

5/26/77

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Dear George,

You may recall that a couple of weeks ago you asked me about the Sunday Sun pieces about the second of which AP's A wire carried a long story.

I then knew about this from what Reppert has just told me when he phoned me. I said it was b.s. but in a vacuum the theory that it was an accidental Secret Service shot was one of the more attractive ones. If you knew nothing about the fact.

Reppert did finally send me the stories. I sent my young friend Howard Hoffman copies.

Howard is perhaps less charitable than I was. He does indentify each of the individual items of fecal matter as fecal matter.

Bill has made a copy of the memo Howard sent me. I send it to you FYI only. You will recognize that this is not my work but Howard. I endorse it but it is his.

Having read the stories I can with some assurance now accuse Howard of understatement.

However, his memo will tell you more than enough of the fact.

(Odd, is it not that papers go for theorizing, which does not mean the normal standards of news, but avoid the fact, which does meet normal news concepts.

You may hear of Howard again. This will let you know that he is not a theorizer and that he is not willing to accept a fabricated conspiracy theory just because it has attained some attention.

Donahue and the Sun cannot have done any minimal checking or this garbage would never have solidified.

Two days ago I had a call from a Sun Wash bureau reporter named Mann. He wanted to know the status of my case. I've heard nothing more from Reppert.

The trouble with fact is that it is uncongenial to what people want to believe.

Including those editors who were conned and lack the ability to admit it to themselves.

I did not feel well last evening or I'd have updated you on your Saturday Kevin/Hall piece. You were not in when I phoned today.

While I have no way of knowing what print interest it achieved I do have a good couple of sources on the committee and the reporter interest. The followup you did not use UPI did use.

The deniability device now seems to be to have Jackie Hess cited. Well, she is not the one who made promises to Art so why should she not deny it? I've heard of no Klein or Fenton denials. What I know of reporter interest is in volume of approaches to the committee, not stories. It appears to have forced a meeting yesterday and a statement by Chardak after it.

The Post syndicated your overdue and delayed Lane-Fauntroy piece. It could have been used widely and I would not know it. What comment I've had, however, would not make you proud. I'm talking about the unprinted syndicated copy, not comment by those who read what the Post used, on which your wife's judgement was excellent.

Others had similar interests long ago. One reporter who was shunted off onto other assignments long ago, maybe two-three months ago, is again interested. ,ay there be others!

Best

5/23/77 MEMO by Howard Roffman:

Howard Donahue Emerges From the Woodwork....or  
Has John K. Lattimer met His Match?

A new pseudo-expert on the assassination has emerged: Howard Donahue, put on a pedestal to espouse his ignorance and stupidity by the Baltimore Sun and Ralph Reppert. Like Lattimer, Donahue hides behind amorphous credentials as an expert, cranks out outrageous "defenses" of the Warren Commission, and reveals a shocking ignorance of the facts. Unlike Lattimer, Donahue, shall we say, has his baloney sliced by the Secret Service in history's most unfortunate accident. He is a living monument to the truth of the old maxim, "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing."

To be sure, Donahue shows many earmarks of a qualified marksman and a man with better than average knowledge of ballistics. He degrades even these credentials by voicing some opinions that true experts in the field have soundly rejected--such as the likelihood of 399 having emerged in the condition it did. More often, he combines a decent ballistics background with utter misunderstanding of the facts relating to the assassination and horrendous, unscholarly analysis.

For example, the first Sun article quotes him as criticizing the way Frazier test fired the rifle for speed. The essence of the criticism is quite valid, i.e., we cannot know the validity of the minimum time Frazier obtained until we know if Frazier worked the bolt in the most efficient way. But how does Donahue know that Frazier did not work the bolt this way? He says a picture of Frazier posing, in a magazine. Most likely, this was the picture of Frazier in the TSED window during the reenactment, printed in Life magazine, 10/2/64 to accompany the Bord piece. This is not when Frazier test fired for speed. In fact, how dare Donahue presume that a single picture of Frazier posing with the rifle demonstrates Frazier's lack of knowledge of how to handle the rifle? It's absurd and irresponsible.

Also, he erects the familiar straw men. Again, from the first article, he chides those who say the cartridge is so low powered it couldn't have penetrated 2 men. This is not a serious criticism. As of the time of the WC's tests, the real criticism was the failure to set up a legitimate test of the proposition. After CBS' tests, the criticism has more merit, but even so, it is among the weakest of attacks against the SBT.

