

Closed?

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GERALD POSNER took the obsolete, bolt-action rifle off the wall in his Manhattan study.

Apart from a bayonet holder and a little extra length to the barrel, this was a replica of the original \$12.78 gun that, according to a fresh version of a 30-year-old theory that Posner is plying in a new book, launched two bullets that killed President John F. Kennedy.

That Posner would have felt the need to purchase his own Manlicher-Carcano rifle is emblematic of the plodding, painstaking research that already has won him accolades — and that he hopes will begin to convince Americans that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, assassinated Kennedy.

"No matter how much you hear the experts say you can operate the bolt in a fraction of a second, you want to see for yourself," Posner said as he held the firearm. "You want to see, as Marina [Oswald's wife] said, he sat on a porch in New Orleans . . . and operated it for hours — does it make a difference" in how quickly the rifle can be fired, reloaded and fired again.

Posner looked down at the metal bolt handle. "I will tell you when I first got it . . . I tended to be gentle with it," he said, recalling his initial unsureness with the World War II weapon. "Now I just slam it . . . If I had personally found that the mechanism is much tougher to operate, I would have questioned the experts in a different way."

As the 30th anniversary of JFK's assassination approaches, Posner's book, "Case Closed," joins a crop of projects, including television specials and nearly a dozen new books, that will take part in what has become an American ritual: re-examining the events that began when shots rang out in Dallas' Dealey Plaza at 12:30 p.m. on Nov. 22, 1963.

But the 39-year-old Posner's book is something different.

In an era when, depending on the poll, as many as 9 in 10 Americans say they believe that Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy, Posner employs meticulous research to reach what counts as a novel conclusion: That, for all its flaws, the Warren Commission was right. Oswald killed JFK without help from anyone.

Posner has impressed admirers and even some critics with his diligent research and measured analysis. He re-indexed the entire 26-volume Warren Commission report, more than a million words of testimony, exhibits and appendices. That project culminated in a chilling portrait of Oswald as a life-long loner who could have pulled off the Kennedy killing alone.

Posner also employed computer technology not available to the commission in 1964. He says the computer modeling and animation help show that the much-derided "magic bullet" — Oswald's second shot — could indeed have hit both Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connally. The computer enhancements also help



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Posner writes that at Youth House, Oswald told his caseworker that he felt his mother "never gave a damn" about him. Later, a staff psychiatrist, Dr. Renato Hartogs, found Oswald, at age 12, to have "a potential for explosive, aggressive, assaultive acting out which was rather unusual to find in a child who was sent to the Youth House on such a mild charge as truancy from school," he told the Warren Commission in 1964.

Posner began the project in 1990 thinking that Oswald might have been part of a conspiracy involving organized crime or even a small group of friends. "I believed, anyway, that Oswald had done the shooting," Posner said. "I never thought that he was a patsy — completely set up. But whether or not he did the shooting in Dealey Plaza didn't answer the question of whether he was part of a conspiracy."

But the more he learned about Oswald, the more he became convinced that he acted alone in killing Kennedy.

But always stoking the conspiracy theories was the case's troubling forensic evidence. After 30 years, assassinsologists still were raising doubts about the "magic bullet" — Oswald's second shot. According to the official account, the bullet passed through both Kennedy and Connally, who was seated in front of the President in the limousine. It was found on a stretcher at Parkland Hospital in Dallas.

Surely, the conspiracists argue, the seven entrance and exit wounds that the bullet allegedly produced had to be evidence of more than one shooter. To some reviewers, Posner's account of the path of the bullet is among the most persuasive material in "Case Closed."

In examining the bullet's trajectory, Posner leaned on modern technology that was unavailable to the commission. Although his personal research already was leading him to conclude that the bullet did indeed pass through both Kennedy and Connally, he became a true believer after stumbling across the work of Failure Analysis Associates, a Menlo Park, Calif., engineering firm that specializes in computer recreations of accidents for use in negligence cases. The firm had done computer imaging of the Kennedy assassination for a Court TV mock trial of Lee Harvey Oswald last year.

After seeing the show, Posner contacted the company, which allowed him to use its computer modeling in the book. Failure Analysis created a full-size model of Kennedy's limousine, placing in the seats two people who were the precise height and weight of Kennedy and Connally. Researchers then filmed the car and put it into animation at the place on Dallas' Elm Street that Kennedy's car was passing when Oswald's second shot was fired. Kennedy's and Connally's wounds also were placed into the animation.

