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Secret '64 Memo Doubts Bullet Idea

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A Warren Commission member expressed serious reservations about one of the panel's more controversial conclusions, the theory that a single shot wounded both President John F. Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connally, a long-secret document has revealed. The "magic-bullet" theory was essential to the commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone assassin.

Marked "confidential," the released document was a memorandum sent by commission member John J. McCloy to the commission's chief counsel, J. Lee Rankin. It was dated June 24, 1964, seven months after Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, and conveyed McCloy's critique of a draft of the final Warren Commission report.

"I think too much effort is expended on attempting to prove that the first bullet, which hit the president, was also responsible for all of Connally's wounds," McCloy wrote. "The evidence against this is not fully stated." He added that a section of the report dealing with the possibility of shots being fired at Kennedy's motorcade from an overpass was "not well done." Elsewhere, McCloy questioned the commission's account that a bullet found on a stretcher at Dallas' Parkland Hospital — where Kennedy and Connally were treated after being shot — was the "magic bullet." He wrote: "The statement concerning the bullet which was found on the stretcher is not particularly persuasive because there is no indication that the 'stretcher bullet' was in fact the bullet which caused the [Connally] wrist wound."

The "magic-bullet" theory's importance to the conclusion that Oswald alone killed Kennedy lay in the number and timing of the shots fired at the president's motorcade. The commission concluded there was time for Os-

wald to fire no more than three shots and that he did, in fact, fire three times. One was said to have missed the presidential limousine entirely. A second — the fatal bullet — was said to have struck Kennedy in the back of the head. That left just one more bullet, but it was known that Kennedy also had been struck in the lower part of the back of his neck and that Connally had suffered wounds to his back, right wrist and left thigh.

If the commission had decided that separate bullets had struck Kennedy and Connally, it would have been forced to conclude there had been a fourth bullet. And since there had not

been time for Oswald to fire more than three shots, it would have meant there must have been a second shooter. The commission responded with the "magic-bullet" theory — concluding the bullet that struck Kennedy in the neck passed through his body, hit Connally in the back, emerged from his chest, then passed through his wrist into his thigh.

It has been perhaps the conclusion most criticized by conspiracy theorists. The document

recently released by the U.S. Assassination Records Review Board — which screens Kennedy assassination documents and releases those that will not endanger national security — also contains many other suggestions by McCloy on revising the draft report. Some of those suggestions were adopted by the commission. But the commission did not revise the sections dealing with the "magic-bullet" theory. Nor did it revise other sections criticized by McCloy, dealing with the Kennedy and Connally wounds. He asked at one point, for example: "Why is there no citation of authority with regard to the wound in the president's back and its path through his body?"

McCloy, who died in 1989, served as Kennedy's disarmament adviser.



AP File Photo

John J. McCloy

Liz Smith is on vacation. Her column will return Aug. 25.