

In 60's, They Missed Assassination Evidence

To the Editor:

In "No Evidence for a Conspiracy to Kill Kennedy" (letter, Feb. 5), William Manchester calls Lee Harvey Oswald a "wretched waif"; in "The Death of the President," an "incoherent hater, nothing more."

A pending file on Oswald sat on a supervisor's desk at Federal Bureau of Investigation headquarters the morning before the assassination of President Kennedy. The Central Intelligence Agency file on Oswald awaited action the same morning. The Soviet Embassy had just opened a mysteriously worded letter from Oswald delayed by the F.B.I.'s having plucked it from the mail and photographed it.

Oswald and I were contemporaries. Just about no one else in our generation had a distinctive, eyebrow-raising personal history by the time he turned 24. Mr. Manchester stood in the front row of the chorus that kept saying Oswald was a lonely, pathetic twerp who turned assassin for reasons of ego. One can't help wondering whether all that oratory proselytized Sirhan B. Sirhan and the other copycat lone nuts of later Presidencies and campaigns.

"The Death of the President" is a superbly readable, richly detailed account, which probably explains a number of riddles turned up by later authors. Weren't the two coffins in the emergency room in Dallas — one ceremonial bronze and one simple gray — the same two that arrived in Washington, according to the detective work of David Lifton in "Best Evidence" (1980)? Mr. Lifton needlessly inferred a sinister intrigue from reports of two coffins.

Neither the Warren Commission nor Mr. Manchester wrote anything pertinent to the debate of one versus two gunmen. They lacked the technical imagination to perceive the evidence. The House Assassinations Committee in 1978 asked a team of scientists nominated by the Acoustics Society of America to analyze a recording made on the Dallas Police radio system during the shooting.

Drawn as a spectrograph, the sound depicted two shots in very rapid succession from the warehouse window, closer together than the F.B.I. originally said was possible, then a third shot from the grassy knoll, where several witnesses heard a shot and saw a puff of smoke. (The Warren Commission was so naïve about guns that one lawyer later wrote that the "smokeless powder" of modern ammunition doesn't give

off smoke, but it does.) The fourth shot, the head shot in the Zapruder home movie, was fired from the same window as the first and second shots.

The acoustics experts reported that the probability of a grassy knoll shot was better than the threshold figure of .95 often used in statistics. The data conservatively computed to a probability of .999999988, a billion to one, nullifying the lone-nut theory.

The inquiries of the 1960's missed the evidence the first time around and ring hollow now. ALFRED LEE
Maplewood, N.J., Feb. 15, 1992

The writer, who is working on a book about the Kennedy assassination, teaches a course on spy fiction at New Jersey Institute of Technology.

Cheap, Unreliable Rifle

To the Editor:

William Manchester (letter, Feb. 5) announces: "I needed no authority to assess Lee Harvey Oswald's marksmanship. As a World War II Marine, I had qualified as an expert



Christophe Vorlet

rifleman on the Parris Island, S.C., range. Oswald, a former Marine, had also qualified."

Now these sentences convey the impression, no doubt intended, that Oswald qualified as an expert rifleman. Evidence in the Warren Report, however, shows that Oswald barely qualified as a marksman, the lowest of the three Marine classifications of expert, sharpshooter and marksman. He scored 191 on a scale of 190 to 250.

Witnesses to Oswald's prowess on the firing range testified that his frequency of "Maggie's drawers" (complete misses of the entire target) was something of a joke. Oswald was a poor shot, and Mr. Manchester risks his credibility to pretend otherwise.

Mr. Manchester continues: "In Dallas he was equipped with a bolt-action, clip-fed, 6.5 Mannlicher-Carcano rifle and a four-power telescopic sight. His target — the Presidential limousine — was only 88 yards away from his sniper's nest. At that distance, with that scope, a trained marksman could scarcely miss."

The Mannlicher-Carcano was a cheap, old, unreliable make, known in the Italian Army as the "humanitarian rifle," on the ground that it could not hurt anyone on purpose. It was testified that the scope on the rifle was mounted for a left-handed user. Oswald was right-handed. Also, the sights were misaligned, and shim had to be inserted to aim properly.

The Warren Commission conducted simulated test firings, a pointless exercise as they took place after corrective adjustments of the scope and sights. Even so, none of the Olympic class Army riflemen who participated in the tests were able to duplicate the alleged feat of Oswald in firing so rapidly and accurately.

Proponents of the Warren Commission have never clearly explained how it reached conclusions contrary to so much of the evidence it itself assembled. HUDSON HATCHER

Bronxville, N.Y., Feb. 15, 1992

The writer qualified as an expert on the M1 rifle in the Army.

Zapruder Film

To the Editor:

There are elements of "agitprop docudrama" in Oliver Stone's movie "J.F.K.," as a Los Angeles newspaper called it. But there is a factual part. Most spectacular is the representation of the Zapruder film showing the effect of various shots on President Kennedy. I do not know of any opportunity for wide audiences to see this film, or this crucial part, other than in Mr. Stone's movie.

In seeing the Zapruder segment, audiences can see something with their own eyes, never mind opinions from so-called experts. Just that segment is worth the price of admission.

One must also have documentation. Mr. Stone has emphasized the need to have access to files on the assassination (from whatever source) made public. Pending the availability of such files, and their critical analyses (because such files tend to be overwhelming), I recommend the documented analysis of the Warren Report given in "Accessories After the Fact" by Sylvia Meagher (1967; paperback, 1976), now out of print.

which provides massive documentation on the internal inconsistencies, insufficient probing, selectivity and other major deficiencies of the Warren Report. SERGE LANG

New Haven, Feb. 10, 1992

The writer is a professor of mathematics at Yale University.