According to the computer, the bullet hit Kennedy in the back, leaving a 6.5-inch millimeter wound, and passed out of his throat. The bullet now was tumbling. It left a 1¼-inch wound in Connally's back and a 2-inch-diameter wound below the right nipple on his chest, where it exited. New enhancements of Abraham Zapruder's famous film of the assassination show Connally's right suit lapel lifting at that moment, which Posner says buttresses the single-bullet theory.

The bullet, by now traveling backward, then entered the governor's wrist, fracturing the radius bone in the forearm. In the process, it was deflected downward into Connally's left thigh.

Posner uses similar techniques to show that Oswald took a total of 8.4 seconds — "ample time," he says — to get off his three shots. Conspiracy believers who have examined the Zapruder film say the shots took a total of 4.8 seconds to 5.6 seconds — not enough time, they say, for Oswald to fire three shots from the manual bolt-action rifle.

But Posner shows how enhancements of the Zapruder film demonstrates that the first shot, which missed, occurred much earlier than many had thought. The first evidence of the shot now appears on frame 160, rather than in frames ranging from 210 to 225, as

Dr. Michael Baden, director of forensics for the New York State Police and formerly the chief forensic pathologist for the House Select Committee on Assassinations, called Posner's forensic evidence "very compelling."

However, Baden notes, he has almost as much faith in what he calls the "Lone Ranger theory of assassination, where one good guy can beat up a lot of bad guys, but it takes a lot of bad guys to beat up a good guy. When someone like President Kennedy is killed there's a natural bent to feel that one lone guy can't do it."

Certainly, Posner hasn't shaken attorney Mark Lane, author of the 1966 book, "Rush to Judgment," and an avid believer in a conspiracy to kill Kennedy.

"For the people clinging to the position that everything's well in America, and that Oswald did it alone — if that's what they need to sleep well at night they'll probably buy this book and put it on their nightstand and probably never read it," Lane said.

"I don't think it'll change anybody's mind," Lane said. "Too many witnesses have come forward . . ."

Said Posner: "We've had thirty years of conspiracy theories in this country — that's all we've been bombarded with. I would hope that it can change minds. I hope it swings the pendulum back to what I view as the truth." ■

Are They Missing America?

PAGEANT from Page 59

broadcast, viewers, expected to number about 50 million, will be invited to call a 900 phone number to vote on whether they'd like to see the swimsuit competition continued.

At least one student of the pageant has an opinion about changing it. "Every time they mess with it they screw it up more," says Frank Deford, a former sportswriter who wrote a book, "There She Is: The Life and Times of Miss America," in the 1960s. "Every time they change it it has less impact and lower ratings. You can dress it up and call it anything you want, but it's a beauty pageant. If it looks like a duck and talks like a duck, it's a duck."

"In the Sixties Miss America was a great slice of Americana, the equivalent of a good athletic contest, extraordinarily popular," Deford said. "But once the organizers lost faith with the idea of a beauty pageant, it began to crumble."

Blame the times? Politics? "Miss America can't be a politically correct show. If you try to make everybody happy you don't make anybody happy. This is not some salacious peep show. Most of the viewers are women. The critics say it's terrible to have these young women walking around in bathing suits. But that's what other women want to see."

Deford doesn't hold out much hope for the reinvented Miss America. "The Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders and Sport Illustrated's swimsuit issue have replaced Miss America," he said. "They're the franchises now."

There's a vocal opposing point of view. It belongs to Leanza Cornett. Cornett is Miss America. Until Saturday.

"Maybe it walks like a duck, but that's not the whole picture," she said. She said it not defensively; matter-of-factly. "I had a lot of stuff to do this year that had nothing to do with a beauty pageant. I went on a national speaking tour on AIDS, I lobbied on Capitol Hill. Frank knows what he sees on the telecast, but he hasn't had the job."

The swimsuit controversy Cornett leaves to the officials. The hair issue is something else.

"The question was, 'Will we let Leanza have a hair dresser?' Well," she said, and took a breath. "I told 'em, I've done my own hair on the road for the past year and I need to be pampered. I didn't do my own hair at last year's pageant, and I won't do it this year either." So there. ■