

Specter still drawing criticism over Warren Commission role

By Dinah Wisenberg Brin
For the Mirror

Ten years into his career as a U.S. senator, Arlen Specter, R-Pa., attracted national attention recently for his much-criticized verbal assaults on Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas hearings and, separately, for his work on behalf of civil rights legislation.

But long before his ascension to the Senate, a young, largely unknown Specter took a bizarre, once-in-a-lifetime Washington job that left him at the center of an ongoing international debate over whether the United States government was diligent and forthright in its investigation of President John F. Kennedy's assassination.

Specter, then an assistant district attorney in Philadelphia, was tapped as one of 14 assistant counsels to the Warren Commission, the presidential panel charged with investigating Kennedy's murder in a Dallas motorcade on Nov. 22, 1963. The panel's seven members included Chief Justice Earl Warren, who was the chairman, and Rep. Gerald Ford.

During the 18-month Warren Commission probe, Specter suggested the so-called single-bullet theory, a fundamental component of the panel's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman in the assassination. That theory, and the methods employed by Specter and other staffers, have raised considerable doubt — even contempt — in the minds of scores of critics who harshly condemn the Warren Commission Report, which was released on Sept. 24, 1964.

Supporters of the report have been equally firm in their denunciation of conspiracy theorists and other commission critics; individuals from the opposing camps readily trade charges of deceit and political and financial opportunism.

Critics blame Specter

Two other critics of the Warren Commission didn't mince words about Specter during recent telephone interviews.

"Of all the many people who saw to it that the country would not know the truth about the assassination of President John Kennedy, none bears greater responsibility than Arlen Specter," said Harold Weisberg of Frederick, Md., one of the earliest and better known of the Warren Commission critics.

Weisberg, 78, wrote and published six books on the Kennedy assassination investigation — his "Whitewash" series — and one on the Martin Luther King killing, and successfully brought lawsuits under the Freedom of Information Act to release previously classified government documents related to the Kennedy case. Years before the Kennedy assassination, he had been a journalist, Senate investigator and worked for the Office of Strategic Services, which preceded the CIA. He owned a chicken farm in Maryland, a town when Kennedy was killed.

During the Warren probe, "Specter took charge of the autopsy evidence and what relates to it," Weisberg explained. "He failed to ask the necessary questions of witnesses who had quintessential evidence — medical people — and he conceived of the most horrible of all theories that the commission presented as fact: the single-bullet theory."

That concept has a single bullet traversing Kennedy's neck from back to front, then wounding Texas Gov. John Connally, who was riding in front of Kennedy in the presidential limousine, in the rib, wrist and thigh. This "magic bullet," as it came to be known, emerged in nearly pristine condition and was later found on a stretcher in Parkland Memorial Hospital, where the two men were taken, according to the Warren Commission.

Because Kennedy and Connally had been wounded in a shorter amount of time than the Warren Commission said was required to accurately discharge two shots from the telescopic rifle, the single-bullet theory explains how one assassin could strike both men in such a brief amount of time. (A congressional committee concluded in the late 1970s that a rifleman indeed could have fired off two rounds in fewer than two seconds if he aimed the gun without using the telescopic site).

1 bullet or 2 gunmen

In his book "Best Evidence: Disguise and Deception in the Assassination of President Kennedy," Warren critic David Lifton said the FBI-analyzed timing evidence, including the film shot by bystander Abraham Zapruder, left the commission with two alternatives: "either one bullet passed through both men, or there was a second gunman firing from behind." (Lifton has advanced the notion of three gunmen, two firing from behind and one from the grassy knoll that was to the right of the president's car).

The Warren Commission concluded that Oswald, acting alone, fired three shots: the magic

bullet that struck Kennedy and Connally, a bullet that missed, and the fatal shot.

The critics didn't believe it.

"Nobody in the world has been able to duplicate the shooting attributed to Oswald," whom the Marines had evaluated as a "rather poor shot," Weisberg said in a recent telephone interview. The history of Specter's single-bullet theory "is in itself impossible," he added.

The bullet had "a career of Mr. Specter's creation," Weisberg asserted, adding that the largely unharmed bullet "could not possibly have struck any bone without being marked."

Weisberg criticized Specter for allegedly failing to ask an FBI ballistics expert why he had not tested the bullet for human residues and for not pursuing other significant leads. He and other critics have suggested that Specter and the commission dismissed evidence and testimony that pointed to more than one gunman or that indicated unusual government actions in the hours following the assassination, and depended on shabby evidence for his conclusions.

Specter "didn't try as hard as I did," said Weisberg, whose Freedom of Information Act suits won him some quarter-million previously withheld government documents on Kennedy.

Agency coverup alleged

Weisberg said he opposes conspiracy theories but believes there was a coverup by the FBI and Secret Service following the assassination. "I have no idea who did it," he said of the murder. The government never investigated it and never intended to, he said.

