

Fresh doubts on JFK assassination

Forensic experts call for a new investigation of all the evidence

Despite the fierce criticism being heaped on the decade-old Warren Commission report and its explanation of circumstances surrounding the death of John F. Kennedy, a governmental review soon may endorse its conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, murdered the President. As a part of the Rockefeller Commission's confidential report on domestic CIA activities, it will be delivered to President Gerald Ford June 6.

But even before the commission has revealed its opinion on the subject, medicolegal experts challenge the thoroughness and objectivity of this latest re-investigation of the 1963 Dallas tragedy, calling for a full congressional inquiry into the JFK assassination (as well as the killings of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.—see page 28).

"Let's have an unbiased, scientific inquiry with full disclosure of all the evidence," urges attorney Robert J. Joling, president of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (backed by four past presidents of the academy). "And I don't mean bury some of it in the National Archives and say you can see this but you can't see that."

On April 18, five experts selected by the Rockefeller Commission went to Washington, where they reviewed some evidence in the archives available to all who can provide a legitimate reason for doing so under terms set out by the Kennedy family. Earlier, some of this material was examined by another government-selected panel in 1968. Independent of government, three physicians have looked at what was given to them to view. In all, 15 doctors (including the Warren Commission autopsy team) have examined "the evidence."

They are: the 1963 military autopsy team of Pierre A. Finck, James J. Humes, and J. Thornton Bosell; the 1968 Ramsey Clark panel of Russell Fisher, Alan R. Moritz, William H.



In assassination film, Kennedy clutches throat while Connally seems still unharmed.

Carnes, and Russell H. Morgan; the Rockefeller Commission panel of Werner U. Spitz, Richard Lindenberg, Fred Hodges, and Robert R. McMeekin; and independents Cyril Wecht, Forest Chapman, and John Latimer.

However, no one outside the Warren Commission itself has had access to all the medical evidence known to exist. And how much of it commission members actually saw is unsubstantiated. In all of the commission report there's no mention of member examination of x-rays, actual photographs, or physical evidence from the autopsy, or even motion pictures taken at the scene of the assassination. But on national television in April, Albert Jenner, former counsel to the commission, said he and commission members spent several days going over films and photographs taken at the scene.

The President's brain, removed and set in formalin, was listed as missing from the archives for more than ten

years. Just over a month ago it was found in the archives but not made available to the most recent panel of experts to visit there. Another key puzzle piece, according to Warren Commission critics—neutron activation analysis of bullets and bullet fragments—was released to those who requested it (three, including Dr. Wecht) by the FBI in mid-April. Again, Rockefeller Commission experts didn't see it. And color slides of President Kennedy's chest interior still elude potential examiners, as do tissue sections made from the area of his back wound.

What all this means is that the Warren Commission report has never been submitted to full and thorough scientific scrutiny. The question remains: Ten years later, should Congress reopen the investigation?

"I think it would be a waste of time and taxpayers' money," believes Dr. Russell Fisher, Maryland's chief medical examiner. "And it implies that people who did previous work were

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dishonest." In 1968, when Dr. Fisher was on the Ramsey Clark panel, he and the other three doctors were permitted only to view available evidence concerning the President and not permitted to view any medical records or x-rays of John Connally. They concluded there was no significant error in the Warren Commission's procedure or autopsy report.

"It wasn't the most accomplished procedure," admits Dr. Fisher. "But that's not new. The worst has already been said about it. For instance, the President's brain was missing. I hope they didn't let it dry out."

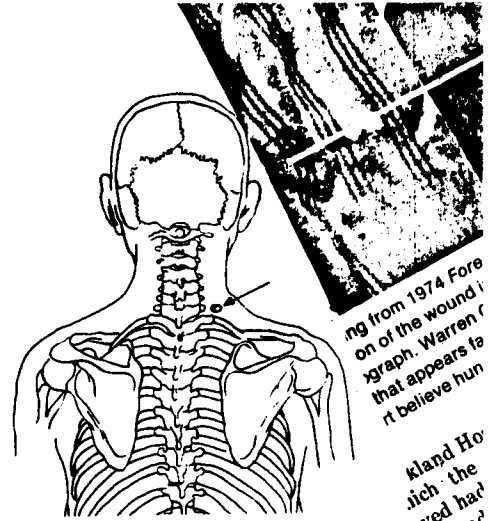
Essentially, the Rockefeller Commission doctors agreed. According to Michigan's Wayne County medical examiner, Dr. Werner U. Spitz, "There is nothing in the evidence inconsistent with the conclusions of the Warren Commission report." Pressed by an MWN correspondent, Dr. Spitz advanced his conviction further: "I doubt the missing evidence could have added much."

