

Post Daily Magazine

The Warren Report And Its Critics

ARTICLE III: The 'Grassy Knoll' Theory

By MICHAEL J. BERLIN

IF YOU GIVE the National Archives a bit of notice, and you have a good reason, you can go down to their Washington projection room and watch the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, in color, on copies of some home movie film taken by Abraham Zapruder, a Dallas clothing manufacturer.

It's a heart-stopping sight. Not something you can shake off easily. But then, the first thing that you'll realize about the shot that killed Kennedy is that it apparently knocked him backwards in his seat, and to his left, toward his wife's lap.

(You'll also be able to see that, at one point, the car accelerates suddenly—but not at the moment when Kennedy jerks backwards.)

And you'll say to yourself, "If the shot pushed Kennedy backwards, Lee Harvey Oswald couldn't have fired it. Oswald was behind him. There had to be somebody firing from the front. . . . Why didn't the Warren Commission notice this?"

Arlen Specter, the Commission staff lawyer responsible for investigating the basic facts of the assassination, says:

"I think this was gone into. I do not remember any testimony or memos written on the head reaction—which doesn't mean there weren't any—I just don't remember, that's all. But you can't draw absolute conclusions from reactions. . . . a head can react in any way."

Another Commission source explains why the head reaction was ignored.

"You've got to evaluate it in the context of what the surgeons found (during the autopsy at Bethesda) . . . and if there is anything that is clear about the autopsy it is that Kennedy was hit in the head by one bullet, and that bullet came in through the back of the head."

But questions have been raised, by virtually all Commission critics, about the validity of the Bethesda autopsy report. There were contradictions in testimony as to the location of the President's head wound. The doctors at Parkland Hospital in Dallas never saw the small entrance wound the autopsy reported at the back of the head (though they admit they could well have missed it).

The report can be proved right or wrong by a look at the X-rays and photos of the autopsy. These may also show whether an earlier shot, which wounded Kennedy in the throat, could possibly have come from the front. (It is conceded by all that Gov. Connally of Texas was hit from behind.)

If these X-rays and photos show that all shots came from the rear, then the strange head reaction, as seen on the film, will have to be dismissed, though unexplained.

If shots did come from the front, an explanation for the assassination might have to be sought in what critic Mark Lane has dubbed "The Grassy Knoll Theory."

AT FIRST GLANCE, THE BEST ARGUMENT FOR the Grassy Knoll Theory is that roughly 60 of the 90 assassination witnesses who were asked where they thought the shots came from indicated, with varying degrees of certainty, the vicinity of the grassy knoll.

The knoll is actually an embankment, studded with brush that is difficult to see through, which runs from Elm St. (on which the Presidential motorcade was traveling) uphill to a wooden fence. Behind the fence is a parking lot, and it is from there, the grassy knoll theorists say, that assassins fired over the fence at the motorcade.

The lot behind the fence was the center of frantic activity in the first moments following the assassination. Law officers ran towards it, so did railroad workers standing on the Triple Underpass (where the rail tracks pass over three city streets).

What they found was a lot of footprints, some cigar butt in the mud beside the tightly packed cars, and what may have been muddy footprints on the trunk of a car parked beside the fence.

There were no shells; there was no rifle; no per-

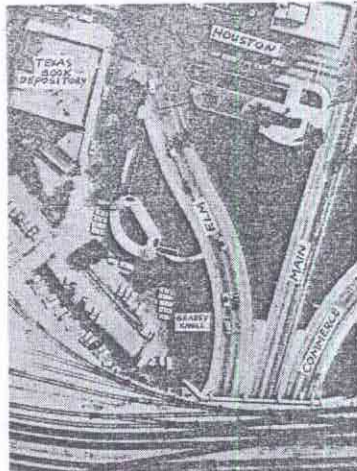
sons had been seen at that spot at the time of the shooting . . . at least nobody has yet said that he saw anyone there.

But several suggestions have been put forward by critics to fill this gap.

One is that the telltale evidence—perhaps a short assassin as well—was hidden in the trunk of a parked car during the search, then was casually driven away.

Several railroad workers told the Commission they saw a "puff of smoke" come from the brush in front of the wooden fence at the time the shots were fired—and various types of rifles do produce a puff of smoke.

There are also reports that a man who identified himself as a member of the Secret Service was en-



View of Dealey Plaza, Dallas, showing the Depository, the Grassy Knoll, the Triple Underpass, and the Kennedy motorcade route along Elm St.

countered near the knoll just after the assassination (the Secret Service said it had no man posted there); that an identifiable individual, not questioned by any authorities, was in or near the parking lot at the time of the shooting (perhaps he was involved or perhaps he saw something).

These reports come from amateur "sleuths" such as Mrs. Shirley Martin, a Tulsa housewife, who have been talking to Dallas witnesses on their own and communicating their findings to Lane or Edward Epstein.

A railroad man, Lee Bowers, said he saw "a flash of light, or smoke, or something" near the knoll at the time of the shooting.