Had Specter tried to pursue a thorough probe, supposedly against the wishes of the FBI, "it would never have had a government job of any kind," Weisberg said. He also speculated that

seems not to care about the facts," Lifton said of Specter.

Weisberg, Lifton and the many other Warren Commission critics have come under heavy criticism from those who support the panel's findings. The critics sometimes are portrayed as sensationalists — "hot-eyed assassination buffs" and "zealots" were words used by New York Times writer Tom Wicker in the forward to a later congressional report on the assassination. Some of the critics even find fault in each other's work.

Specter was unavailable for comment, but his press secretary, Dan McKenna, said the 81-year-old senator "still maintains that the findings of the Warren Commission have withstood the tests of the years" despite the assaults by its critics. "He says it's sort of become a cottage industry where people can write books and make money attacking the Warren Commission," but does not think the negative critiques have merit, McKenna said.

Standing by the findings

Specter's views mirror those of other Warren Commission members and staffers who stand by the findings. Although the critics cut a wide swath in many others in government and media also support the panel and debunk conspiracy theories.

As for Specter's performance on the commission staff, "he was a superb lawyer," said attorney David Belin of Des Moines, Iowa, who also was an assistant counsel to the Warren Commission and who is a strident defender of its work and conclusions; Specter concentrated on the medical evidence and the testimony of witnesses in the motorcade and in Dallas' Dealey Plaza, Belin said.

He praised "the competence with which (Specter) handled the interrogation" and his outstanding skills as a lawyer.

The single-bullet theory came out of Specter's attempt to examine the potential existence of more than one gunman, Belin said.

The critics "have misrepresented the evidence," Belin said, adding that the only conspiracy related to the Kennedy assassination was "a conspiracy of laziness on the part of the media." The news media have ignored and overlooked the Warren Commission record, he said. It takes only a few seconds to tell a lie, but longer to explain the truth, he said.

Belin, whose books on the subject include "Final Disclosure: The Full Truth About the Assassination of President Kennedy," said that no new evidence has emerged since the Warren Commission Report to disprove its conclusions. "There is not one claim that has been made that cannot be fully answered to," he said.

Mass of evidence cited

Lifton's assertion that the body was altered is "a preposterous claim ... (that) is completely overwhelmed by the mass of evidence that disproves the claim," Belin said. The magic bullet found on the Parkland stretcher and fragments from the fatal bullet were identified by ballistics experts as having come from Oswald's rifle, to the exclusion of any other weapon, he said.

The fact that the Parkland bullet was largely unscathed by its journey through Kennedy and Connally was just chance, Belin said.

Belin has suggested that some Warren Commission critics are simply in the critic business for personal financial gain. He mentioned that the proceeds from his own books and articles are given to charity.

Is there any middle ground between the Warren Commission's unwavering critics and its die-hard supporters? Possibly.

In January 1979, the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which conducted its own examination of the Kennedy and King murders, published a report finding that Kennedy probably was assassinated as the result of a conspiracy.

Fourth shot suggested

It based this finding largely on acoustical evidence suggesting the firing of a fourth shot and, therefore, the presence of two gunmen. (Belin said subsequent tests by a National Science Foundation panel proved this evidence wrong).

The House select committee supported the single-bullet concept.

While discounting many popular conspiracy theories, it concluded that evidence did not rule out the possible involvement of individual anti-Castro Cubans or organized crime members in the assassination.

It said that, although the Warren Commission conducted a thorough and responsible investigation of Oswald's involvement, it failed to look adequately into the possibility of conspiracy, a shortcoming attributed in part to the commission's failure to receive all the relevant information from other government agencies.

The Warren Commission, according to the House committee, presented its findings in too definitive a manner, but arrived at them in good faith.

Of course, the House Select Committee on Assassinations' document, "The Final Assassinations Report," has its critics, too.



Arlen Specter

Specter would have had enemies as a private practice lawyer.

Lifton said in a recent telephone interview that he has a thick file on Specter, who remains an enigma to the California-based author and lecturer.

"When you watch him on C-Span, you have to wonder why a bright guy like that came up with the single-bullet theory," Lifton said. "Did he really believe the evidence or is he just a totally amoral person?"

"He is a major party responsible for this false reconstruction" of the assassination, Lifton said.

The author presents evidence in his book suggesting that Kennedy's body was tampered with — operated on — sometime after the Dallas doctors examined it and before the autopsy was performed several hours later at the U.S. Naval Hospital in Bethesda, Md. (There were discrepancies between the Dallas doctors' and the Bethesda doctors' descriptions of the wounds, he said). Someone "phonied" the evidence, and "Specter bought the whole thing at face value," he said during the interview.

"Forged body" seen

Lifton said the commission relied on an autopsy report from a "forged" body. He criticized Specter for not asking the autopsy doctor, James J. Humes, why he had burned preliminary draft notes of the autopsy report as well as a draft of the report itself.

Lifton accused Specter of asking leading questions of expert witnesses to prompt the testimony he wanted. "I see him as a very bright man who

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