

9/93
Lone Assassin
Review

A LONE ASSASSIN

A REVIEW BY PATRICK J. SLOYAN

Case Closed

Lee Harvey Oswald and
the Assassination of JFK

By Gerald Posner

Random House

607 pp., \$25

The reviewer, who as a *Newsday* reporter won a Pulitzer Prize for his Persian Gulf war coverage, covered the Warren Commission in 1964.

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 nicking 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. Mann-



Lee Harvey Oswald in his Marine days.

licher-Carcano rifle.

A color film of the crime by Dallas dressmaker Abraham Zapruder (a frame from which is reproduced, above) 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 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.

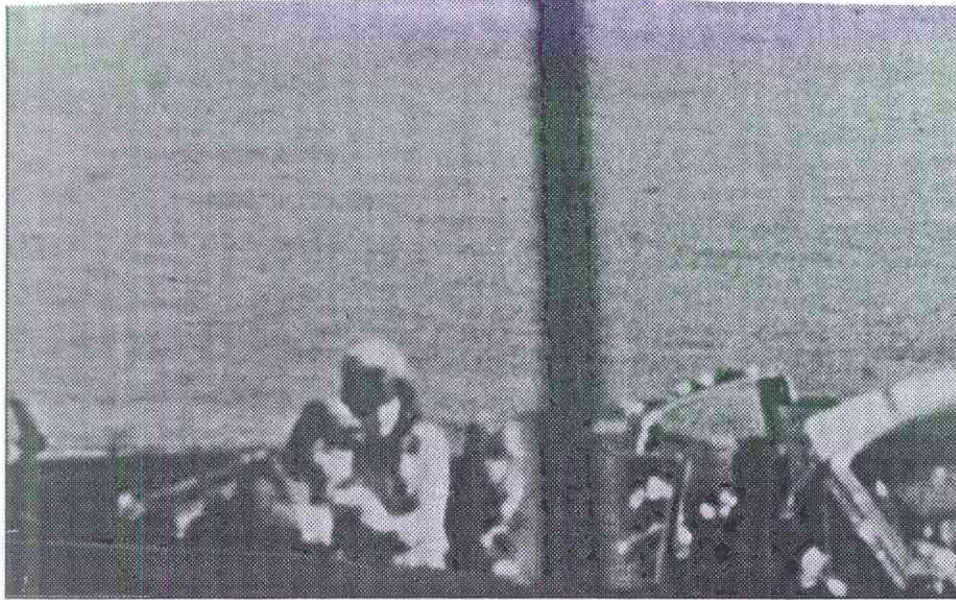
"They were so horrible that I could not sleep well for nights," Warren said later.

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 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 Za-

pruder 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



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A frame from Abraham Zapruder's film of the Kennedy assassination.

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 Commission 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 slivers, 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 stays up. Then she pushes with two hands. His arm does 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 theory is just one facet of the best critical examination of assassination evidence since Mark Lane's *Rush To Judgment* was published in 1967. Lane served as the defense lawyer Oswald never had in a book that challenged the Warren Commission's weaknesses and emphasized evidence that favored his would-be client.

Posner's mission can be seen in the book's title: *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK*. Posner has become the prosecutor with

evidence also compiled by congressional investigations and two more presidential commissions. And he is an overzealous prosecutor at times, omitting, minimizing or dismissing witnesses who heard or saw things in Dealey Plaza that did not square with the Posner indictment. Even so, he revisits Warren Commission eye-witnesses who actually saw Oswald firing from the sixth floor of the schoolbook depository. Startling stuff for generations raised to ignore the stainless-steel chain of evidence forged three decades ago that makes the case against Oswald.

In presenting credible evidence — as opposed to just evidence — Posner also shows how past authors and publishers have twisted the facts to suit their book sales. But it is indeed the publishing industry that provides new insight into Oswald's trip to Mexico City the month before he killed Kennedy.

The two KGB agents manning the Soviet Embassy there recount how Oswald was rebuffed in his requests for aid in obtaining a Cuban visa. The KGB version is in two book outlines for western publishers obtained by Posner. (He also demonstrates that the Russians considered Oswald mentally unfit and had no relationship with him.)

Oswald's approach to the Cuban Embassy in Mexico led Lyndon B. Johnson and others to believe Fidel Castro was somehow involved in the assassination. LBJ knew that the CIA, since the Eisenhower administration, had mounted plots to assassinate Castro.

So Castro had a motive for helping Oswald, a motive that the Warren Commission ignored in concluding Oswald acted alone. But Posner cuts away much of the murky underbrush in Mexico City.

Had he lived to read Posner's book, LBJ might have changed his mind.