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Crime of Century

A history professor who studied President Kennedy's assassination for 15 years says in a new book the nation's 35th president was killed by at least three gunmen in a synchronized cross-fire. In *Crime of the Century*, a scholarly study of the Kennedy assassination, Dr. Michael Kurtz of Southeastern Louisiana University said Lee Harvey Oswald may or may not have been one of those who fired as Kennedy's motorcade passed through Dallas Nov. 22, 1963. "Those responsible for the murder of John Kennedy got away with it," Kurtz said. "Their successful escape from arrest and prosecution was aided and abetted by the incompetence of the Warren Commission and by the vigorous efforts of the executive branch of the government and by the House of Representatives to suppress evidence."

Exhume Kennedy, historian

By MARJORIE ROEHL

Unless the body of John F. Kennedy is exhumed and comprehensive tests made on every bullet fragment that figured in his death, the murder of the former president may never be solved, Dr. Michael L. Kurtz of the history department at Southeastern Louisiana University said here yesterday.

He refused to express conclusions about the case. "This is not the function of historians," he said. "However, I do believe the time has come for a scholarly study of the case by historians. I would say that the evidence now available does lean toward the conspiracy theory (that there was more than one person involved) and that tests, while not conclusive, do point to possible use of more than one gun."

Kurtz spoke during a discussion of the Kennedy assassination at the 43rd annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association at the Grand Hotel.

He discussed the medical and ballistics evidence in the case, saying that evidence is "a matter of reasonable doubt."

THE ORIGINAL AUTOPSY report on Kennedy's murder was altered, Kurtz said, citing as one source an unnamed official present at the autopsy. "The present report now considered official is undated and incomplete," Kurtz said. At first he used the word "forgery" about the report, but later qualified the term.

"The present report lacks any mention of several bodily organs," he said. "There are no tapes or films of the

autopsy. We do not know what the original report said. Also, slides showing the president's brain, tissue and the chest are missing from the National Archives."

He said the missing items are "in the possession of the Kennedy family, who have access to them." The body may contain bullet fragments important to a solution, he said.

The present autopsy report says, for instance, that "the president fell forward onto the floor, which is obviously incorrect," Kurtz said. "It also uses the term 'presumed,' which is not proper medical terminology."

Another speaker, Howard Roffman of Florida, author of "Presumed Guilty," a book about the case, said the original autopsy report was burned by the chief autopsy officer "after it became clear that Oswald had been killed and the report would never be challenged in a courtroom."

KURTZ SAID HE believes that Bullet 399, said on the Warren Commission report to have been fired by Lee Harvey Oswald, "came from the gun that was supposed to have belonged to Oswald, but there is no evidence that it was fired at either President Kennedy or John Connally. It was found on a stretcher in the hospital in Dallas, and some theories today are that it may have been planted there, or even that the bullet now held by the FBI may not really be Bullet 399."

Neutron action analysis, a test designed to prove whether bullet fragments came from the same source, seems to show that more than one rifle

was used, Kurtz said, but further study is needed.

However, he agreed with a questioner that it was possible the assassin might have used ammunition of different types in the same gun.

Asked whether he believes the confusion surrounding the case was caused by deceit or official bungling, Kurtz once more refused to state a conclusion. "However," he said, "I do think it may well have been the result of the Warren Commission's irresponsible and stupid actions. These people had no special expertise in this matter and some of them did not even attend the most significant meetings."

N.O. States Item
urges pg. 2

"It seems possible, however, that some members of the commission staff did presume Oswald to be guilty."

He cited the commission's finding that a bullet entered the president's neck, when other sources, including an inspection of the president's clothes, show that the wound was about six inches lower.

Dr. David R. Wrono of the University of Wisconsin said much of the material published on the assassination is filled with errors and "shoddy scholarship." He called former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's courtroom work in the trial of Clay Shaw "confused."

Dear Jim,

9/7/82

Dave told me he'd recommended that you review Kuttz's book. As I told him, I think it is a waste of what little time you have, unless you'll enjoy it.

I've read and annotated the book and can send you notes and quotes if you want. It is sick as well as crazy, utterly irresponsible, aside from being dishonest and inaccurate. In his arrogance and ego-tripping he makes stupid mistakes as he pontificates. And it is anything but ~~scholarly~~ scholarly. He is careful, where he has notes, to make it close to impossible to find what he refers to. He doesn't even know how to refer to the FBI or Archives records and refers to them in meaningless ways. Sometimes his references cannot possibly be relevant. I've a number of them noted.

