

Media Views

The Media and the John F. Kennedy Assassination

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In 1977, the commercial press of America may be facing its own Watergate, its Dreyfus scandal, in the congressional attempt to re-open the investigation of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. If this inquiry is allowed to proceed freely, its victims may not be the CIA and the FBI but The New York Times, Time magazine, the wire services, and the network news departments. No impartial congressional investigation can fail to disclose that the national press misled the country in its treatment of the events of November, 1963.

its more editorially weighed Sunday editions. On Sunday, November 21, 1976, the Times week-in-review section carried a prominently featured article entitled "Why Another Assassination Inquiry?" Set off by a photograph of the Kennedys and John Connally in Texas, this article discussed the Kennedy and King murders as "long past events" and implied that little could be learned from a new investigation. About six weeks later, on January 2, 1977, the Sunday Times carried a lengthy article in its news section entitled "Council in Assassination Inquiry Often Target

In the aftermath of Kennedy's death, a number of journalists suffered a reversion to a child's fixation upon an archaic crime. In this fixed idea, a picture-book John Wilkes Booth eternally rises to threaten a picture-book Abraham Lincoln. Suddenly overtaken by the realities of 1963, the press dealt with the situation by turning a contemporary assassination into a scenario in which Oswald became Booth and Kennedy became Lincoln. This scenario is closer to fantasy than history, and it is frozen for posterity in William Manchester's hysterical book about the Ken-

Wicker's article typifies the jumping to conclusions which heightened public resentment toward Oswald, the only jailed suspect in the Kennedy case. In the following hours, the Times became even surer of itself. On November 25, 1963, the very day of its "Spiral of Hate" editorial, the Times' 8-column headline convicted Oswald of murdering the President. The headline's first line: "PRESIDENT'S ASSASSIN SHOT TO DEATH." The article accompanying this inflammatory headline also convicted a legally innocent man, Gladwin Hill, a Times reporter, opened his



Associated Press wirephoto
THE MOMENT—President Kennedy, his face hidden by the rear view mirror, thrusts his hand across his body after being struck by the assassin's bullet. Left, with his back turned, is Texas Gov. Connally, also hit by bullets. Mrs. Kennedy, partially obscured, is at the President's right, her white-gloved hand on his arm.



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It would be pointless to resurrect this lapse of the Fourth Estate were it not for the fact that much of the press is repeating its past mistakes in its coverage of the current House Select Committee on Assassinations.

In September of 1976, the United States House of Representatives set up a Select Committee on Assassinations. Although the committee's primary purpose is to investigate the murders of both John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the press and the public have tended to give greater attention to the Kennedy assassination. The chief counsel for this select committee is Richard Sprague, at one time first assistant district attorney of Philadelphia. The choice of Sprague seems apposite in view of this prosecutor's independence from political pressure and his achievement from convicting union leader Tony Boyle for complicity in the murders of Boyle's union rival, Joseph Yablonski, and Yablonski's wife and daughter.

The Select Committee on Assassinations has been established partly in response to public and congressional doubts concerning the findings of the Warren Commission. A recent Gallup poll indicates that about 80% of the American people reject the Warren Commission's conclusion that a lone sniper killed President Kennedy. Last spring the Senate Intelligence Committee found so many contradictions regarding circumstances surrounding Lee Harvey Oswald that it voted without objection to recommend a congressional investigation of Oswald's motives for killing Kennedy.

One would think that the American press, if only to allay public and congressional doubts, would have an interest in seeing the Kennedy case reopened. Yet instead of supporting this committee, influential members of this country's commercial press are now engaged in an effort to discredit the Select Committee on Assassinations.

Leading this effort are the New York Times and Time magazine. The Times has been placing anti-committee articles in

These two photographs are both reproductions of the Algens photograph which appeared in the late city edition of the New York Herald Tribune on Saturday, November 23, 1963, the day after the assassination. The forged rear-view mirror appears just above Kennedy's clenched fist. A rectangle has been drawn on the photograph at the right so that the reader can see in the upper right section of the rectangle part of the actual rear-view mirror which is attached to the President's windshield. The caption directly beneath each photograph is the Herald Tribune's.

of Criticism." In view of Sprague's superior record, the shortcomings in his work raised by this piece are relatively minor. This article, however, is one of the many which has created a negative portrait of Sprague in the public mind. In it Sprague is characterized as having a "controversial background." The adjective in this phrase has left its mark. Today, the media's standard epithet for Sprague is "controversial prosecutor" and now there may be no way to save this committee without sacrificing Sprague to his critics.

