

NYT m/s

No Evidence for a Conspiracy to Kill Kennedy

To the Editor:

After the assassination of President Kennedy, his widow and his brother Robert asked me to inquire into the Dallas tragedy and write an account of my findings.

This task became my sole concern for the next three years. I was answerable to no one. I accepted no money from the Government or the Kennedys, and I stipulated that the author's royalties would be donated to the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. My only assistants were volunteers. I was especially grateful for the help of Jim Lehrer, who was then a young reporter for The Dallas Times-Herald.

In Texas, in Washington and elsewhere, I questioned everyone who might shed light on the event. That included members of the Secret Serv-

ice, who had never been available to interrogation by an outsider; the physicians who performed the autopsy on the President's body at Bethesda Naval Hospital; undertakers in Dallas and Washington; the Kennedy family; Kennedy and Johnson aides; members of the Cabinet and the Supreme Court; the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the Congressional leadership, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, including J. Edgar Hoover.

In Texas, I went over the motorcade route, searching for and finding men and women who had been spectators that Friday, Nov. 22, 1963. Abraham Zapruder went over his remarkable film with me and showed me where he had been and what he had seen. In Irving, Tex., the Paines, with whom Lee Harvey Oswald spent

the night of Nov. 21, were interrogated at length. So were Dallas policemen, Gov. John Connally, E. M. (Ted) Dealey, Maj. Gen. Edwin A. Walker, employees of the Texas School Book Depository, Bill Whaley, the taxi driver who unwittingly carried Oswald in his flight from the depository; and doctors, nurses and orderlies at Parkland Memorial Hospital. In Washington, I had the President's first coffin — inadvertently damaged at Love Field — uncrated for inspection.

I needed no authority to assess Oswald's marksmanship. As a World War II Marine, I had qualified as an expert rifleman on the Parris Island, S.C., range. Oswald, a former Marine, had also qualified. In Dallas he was equipped with a bolt-action, clip-fed, 6.5 millimeter 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.

In any gathering of evidence, time is crucial. During the first eight months of my inquiry, Warren Commission investigators were also in the field, but after that I was alone. Had anyone else been active there, I would have known of it. The witnesses I was interrogating would also have been questioned then.

When Chief Justice Earl Warren's report was complete, he asked me to sign it as a representative of the Kennedy family. I felt that would be presumptuous and inappropriate; my own work was far from finished, and I was far from ready to endorse the commission's findings. Nevertheless, in the end I concluded that its report was correct on the two main issues. Oswald was the killer, and he had acted alone.

"The Death of a President" was published by Harper & Row on April 7, 1967. More than 550,000 copies were sold in bookstores and 800,000 more through the Book-of-the-Month Club. It astonishes me that anyone undertaking a portrayal of the assassination should be unaware of it. When a Congressional committee was looking into rumors of a plot to kill Kennedy, its chief counsel and chief investigator approached me, and I opened my files to them. I have never heard from a motion picture producer or director on such a mission.

Those who desperately want to be-

lieve that President Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy have my sympathy. I share their yearning. To employ what may seem an odd metaphor, there is an esthetic principle here. If you put six million dead Jews on one side of a scale and on the other side put the Nazi regime — the greatest gang of criminals ever to seize control of a modern state — you have a rough balance: greatest crime,

greatest criminals.

But if you put the murdered President of the United States on one side of a scale and that wretched waif Oswald on the other side, it doesn't balance. You want to add something weightier to Oswald. It would invest the President's death with meaning, endowing him with martyrdom. He would have died for something.

A conspiracy would, of course, do the job nicely. Unfortunately, there is no evidence whatever that there was one.

WILLIAM MANCHESTER

Middletown, Conn., Jan. 17, 1992

Open Committee's Files

To the Editor:

As a former staff member of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, I am convinced that the American public deserves to know what is inside that committee's files.

Those of us who worked on the sealed portions of the committee's report are under oath not to speak about their contents. But the recent burst of publicity surrounding the release of the Oliver Stone film "J.F.K." has underscored once again the need for full disclosure of this material. The reports could be released with the names expurgated, thus eliminating any damage, embarrassment or humiliation to those named.

EDWIN J. LOPEZ-SOTO

Rochester, Jan. 12, 1992