It appears that he wrote it off the top of his head on different occasions and then added enough notes to meet the phony standards about notes.

This book will have little circulation and less influence, none at all except for a few collegiate phonies like him.

Of course he cribs and tries to hide it with contrived notes. He maligns the critics, extending this even to his consored index, but he has nothing of any consequence that I didn't publish earlier. The manner in which he does this is calculated to give the impression that it is all his own original work. What is original with him is almost as responsible as The Umbrella Man.

No mention of missed shot and he is not able to understand what NAA is, so he describes it only incorrectly.

The funniest thing is where he says that the back shot was upward in JFK and thus came from the TDED second floor - get this - because that was lower than the car on Elm Street! Even his area charts are badly wrong.

I won't waste any more time on it unless you think you'd enjoy clobbering him.

Best,

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March 21, 1983

James H. Lesar
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Suite 900
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Dear Mr. Lesar:

I have now gone through your letter of February 7 and have examined both the Kurtz and Weisberg books.

I do understand the basis for your suspicions; the parallels are often close. At the same time, it is possible to conclude in each case that the two authors were drawing similar conclusions from the same documents. Where the language is parallel it is sometimes drawn from the documents themselves. Since Weisberg's works are mentioned in the bibliography, some attribution is clearly provided. In our judgment, the charge of "lifting material"--a very serious one in the academic world--is too strong.

I wonder if a slight rewording might not resolve the problem. Might you say, for example: "Its valid points derive from the very critics Kurtz deprecates. For example, Kurtz relies heavily on the work of Harold Weisberg and offers little information that Weisberg has not previously revealed." That wording--or something similar of your own choice--would make the point without imposing the burden of having to document plagiarism, which as I'm sure you know is difficult to do.

Let me know what you think.

Sincerely yours,

B. Edward McClellan

B. Edward McClellan
Acting Editor

BEM:smp

Crime of the Century: The Kennedy Assassination from a Historian's Perspective. By Michael L. Kurtz. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982. xi + 291 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$17.50.)

In *Crime of the Century* Michael L. Kurtz laments that "professional scholars" have neglected the assassination of President John F. Kennedy; he also disparages the works of Warren Commission critics for their "obvious bias" and lack of "the careful analysis of objective evidence that characterizes the scholar." Having set the stage for his own entry, Kurtz announces "an original interpretation based on carefully calculated scrutiny of the most reliable and convincing sources" and promises "much new evidence." He vows to avoid speculation because it "is not within the realm of the historian."

Kurtz concludes from his examination of the evidence that there clearly was a conspiracy to kill Kennedy and that the probes of the Warren Commission and the House Select Committee on Assassinations were seriously flawed. Although these conclusions cannot be faulted, there is virtually nothing of any consequence in this book that is new. With minor exceptions, its valid points derive from the very critics Kurtz deprecates. For example, Kurtz relies heavily on the work of Harold Weisberg and offers little information that Weisberg has not previously revealed.

This book lacks scholarship. The author makes blatant factual mistakes and important errors of omission: Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment* (1966) is not the first book on the subject; the wounding of James Tague is totally ignored. There are falsehoods: the Warren Commission was not "[u]naware of the FBI's real attitude toward it"; to the contrary, its members stated in their secret sessions that the FBI "would like to have us fold up and quit," and they also asserted that the FBI had concluded that Oswald was the lone assassin without having "run out all kinds of leads." Kurtz relies on commission testimony by an FBI agent contradicted by FBI records and on the results of tests performed for the House committee on evidentiary items inexplicably different in size, shape, and weight from the original FBI specimens without evincing any awareness of the discrepancies. The book's footnotes retard rather than advance scholarship: they generally do not support the assertions made in the text, nor do they identify with requisite specificity the materials cited.

In his last chapter Kurtz forgoes his vow against speculation—already broken—and reconstructs the assassination. He hypothesizes that a shot that hit Kennedy in the back—he asserts at an upward angle—was fired from the second floor of the Texas School Book Depository Building. Here he whooshes across the line separating speculation from fantasy. His assertion that "the first two floors of the Depository were lower than the limousine at the time of the shots" requires a feat of levitation that is neither recorded on any film of the assassination nor testified to by any eyewitness.

Kurtz rightly calls attention to the need for professional historians to appraise the assassination of President Kennedy and the official investigations into the crime. Unfortunately, this book does not measure up to the demands of that gargantuan task.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

JAMES H. LESAR