Time magazine, working with less subtlety, recently used its "Nation" section to create doubts about the select committee. Its January 10th issue ran an article tendentiously entitled "Sprague's Sprawl." Time's prose turned the committee's investigative staff into "the newest congressional empire;" and the inquiry's projected time span became an epoch beyond mortal reckoning ("no prudent actuary would dare to predict how long it may last").

Distortions such as these have aroused such doubts among media-conscious Washington legislators that the committee's investigation may be called off by the House of Representatives. Before this happens, we should consider the reasons why the press has been so sensitive regarding the Kennedy assassination.

On November 22, 1963, a president was killed, and the national media had no historical resources to bring to the event. Kennedy had been riding so high and the press had been so infatuated with his success that his murder created a void, an emptiness in the media's idea of America's history.

nedly assassination. The Death of a President. The Manchester fantasy does, however, help to explain the extreme contradictions which appeared in the media's reporting of the events surrounding Kennedy's death.

Shortly after the assassination, on November 25, 1963, The New York Times wrote an indignant editorial in response to the killing of Lee Harvey Oswald. Entitled "Spiral of Hate," the editorial blamed this murder on, among others, the Dallas authorities and those members of the press who turned Oswald's jail appearance into a media event. In these paragraphs, the Times displayed sensitivity regarding the legal rights of Oswald. The editorial noted that Oswald was declared guilty by Dallas law enforcement officials "before any indictment had been returned or any evidence presented and in the face of continued denials by the prisoner."

One would not guess from this editorial that the Times was an active contributor to the atmosphere of hysteria in which Oswald was murdered. During the interval between November 22 and November 24, the Times had determined that Oswald was guilty; and more than once this news paper explicitly labeled Oswald as the "president's assassin." On the day after the assassination, November 23, Tom Wicker's lead story on Kennedy's death blamed the assassination on a single person (called "an assassin" or "the killer") who "fired the rifle from a building just off the motorcade route." Wicker was writing only hours after the killing, but, Sherlock Homes-like, he presented as facts: 1) the existence of a lone assassin; and 2) the location of the assassin's point of firing.

story by referring to "President Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald."

There was no conscious hypocrisy in the Times double portrait of Oswald. The days immediately following the assassination were marked by a panic in which newspaper and television journalists fell into a rage for order. If the pieces of the puzzle did not fit the Booth-Lincoln scenario, then they were altered to fit. The most striking alteration of the pieces did not, however, concern written journalism but rather the photographic documentation surrounding the Kennedy assassination.

Much of the alteration of assassination photographs is a matter of record. In exhibits contained in Volume XXI of the Warren Commission's evidences, for example, Life, Newsweek, and The New York Times all admit to having reouched for publication a photograph in which Oswald supposedly holds the murder weapon in his hand. This photograph is surrounded by uncertainty. If mysteriously appeared about two months after Oswald's death, its quality is poor; and it may have been altered prior to its acquisition by journalists. Yet Life, Newsweek and The New York Times, instead of ascertaining this photograph's authenticity, cavalierly reouched and then published it as one more piece of evidence against Oswald.

The Warren Commission itself was not above altering photographic evidence in order to make the visual documents support the orthodox hypothesis that Kennedy was slain from behind by a single sniper. Volume XVIII of the Warren Commission's documents prints a lengthy sequence of frames from Abraham Zapruder's 8mm film of the president's assassination. These frames do not support the Commission's hypothesis about the shots from the rear inasmuch as the film, beginning with frame 314, shows Kennedy's head lurching backwards rather than forward upon the impact of the most severe head wound. Instead of confronting this contradiction, the Warren Commission simply cut the pieces to fit its hypothesis by reversing and then incorrectly numbering frames 314 and 315. This alteration is meant to give

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the reader of Volume XVIII the impression that Kennedy's head was driven forward for a moment on being hit.

This transposition of frames, the only such reversal in Volume XVIII, is easy to detect. The placements of a woman's shadow in the background makes the change immediately evident to the eye. Yet when the Warren Commission volumes were released in the fall of 1964, no one in the national press called attention to this crucial reversal of frames.