Bowers, who worked near the Triple Underpass and was very familiar with the area, also testified on a subject that Commission critics chose to ignore—a subject that helps explain just why witnesses reported varying numbers of shots and varying sources for the sounds.

"Prior to November 22, 1963," the Warren Report says, "Bowers had noted the similarity of the sounds (auto backfires and other sharp noises) coming from the vicinity of the Depository and those from the Triple Underpass, which he attributed to a reverberation which takes place from either location."

Why didn't the Commission conduct sonic tests to determine the echoes of Dealey Plaza? Why didn't it question more witnesses to determine whether one of them might have seen something on the knoll? Why didn't it follow up the Grassy Knoll leads it had?

Obviously, because the Commission trusted the autopsy report, which said President Kennedy's wounds were inflicted from the rear. If the autopsy reports should prove dubious, the case that the in-

vestigation was a thorough one becomes equally uncertain.

There are many other areas of the investigation that leave questions unanswered in the public mind:

The incident involving the murder of officer J. D. Tippit, including the strange circumstances of Oswald's arrest; the possibility that Oswald worked as a government agent; the question of whether Jack Ruby acted alone in the murder of Oswald; the timing of Oswald's movements; Oswald's involvement in the attempted assassination of Gen. Edwin A. Walker. There is no room to go into them here.

But if all the bullets came from the rear, and if Kennedy and Connally were hit by the same bullet—then Oswald's Manlicher-Carcano rifle did the firing. And there is compelling circumstantial evidence that Oswald is the man who fired it.

Still, the question remains: did Oswald act alone—or did he have accomplices?

This puzzle looms ever larger now that the New Orleans "plot" investigation has been revealed.

Psychologically, the "loner" idea sounds right. But we can never be certain. The Commission says only that it went as far as it could, and turned up nothing to pin down a conspiracy.

After the assassination, hundreds of people reported having seen Oswald in the most mysterious of circumstances. Given the impact of the assassination, this is easy to understand and to discount.

Rumors of a plot by either pro-Castro or anti-Castro Cubans emanated from New Orleans (where Oswald lived in the spring and summer of 1963) immediately after the assassination. They were among the hundreds checked out by the FBI for the Warren Commission, and were thought so worthless that they were given short shrift in the Warren Report.

★ ★ ★ THE COMMISSION MENTIONED AN INCIDENT

report in a New Orleans bar frequented by Cubans. Someone looking like Oswald, the bartender and the owner testified, entered in the company of a Latin-American and conspicuously asked for lemonade. Then he switched to whisky and got conspicuously sick. Who was the man with "Oswald"? He was never discovered.

Dean Andrews, a New Orleans lawyer, said Oswald had come to his office, in the company of "Mexicano" homosexuals, to ask help in forcing the Marines to change his discharge from dishonorable to honorable. On Nov. 23, after Oswald's arrest, Andrews testified, "Clay Bertrand" (a man who had allegedly sent him Cuban homosexuals as legal clients on previous occasions) called and asked Andrews if he wanted to defend Oswald. Andrews, ill at the time, says he referred the case to a prominent New Orleans criminal attorney. This man, who never testified before the Commission, confirms that he was offered Oswald's case. (Oswald was slain before any action was taken).

Warren Commission staffers say they could never find "Clay Bertrand," and they have said that they thought Andrews was "making it all up." But now, the New Orleans DA has accused retired businessman Clay Shaw of using the alias "Bertrand," and of plotting with Oswald in the assassination.

If it turns out that there was a "Clay Bertrand," the fact that Commission staffers failed to find him would be an example of the incompleteness of the Commission investigation into a possible conspiracy.

The question then comes up: If the Commission failed to discover a connection between Oswald and "Clay Bertrand"—however innocuous that connection may have been—what other Oswald associates, perhaps less innocuous, did the Commission investigation fail to unearth?

So even if the New Orleans "plot" proves unrelated to the assassination, it may provide more ammunition for those who feel a more complete investigation of the assassination is warranted.

★ ★ ★ THERE WERE FOUR OTHER "SIGHTINGS" OF

Oswald, all near Dallas, which have led critics to theories of conspiracy, and also the theory that someone was impersonating Oswald.

These involved a gunsmith, some auto salesman, the patrons of a rifle range and a Cuban exile who says she was visited by "Leon Oswald" and two Cubans at her Dallas home. The Commission attempted to demonstrate that Oswald couldn't have been where these people said he was, but did not consider the possibilities of an impersonation.

One Commission staff member says an impersonation "still doesn't make sense," because all four incidents—and the ones in New Orleans—look place before Kennedy's motorcade through Dallas was announced. How did the conspirators know the President was going to be in a position where Oswald could kill him?

He says of the New Orleans "plot" and the Cuban exile's story: "They were doing this in September, when nobody knew where Oswald would be at the time of the assassination. . . . He was on his way to Mexico to try to get into Cuba, for Chrissake."

"We looked into all these things ourselves," says the Commission lawyer. "You couldn't go anywhere with it. . . . I don't know where you go from there. . . ."

So the loose ends—the possibility of conspiracy—may always remain. . . .

TOMORROW: The Critics