

Commentary

PERSPECTIVES ON CONSPIRACY

Facts Knit the Single-Bullet Theory



Fame and fortune would have been incentives to debunk the Warren panel's findings. But then there's the evidence.

By **KENNETH KLEIN**

The new Oliver Stone movie, "JFK," might lead moviegoers to suspect the conclusions of the Warren Commission, which investigated the assassination of President Kennedy. But the commission's findings have stood the tests of forensic analysis.

In September, 1976, the House of Representatives established the Select Committee on Assassinations to investigate the deaths of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. In early 1977, I resigned as an assistant district attorney in New York County, assigned to investigate and try homicide cases, and accepted the position of assistant deputy chief counsel for the committee. I spent the next two years investigating the Kennedy assassination.

When I first heard of the "single-bullet theory," I was very skeptical. How could a single bullet found on a stretcher in Parkland Hospital enter the upper back of President Kennedy, emerge from the front of his neck, then enter the back of Texas Gov. John Connally, emerge from his chest and then shatter a bone in Connally's right wrist and cause a superficial wound to his left thigh?

Since the validity of the Warren Commission's finding that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin rested firmly on the validity of the single-bullet theory, the staff members of the select committee would have been thrilled to have disproved it. To have done so would surely have led to fame and fortune. Only one thing prevented us from doing so—the evidence.

First, the committee formed a panel of top forensic pathologists. These men had performed tens of thousands of autopsies and were experts at determining points of entry and the trajectories of bullets as they passed through human bodies. The panel concluded that two bullets struck the President from the rear.

The panel also noted, and the committee found very significant, the ovoid shape of the wound in the governor's back. Such a wound indicates that the bullet had begun to tumble or yaw before entering. An ovoid wound is characteristic of one caused by a bullet that has passed through or glanced off an intervening object.

Second, the committee performed a trajectory analysis of the shots fired. We used the expertise of the forensic pathologists, acoustical and photographic analysts and an engineer from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration who plotted the trajectories. By coordinating the data from these experts, the analysis yielded three circles within which all shots originated. The southeast corner window of the Texas School Book Depository—the window from which the Warren Commission concluded that the single bullet was fired along with two other shots—was inside each of these circles.

Third, the committee considered the fact that the Zapruder "home movie" shows Kennedy's head moving backward after being hit. Of course, there are no other motion pictures of people being shot that could have been used for comparison purposes. Instead, the committee consulted an expert on gunshot wounds who determined that nerve damage from a bullet entering the President's head could have caused his back muscles to tighten, which, in turn, could have caused his head to move toward the rear. While such testimony was not considered decisive, it did lead the committee to conclude that the

rearward movement of the President's head was not inconsistent with a bullet striking from the rear.

But the firearms evidence was the most important. The rifle found on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository was analyzed by an independent panel of ballistics experts chosen by the committee. It was determined that the bullet found on a stretcher at Parkland Hospital had been fired from the rifle recovered from the depository.

A remaining issue was determining whether the bullet found on the stretcher was the source of the bullet fragments taken from Connally's wrist. In making the determination, the committee had the benefit of neutron-activation analysis, a highly precise test that was not in existence at the time of the Warren Commission.

The essence of neutron-activation analysis is that every bullet has a unique composition. Using this analysis, it is possible to analyze precisely the composition of a bullet and a bullet fragment to determine whether the fragment came from the bullet. The analysis showed that it is highly likely that the bullet found on the stretcher was the one that passed through Connally's wrist, leaving tiny fragments behind.

That the single-bullet theory was not only a plausible explanation but, in fact, was the only reasonable explanation for the wounds suffered by President Kennedy and Gov. Connally is supported by the facts: The bullet that hit the President and the governor came from the rear; the trajectory of the bullet leads back to the Texas School Book Depository; the bullet was fired from a rifle found on the sixth floor of the depository; the bullet had been deflected before entering Connally's back, and the fragments in Connally's wrist came from the bullet found on the stretcher in Parkland Hospital.

Goodbye fame. Goodbye fortune.

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