

BOOK REVIEW

A Tighter Case Against Lee Harvey Oswald

CASE CLOSED: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK. By Gerald Posner. Random House. 607 pp., \$25.

By Patrick J. Sloyan
STAFF WRITER

CHIEF JUSTICE Earl Warren was upset. It was in the final days of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy — a panel already dubbed the Warren Commission. He opened the 1964 meeting by pulling a wire service dispatch from his briefcase. The news report said some members of the commission planned a dissenting report to challenge the conclusion that a single bullet struck Kennedy and then wounded Texas Gov. John Connally.

"Who is doing this?" Warren demanded, flourishing the report before his six colleagues. Gerald R. Ford, then a Republican congressman from Grand Rapids, Mich., looked innocent. But Ford was balking. So were Sens. Richard B. Russell of Georgia and John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky, two men with reputations for brains and integrity. And, Rep. Hale Boggs, a Democrat from New Orleans, had misgivings.

Four of seven — a majority — doubted the theory that was crucial to the central conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. Only a single bullet hitting both — through Kennedy's neck, out the throat nick-



From the book (National Archives)

Oswald in the backyard of his apartment holding leftist newspapers and the rifle used to kill President Kennedy. The photograph was taken by his wife, Marina.

ing the knot in his tie, then in Connally's back, exiting below his right nipple, striking his right wrist and then embedding in his left thigh — could justify the time Oswald needed to operate the bolt on the 6.5-mm. Mannlicher-Carcano rifle.

A color film of the crime by Dallas dressmaker Abraham Zapruder seemed to contradict the theory. It looks as if Connally, on the jump seat in front of the president, reacted to the shot two seconds after Kennedy was hit. Too long for a bullet to travel less than 24 inches between the two men. Too fast for Oswald to eject, reload, aim and fire another shot. That would take at least 2.5 seconds.

And, sketches by the Navy doctors who performed the autopsy indicated an entrance wound so low on Kennedy's back that the bullet's trajectory would have never inflicted the wounds suffered by Connally.

Was there a second shooter in Dealey Plaza?

Warren had seen the grisly proof that the autopsy sketches were wrong. The Kennedy family permitted him — but not the other Commission members — to view autopsy photographs. They showed the entry wound that justified the single-bullet theory. And the photos also showed the rear entry of the bullet that blew

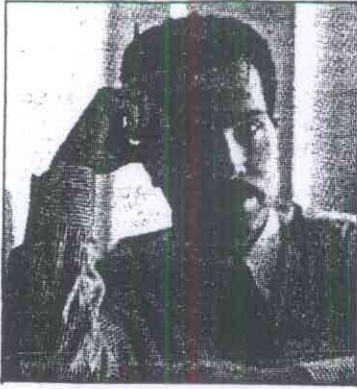


Photo by Bohuslav Raposh

Gerald Posner

ago this month, it raised the possibility of a delayed reaction by Connally — something not unknown for gunshot victims.

But the media and critics quickly spotted the theory as a contrived solution for a shaky set of facts. The single-bullet theory was the major flaw that, over time, would convince a majority of Americans that the Warren Commission was part of a conspiracy that led just about anywhere.

If only the Warren Commission could have digitally enhanced the Zapruder film as Failure Analysis Associates did with computers in 1992. The computer massage detected the right front lapel of Connally's suit flipping up at frame 224 of the Zapruder film — a movement indicating passage of a bullet in the precise location where a bullet hole was formed in the governor's jacket. "This jacket movement may be one of the most important timing confirmations in the case as it establishes the moment the bullet hit him," writes Gerald Posner. His landmark book is required reading for anyone interested in the American crime of the century.

Posner demonstrates that frame 224 also shows almost the exact moment Kennedy was hit — just as he emerges from behind a road sign in the Zapruder film. To the Warren Com-

off the right side of Kennedy's skull. But it was photos of the young handsome man in the grip of death, eyes opened and fixed, teeth bared by rigor, that haunted Warren.

"They were so horrible that I could not sleep well for nights," Warren said later.

Finally, Warren forged a compromise: Instead of concluding that a single bullet struck both men, the Commission settled on the phrase: "There is very persuasive evidence." And, in its report issued 29 years

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mission and the rest of the world who saw the film later, Kennedy seems to grab at his throat with both hands after passage of the bullet. But Posner recounts a 1972 review of autopsy X-rays that shows Kennedy's arms were raised by an involuntary neurological reaction undetected by the Warren Commission.

The shock wave from the bullet passed close enough to Kennedy's cervical vertebrae to splinter fragments from the spine. The splinters, first spotted in 1972 by Dr. John Lattimer, triggered the raising of Kennedy's arms, a reflex of a kind known for a century and called "Thorburn's Position."

Kennedy's hands never touch his throat. Jacqueline Kennedy is seen pushing his left elbow down with her right hand. But it stayed up. Then she pushes with two hands. His arm did not lower. By calculating backward from the time Kennedy's arms are raised, Posner's medical experts conclude Kennedy and Connally are wounded at almost the same second.

Posner's new perspective on the single-bullet the-