What Dr. Spitz did see: motion pic-

tures taken at the scene of the assassination, including the Zapruder film that shows the fatal gunshot, x-rays of the President, his clothing, his brace, bullets and bullet fragments, the Warren Commission autopsy protocol, and medical reports and x-rays of then-Gov. John Connally.

From his examination of the physical evidence and the films, the forensic pathologist offers the following description of the wounding of Connally and the murder of JFK. "Kennedy obviously was first hit while behind a sign in the Zapruder film," he says, "because as he emerges his hands are raised toward his neck.

"At that point Connally doesn't look hit, but that doesn't mean he wasn't. His reaction time could be slower and there was a difference in type of wound. The President's wound caused immediate bleeding into the air passage. Connally's major wound involved a punctured lung. The lung is very insensitive to pain. By looking at the film I have no idea whether the President and Connally



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were struck at the same time, but it's not at all inconceivable.

"The slug went through the back of the President's right shoulder and out his trachea. In Connally's case, the bullet went through his right lung, shattered a rib, and emerged below his right nipple. It then penetrated his right wrist at an angle, fracturing the right radius. And, finally, the bullet punctured Connally's left thigh."

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Diagram from 1974 *Forensic Sciences* paper by Dr. Wecht (left) shows 'approximate location of the wound in the President's back' as he found it in autopsy photograph. Warren Commission photograph of Kennedy's shirt shows bullet hole that appears far lower and to the left. Defenders of commission don't believe hunching of Kennedy's shoulders could have brought shirt up.

quiry and one later re-investigation the experts posited a change in seating positions during the second that both Kennedy and Connally are hidden behind a sign in the Zapruder film. If Kennedy had leaned out from the car or hunched over before being hit, magic bullet hypothesis proponents suggest, the trajectory from his wound to Connally's wound matches up.

Re-creation of the bullet trajectory through the late President's body is complicated by the fact that the exit wound was enlarged by Parkland Hospital surgeons for a tracheotomy. Too, chest interior photographic slides that might verify the bullet's path are still missing from the Washington archives.

Dr. Spitz assumed the exit wound to be at the center of the tracheotomy incision, concluding the magic bullet hypothesis fits the facts. Dr. Wecht plotted a range of possible trajectories from the enlarged exit wound, concluding that the same bullet could not have hit Connally in the right side of his torso.

More telling, the two physicians differ on the conceivability of one bullet doing so much damage—four penetrations and two shattered bones—and emerging relatively undamaged. Dr. Spitz says it's not inconsistent; Dr. Wecht says it's very unlikely.

But before this disagreement becomes a shouting match, evidence newly released by the FBI under the Freedom of Information Act may resolve the dispute. As part of the Warren Commission's investigation long ago, the federal law enforcement agency submitted samples of bullets matched with the rifle Oswald was said to have fired from the Texas School Book Depository, and bullet fragments extracted from wounds, to neutron activation analysis (NAA). Very new in 1964, NAA involves irradiating a specimen in a nuclear reactor, followed by detection and analysis of the induced radioactivity. It can verify with greater accuracy than spectrographic analysis whether two samples came from a common source.

A letter from then-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to the Warren Commission about the NAA test of bullets

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Parkland Hospital was a single bullet, which the Warren Commission believed had penetrated both the President and Connally. Speculation about the presumed angle of the bullet's path from a sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository and the relatively undamaged condition of this so-called magic bullet have been major sources of controversy. Critics ask how one bullet could hit two people, cause four penetrating wounds, shatter a rib and a wrist bone, and emerge in nearly pristine condition with less than 2% of its original weight lost.

"If I consider that the President was sitting in a relaxed fashion with his back slightly curved while hidden behind the sign in the Zapruder film," says Dr. Spitz, "it's entirely conceivable that one bullet penetrated both Kennedy and Connally. In my evaluation, the bullet went through all these structures and that it was not deformed is not contradictory. I believe that total fragments found and those on x-ray are less than what was missing from the weight of the bullet." But Dr. Spitz weighed neither bullets nor fragments.

According to the Warren Commission, a second bullet fired from the same location, the Texas School Book Depository, missed the Presidential limousine but left a lead smear on the sidewalk near the auto's path. A third military-jacketed slug shattered the President's skull, killing him. There's little serious question from critics about this event.

"It couldn't be the case that two bullets struck his head simultaneously, as some critics have suggested, because distinctive fracture lines would radiate from the second

impact as well as the first. This was not seen. One bullet entered from the rear of his skull and exited near his right eye," observes Dr. Spitz.

