what happened that day, according to Mr. Donahue:

Oswald fired only twice at President Kennedy. His first bullet struck pavement, and sprayed the limousine with fragments, one of which struck Kennedy in the head. The second, the so-called "magic bullet," penetrated the president's neck (probably a mortal wound) and Governor Connally, as the Warren Commission said. In fact, Mr. Donahue is one of the few people who have studied the assassination who endorses the "magic bullet" theory.

At this point, a Secret Service agent in the follow-up Cadillac stood

weapon later made famous as the M-16. As he turned toward the Texas School Book Depository he slipped backward and the rifle fired, striking the president on a left-to-right axis high in the head, fragmenting inside his brain, and blowing out the right side of his skull. The moment was captured in all its terrible gore on Frame 313 of the Zapruder film.

That rifle's presence was acknowledged in some Warren Commission testimony though it evaded Mr. Donahue's notice for years, even if he had early on concluded from an analysis of the bullet angles in the skull that the fatal shot had to have come from some other source.

"It has the pattern of the classic gun accident," says Mr. Donahue. "As freakish as the odds may seem, many gun accidents involve fantastic odds: a man just happens to be in the way when a shotgun goes off. A tenth of a second later he'd be alive or a tenth of a second earlier."

Attempts by Mr. Donahue, Mr. Menninger and the chairman of the board of the book's publisher, St. Martin's, to approach the agent in question have been rebuffed with silence or threats of lawsuits. In fact, Katie Donahue, Howard's wife of 44 years, even tape-recorded a plea to the agent, and sent it via registered mail to his home; he signed for the package but never responded.

Warned that the agent could sue him for \$40 million, Mr. Donahue replied: "A hundred million. We think it's great. We went over this with our lawyers and their consensus is that he won't sue, because we did everything we could to reach him. We never arrived at our conclusion through malice. It was a deduction on our part. We don't accuse him of being an assassin. He was caught in an unfortunate web of fate through no fault of his own. . . ."

"It was an absolute accident and [the agent in question] was reacting in a courageous manner. He knew that as soon as he was up, he was going to come under a hail of lead."

Mr. Donahue offers a body of evidence to support his thesis:

□ Examination of the line between entry wound and exit portal in the skull which suggests the fatal bullet moved from left to right, exploded out the right side of the president's head; a bullet from the Texas Book Depository would have moved from right to left, exploding out his face.

□ The behavior of the fatal shot, which was consistent with a small caliber, thin-jacketed, high velocity round; it ruptured inside, leaving metal droplets throughout the tissue that can be observed in autopsy X-rays.

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