The reconstruction offered in the second article is something else, flawed from beginning to end. At page 6 he is quoted as saying that a bullet from the TSED Window entering the top right rear of the head would have exited in the left front lower part of the skull. This is nonsense on several grounds. First, after entering the skull, the bullet fragmented, so there is no telling where it "should" have exited. Second, I have long ago plotted the trajectory, and based on the way JFK's head was turned at 313, the trajectory was tangential through the right side of his head. Theoretically the bullet could have followed the lateral trajectory the WC says it did.

Donahue reveals some expertise in ballistics when he says that

the head wounds could not have been caused by ammo from Oswald's rifle, and that frangible ammo had to have been used. But then he blithely accepts the SBT in the face of the "near pristine" condition of 399. What happened to his expertise?

On his attempts to reconstruct the path of the head bullet, page 9, it is all worse than academic if only because, given the large "exit" area, he cannot in good faith pretend to know the precise point at which the "bullet" exited. If there was a 5 inch hole, there is an area of 5 inches in which the exit occurred, and on that basis you simply can't connect "two points" and discern a trajectory. Furthermore, his own reconstruction rules out the possibility of discerning a trajectory. He says the bullet exploded after entering the skull; it went to pieces, over 40 pieces. Obviously, they did not all continue along the original trajectory of the bullet before it struck the skull. Obviously, in fact, once the bullet was so violently taken off its ~~initial~~ initial course, it could not have continued along its original trajectory. So his plaster skulls with pointers stuck through them really tell nothing. You can stick the pointer in the "entrance" hole, but you can only randomly have it emerging from the enormous "exit" hole. And with that method of tracing a trajectory, you can virtually take your choice of any point to JFK's rear.

I was gratified, in a perverse way, that Donahue independently noted the 6.5mm metal fragment in the entrance wound. But I was agasht at his explanation of how it got there. He totally discounts the commonly observed phenomenon of "shaving"--when a soft-nosed bullet enters the skull on an angle it can shave off a fragment that is embedded on the outside of the skull. This again casts doubt on his credentials as a ballistics man. Instead he speculates (he who eschews conspiracy theorizing) that this fragment was the result of ricochet from an earlier miss that hit the street. This ricochet had amazing properties, and the theory is rivaled perhaps only by the single bullet theory itself. Apparently, the "missed shot" broke into three main pieces. Two of these, portions of the base and front end respectively, managed to land in the front seat of the car. Imagine that-- 2 pieces from opposite ends of the bullet deflect to the same location. Another hits the back of the head, but not any place on the back of the head. Rather, the precise spot where seconds later another shot is accidentally fired into the head by a SS agent! To raise the possibility is to refute it.

Donahue's reliance on S.M. Holland is at best misplaced. Holland in many respects was confused. In addition to confusing which ~~xxx~~ car the SS agent stood up in, he also said there was a dog sitting in the back seat with Mr & Mrs JFK.

But Donahue doesn't even need Holland for the proposition that a SS agent stood up with his rifle drawn. It was admitted by the agent, George Hickey, and has been no secret. All the mystery about who the agent was is poppycock. If Donahue had simply read the statements printed in volume 18 he could have resolved some of his problems and even found evidence to shake his theory. Like SS agent McIntyre describing Hickey's handling of the AR-15 and

adding "no shots were fired by any agents." (18H747). Oh sure, McIntyre might have been lying as part of a cover up...but doesn't Donahue have an obligation to at least cite this "lie"?

Furthermore, in his statement, Hickey very plainly says that he picked up the AR-15 after he saw the impact of the fatal head shot on JFK (18H763) Another lie perhaps? If so, the expert Donahue is silent about it.

As a measure of his familiarity with the facts, Donahue has to point to Manchester's book as authority for the proposition that there was an AR-15 in the follow-up car. The article notes that Donahue thinks the weapon really was an M-16, but apologizes for the errant Manchester because the 2 could easily be confused. The trouble is that all the SS agents referred to the weapon as an AR-15, including Hickey, the one who handled it. Presumably, they weren't confused. If anyone is, it is Donahue.

Interestingly, Donahue admits that Six Seconds was one of the books he read. Presumably, Thompson is also included among those critics he chides for having inadequate knowledge of ballistics. But he repeats one of Thompson's worst errors--about the dented cartridge case (page 14, second article) as support for the 2 shots by Oswald theory.

There are repeated other errors, reflecting a pathetic lack of basic knowledge: e.g., Robert Kennedy was the "take-charge" type who might have ordered the cover-up. But RFK was not in charge, and couldn't have ordered anything. or the quote of Earl Warren that he can't cite, and can't even remember fully, but which sticks in his mind. The quote is easily found--I think Lane cites it, and it is not to the effect that Donahue remembers.

This kind of irresponsibility is distressing indeed, especially when it is touted so. It is nothing more than ill-informed and inaccurate.

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