A longtime Warren Commission critic, independent medical evidence examiner Cyril H. Wecht, a physician-attorney who is coroner of Pennsylvania's Allegheny County, notes that a single nonmedical member of the Rockefeller Commission panel, Defense Department civilian employee Alfred Olivier, is the very same ballistics expert who judged the evidence for the Warren Commission over ten years ago.

"I consider the selection of panel members very improper," charges Dr. Wecht. "At best, the selection process appears to have been naive."

Dr. Wecht, the pathology representative on a special committee of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences created to review the JFK assassination in 1965, first asked ten years ago to see the physical evidence stored in the archives. He was not permitted access until 1972. The only forensic pathologist to examine independently what was available there, Dr. Wecht differs with government-selected examiners on several observations. Basing his opinion on his examination of the President's initial wound from a slug that entered his right shoulder, exiting to the left side of his trachea, Dr. Wecht challenges the feasibility of the Warren Commission's magic bullet hypothesis.

"That bullet should have either completely missed Connally or struck him at the extreme left side of his torso," Dr. Wecht insists. "But, in fact, Connally was wounded on his right side."

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Dr. Spitz has examined evidence as Rockefeller Commission member.



Dr. Wecht has independently examined Kennedy autopsy records.

and bullet fragments noted "minor variation in composition." There was no indication that the commission explored the inferences or hypothesis verification that could have been drawn from this bit of evidence. Did NAA indicate fragments from Kennedy's initial wound, Connally's wounds, and a sample of the nearly intact magic bullet all came from the same source or different sources?

Different sources would suggest more than one rifle and more than one assassin. The President's initial wound and Connally's wounds occurred no more than 1.5 seconds apart, according to frame-by-frame analysis of the films. The single-shot, bolt-action rifle linked to Oswald could not fire two bullets more quickly

than 2.5 seconds apart, according to re-enactments performed by military sharpshooters.

Dr. Wecht confirms that he has received FBI technical data from the ten-year-old NAA analysis. The 72-page report will be evaluated by Dr. Vincent Guinn, one of the developers of the NAA process; says Dr. Wecht.

But even if this highly technical evidence leans toward the Warren Commission's magic bullet conclusion or the "more than one bullet" assertion of critics, questions will persist till all the autopsy evidence is released. A recent poll found that 70% of Americans doubt the Warren Commission findings.

That's why the president of the American Academy of Forensic Sci-

ences urges that Congress reopen the investigation and select a panel of assuredly unbiased experts to go over all the remaining evidence piece by piece. In a letter circulated to ten past presidents of the prestigious medical-legal organization, Joling has asked them to join him in this request. Several, including Dr. Wecht, have done so already.

An inquiry conducted as the Rockefeller Commission investigation appears to have been, suggests Joling, "immediately makes it suspect to a lot of people. Not me particularly, but to a lot of people because it's the CIA or the Executive Branch going to somebody and saying 'Look at this and give us the right answer,' meaning 'our' answer."

The AAFS president noted that he has been in contact with Rep. Henry B. Gonzales (D-Tex.), who months ago introduced a resolution in Congress calling for reopening investigations into three assassinations in the past decade—those of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—as well as a new look at the attempted assassination of George C. Wallace.

On May 7 Dr. Wecht was invited to testify before the Rockefeller Commission. "Chief counsel Robert Olsen took my deposition," he says. "I stressed the importance of getting missing material, pointed out that the commission-selected panel of experts had not asked to see it. Why? Of course, he didn't respond." ■

... AND ON RFK AND KING KILLINGS, TOO

Under the intense scrutiny of scores of critics over a period of ten years, some nagging doubts about the JFK assassination linger on and on. Nearly forgotten, however, are some equally valid doubts about the killings of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. Maybe it's because there are fewer critics.

"In the case of Robert Kennedy, powder burns indicate the gun that killed him was no more than three inches nor less than an inch from his mastoid when fired. The bullet entered right to left, back to front, and

at a 30 degree upward angle," notes AAFS President Joling, also director-consultant for Med-Sci-Law in Tucson. "Between Kennedy and Sirhan Sirhan there was an assistant chef named Uecker who said the gun in Sirhan's hand never came closer than a foot or two from Kennedy and that it was always in front of him. Comparisons were made between one bullet removed from Kennedy, another removed from an ABC correspondent shot at the scene, and a third test-fired from a similar gun. None matched.

"In the case of Martin Luther King Jr., you've got an escaped prisoner named James Earl Ray, at a window near where King is going to be. After the killing he leaves a duffel bag and radio behind, identifiable by the prison staff as belonging to him, and gets into a white Mustang. At various times he turns up in Canada, London, and other European cities. Between the time he escaped from prison and the day of the killing, Ray had not been employed. How did he manage to travel to all those places?"