The media's most perplexing manipulation of a visual document concerns a photograph which played a large role in aiding the Warren Commission's determination of the exact timing of the Kennedy shooting. This photograph was made by Dallas Associated Press photographer and news photo editor James Altgens during the assassination itself. It was taken from a position in front of the presidential limousine and depicts Kennedy, visible through the windshield, after he had been hit the first time but before he received his fatal head wounds. Altgens' position on Elm Street gave him an open view of Kennedy's face. In the photograph, however, there seems to be one obstacle to our view of Kennedy. This is a rear-view mirror, which, suspended over the windshield, blocks our view of Kennedy's face. This mirror appears in prints of the picture published all over the world (as well as in those prints studied by the Warren Commission's investigators and published in its volumes).

This Altgens shot is one of the most eloquent pictures in the history of photojournalism. Within it there are memorable details such as the gloved hand of Mrs. Kennedy supporting the arm of her husband. This picture is also an AP photograph taken by a skilled professional who had been working for the Associated Press for more than 25 years. It is surely among the handful of great historical news photographs; and one would expect to find it featured in the AP's recently published collection of news photographs, *The Instant It Happened*. It is jolting to open this book to the Kennedy assassination section and not find this photograph among the AP's selections.

This omission in *The Instant It Happened* may make more sense after we study the Altgens photograph. A scrutinizing look quickly discloses that Altgens did have a basically unobstructed view of the president's face and that the rear-view

mirror blocking most of Kennedy's face from view has been drawn over the picture by a retouching hand. Again, it does not take an expert on photographic forgery to see that the mirror has been drawn over the photograph. In fact, the re-touching job is so careless that the real rear-view mirror, somewhat obscured by the tinted glass of the windshield, is partly visible almost directly above the drawn-in, forged mirror.

Why was this photograph altered and by whom? I telephoned James Altgens in Dallas to ask him about the photograph. He said that he had no reason to suppose that the AP had ever altered one of his photographs. He also spoke of various AP policies: 1) The AP rarely retouches a photograph; 2) retouching is done only for reasons of pictorial clarity; and 3) the subscriber to the AP is always notified of the retouching. I was interested to learn of this third policy; it is one which every publication should follow whenever any

kind of alteration is performed on a photograph. Mr. Altgens was generous with his time and his recollections of his camera work in Dallas on the day of the assassination. He put me in touch with the New York AP office, and I now have an appointment to visit The Associated Press in New York to look at its Altgens photographs.

This Altgens photograph raises many questions. Why were the Warren Commission investigators given this altered photograph to work with? Why hasn't the tampering with this photograph been noticed by the national press? Why have books and newspapers all over the world printed this photograph with captions erroneously explaining that Kennedy's face is blocked from view by the mirror?

It is surprising that newspaper editors did not see at once that in Altgens photograph there are two rear view mirrors on the presidential windshield, one real and one forged? On the day after the assassination, November 23, 1963, the late city edition of the New York Herald Tribune used a blow-up of this Altgens photograph in which part of the actual mirror of the presidential limousine is plainly visible above the forged mirror. In fact, even if the real mirror were not visible, it would be easy to spot the forged mirror by comparing a photograph of the Altgens windshield with the other photographs available to us of the windshield of the presidential limousine. If we take two photographs, the standard Altgens print and an unaltered photograph of the windshield, we discover that the forged mirror has been placed closer to the dashboard than the more elevated actual rear-view mirror. Among the many appearances of the altered Altgens photograph, the Herald Tribune's version is particularly striking in that the forged mirror is drawn in so lightly that we can see the outline of the rear of John Connally's head beneath it.

The alteration of the Altgens photograph may explain why it is not included in the AP collections, *The Instant It Happened*. Although an AP official in the New York office assured me that this was not the reason for its omission, I believe that the question of its nonappearance in *The Instant It Happened* has not been fully ex-

plained.

Exactly who altered the Altgens' photograph is not a matter of immediate concern. What is important is that the alteration is part of the pattern of misrepresentation which has characterized much of the media's coverage of the Kennedy assassination for a period of about thirteen years. This misrepresentation helps to explain why the press is not eager to see the current congressional investigation proceed with an inquiry into Kennedy's death. As an institution, the commercial press does not want to look back on its own failures.

The media's lapses in the Kennedy case indicate that the press fails whenever it places the interpretation of events before the reporting of events. Perhaps it is too much to ask of journalists that they encounter fresh historical circumstances with detachment and impartiality. But nothing less will do if the press is to serve its primary function of telling the truth.

It will be unfortunate if pressure from the commercial media shuts down the House Select Committee on Assassinations. The question this committee should answer is not, "Who killed Kennedy?" but, "Who controls public information?"