

New Look

Second-gun theory put to a new test

By Michael Dorman

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Almost 35 years after President John F. Kennedy's assassination, federal agencies disclosed plans yesterday to conduct new, highly unusual scientific tests on evidence obtained from a bullet nose found in Kennedy's limousine. And one source with knowledge of the planned tests said it is conceivable they could show that a second gunman fired at Kennedy's motorcade.

The belated tests — no matter what their outcome — were expected to stir new speculation by assassination theorists who contend that a conspiracy was responsible for the murder. FBI laboratory examiners in Washington, D.C., have been designated to conduct the tests, initially requested by the Justice Department, for the National Archives and the U.S. Assassination Records Review Board.

After the 1963 assassination in Dallas, five fragments making up the bullet nose were recovered from a seat of the limousine in which Kennedy was riding. The largest fragment still has "fibrous-plant debris" embedded in it, the National Archives said. Nobody has ever explained what the debris is and why it was there, although there has been discussion of it in investigations over the years. Archivist of the United States John Carlin, the custodian of Kennedy assassination evidence and records, said the testing "to complete this unfinished business is in the public interest."

The source who suggested the possibility of a second gunman said the new tests could show that four shots were fired at the presidential motorcade — not the three described by the Warren Commission. Since the commission determined that a single gunman could not have fired the rifle identified as the murder weapon more than three times in the available time, this source said, the inescapable conclusion would be that there were two gunmen.

Only one other bullet was recovered, the so-called "magic bullet" the Warren Commission concluded had hit Kennedy in the back, passed through his body and wounded Texas Gov. John Connally — and still was found in almost pristine condition on a hospital stretcher. A third bullet, the commission said, missed the limousine.

Investigators say the logical assumption about the bullet fragments found in the limousine is that they must have come from the fatal bullet that struck Kennedy in the back of the head.

"There is no known reason why this fiber should be embedded in that bullet fragment," the source said. "If tests show the fiber came, say, from Kennedy's necktie, that would upset all the assumptions made for years." One of the assumptions was that a nick in Kennedy's tie was made by the "magic bullet" after it passed through his body.

But if the fragment with the fiber shows that an-

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NATION at Bullet Fired at JFK



AP Photo

An FBI crime lab will try to determine if the bullet fragment, above, from Kennedy's limousine came from a second shooter's gun.

other bullet hit the tie, the source said, that would indicate a fourth bullet.

National Archives officials said the fibrous material on the bullet may have come from Kennedy's clothing, from material in which the bullet was wrapped after the assassination — or the tests may be inconclusive. The tests will be conducted only on the fibrous debris and on the four smaller bullet fragments. The largest fragment has previously been examined.

Archivist Carlin said the Archives were initially reluctant to engage in any testing that might alter an

item of evidence. "I was persuaded to the contrary by the review board's finding that the testing of the fiber was recommended by the firearms examination panel of the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1979," Carlin said. "This recommendation was not in the published final report of the committee and thus the testing was never done." The Justice Department, noting that the tests recommended by the House committee panel were never carried out, recently requested that they be performed now.

The review board said it will choose one or more independent observers for the testing.