

A RESPONSE TO HAL VERB

by
James Fetzer*

The double-review by Hal Verb of ASSASSINATION SCIENCE and BLOODY TREASON (THE FOURTH DECADE 5 #2, January 1998, pp. 12-17) was highly misleading and hopelessly inadequate. No one unfamiliar with these books could have understood their scope or their contents from what Verb had to say here; no one familiar with these books would have recognized them from his remarks. Instead of discussing them in some detail, he indulges himself by using this as an excuse to offer his personal views relative to a few selected aspects of these books that were of special interest to him. Virtually everything he has to say about both books turns out to be wrong.

Verb remarks that these books complement each other in contending that major evidence has been altered, forged or changed to conceal indications of conspiracy. While this might serve as a description of ASSASSINATION SCIENCE—which provides decisive evidence that autopsy x-rays have been fabricated to conceal a blow-out to the back of the head and to impose a 6.5 mm metal object, that diagrams and photographs that are supposed to be of the brain of JFK must be of someone else's brain, that the "magic bullet" theory cannot possibly be true, that President Kennedy alone was hit at least four times, and that the Zapruder film has been subjected to extensive editing—it is not an adequate description of BLOODY TREASON.

Indeed, only about 250 pages of Noel Twyman's 960-page book are on the medical and photographic evidence, while approximately 700 pages explore evidence concerning the motives, means and opportunities of a wide range of individuals, organizations, and groups opposed to JFK, who might have wanted him removed from office and who may have been involved in the conspiracy. These books are indeed "complementary", but primarily because they both suggest that the conspiracy and the cover-up involved powerful elements of the federal government and the military-industrial complex. ASSASSINATION SCIENCE provides hard

evidence of conspiracy and of cover-up, while BLOODY TREASON also examines the powers and personalities who contributed to the plot to kill President Kennedy and then covered it up.

Instead of discussing the evidence and why the authors maintain that it supports their conclusions (which implicate LBJ, J. Edgar Hoover, the CIA, the Mafia, Texas oil men, and anti-Castro Cubans), Verb focuses primarily on superficial questions and non-existent errors, while maintaining—but without explaining why—he (Hal Verb) believes that the x-rays, the photographs, and the Zapruder film are NOT faked, altered, or fabricated. It would have been fine for him to have indicated his points of disagreement PROVIDED that he had done an adequate job of accounting for the evidence that these books present. He never gets around to this, however, and most of his "criticisms" reflect his misunderstandings or else are simply false. In this response, I shall follow his order using his sequence of numbers.

(O) The first (call it Point O, since the other ten are numbered 1 to 10) is that I committed "a real howler" in ASSASSINATION SCIENCE (on page 371) in suggesting that "two rich and powerful right-wing politicians were pitted against two rich and powerful left-wing politicians" (a phrase that he misquotes) based on his INFERENCE that I meant the Cabell brothers, on the right, and JFK and LBJ, on the left. Since I implicated LBJ in the plot to kill JFK (on page 370), which means that LBJ and the Cabell brothers were on the same side, I find this inference very odd. But I concede the sentence would have been less misleading had I said "two rich and powerful right-wing BROTHERS (Earle and Charles) were pitted against two rich and powerful left-wing BROTHERS (Bobby and Jack)", which was what I intended.

(1) The first of his numbered criticisms discusses a letter from Evelyn Lincoln, JFK's personal secretary, published in ASSASSINATION SCIENCE on the following page (page 370). Although this letter takes up one-half a page of a 480 page book (about 1/1000 of its contents), Verb devotes 1/10 of his review to explaining why it may be faked, including a grammatical error, what he takes to be a missing address, discussing her thoughts on the assassination with a stranger, identifying conspirators ("Johnson, J. Edgar Hoover, the Mafia, the CIA and the Cubans in Florida") not discussed in her book, her failure to present these views to either the Warren Commission or HSCA, and a signature that doesn't look right.

James H. Fetzer
Department of Philosophy
Duluth Campus University of Minnesota
Duluth MN 55812-2496

Evelyn Lincoln was 79 when she wrote this letter, and the error ("As for (sic) the assassination is concerned,") is a mistake that is easily made, especially among the elderly. The address appears at the bottom of the letter but was not included in ASSASSINATION SCIENCE to preserve the anonymity of the recipient. In BLOODY TREASON (page 831), Richard Duncan, who had written on behalf of his students and to whom she is replying, is identified by name and by profession (a middle school teacher). It does not take a rocket scientist to infer that she was responding in this case because the inquiry had come from a teacher on behalf of his students.

A few years prior to the letter in question (dated 7 October 1994), moreover, Evelyn Lincoln conveyed the same thoughts to Anthony Summers, who was at the time engaged in research on a new book, OFFICIAL AND CONFIDENTIAL (1993), which discusses J. Edgar Hoover. And she made similar statements to Harrison Edward Livingstone, who includes an interview with her in HIGH TREASON 2 (1992), pp. 435-437. Whatever her reasons for not sharing her sentiments during the official inquiries, the letter appears to be genuine. What many readers may find perplexing, however, is why Verb devoted so much attention to something that was not serving as evidence for conclusions independently drawn but as a display that someone close to the Kennedys had come to conclusions that are similar to those of these books. Her opinions are especially noteworthy in view of her past position among JFK's most trusted aides.

(2) The second numbered criticism concerns BLOODY TREASON, page 98 (it is actually page 99), where Verb alleges that Twyman contradicts himself by observing (in a caption beneath this photograph, known as Willis #5) that it was "taken an instant before Kennedy was hit", since in discussing frame Z-188 (which appears between pages 144 and 145), Twyman also reports that the Betzner photo and the Willis photo were taken "before and after" the first shot. Verb thinks that Twyman is asserting that the Willis photo was taken BOTH before AND after the first shot! Since Twyman regards these photos as more or less bracketing the first shot, his meaning might have been clearer if he had also observed that, in his opinion, JFK was not hit by the first shot.

Verb also objects to a remark Twyman makes in passing (relative to his belief that the first shot occurred between Z-160 and Z-188) that Gerald Posner also thinks

the first shot was fired before frame Z-166. He sarcastically complains, "Imagine that—relying on Gerald Posner for fixing the timing sequence of the shots fired!" But that would be a fair criticism only if, in order to disagree with Posner's position, it was necessary to disagree with him on every single point! For example, I agree with Posner that the muzzle velocity of the Mannlicher-Carcano is about 2,000 fps (compare my piece in the very same issue of this journal as Verb's review), but I am not thereby relying on Gerald Posner to fix the muzzle velocity of the Mannlicher-Carcano!

Verb cites a syndicated column written by Liz Smith (SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, 23 December 1997), in which she discusses Twyman's book, remarking that, after reading it, she was "totally confused again"! What Verb neglects to mention is that this remark was made within a specific context. Smith first explains that she had been convinced by CASE CLOSED that the Warren Report was correct, but after having read BLOODY TREASON, she was returned to the position of not knowing what she should believe. The thrust of her remarks is praise for the book. Including its study of the Zapruder film! Such cheap shots do nothing for Verb's credibility, especially since Smith's column seems to be the first national forum to praise work critical of CASE CLOSED.

(3) Indeed, the very next criticism displays Verb's tendency to take matters out of context. He quotes Twyman's observation about Walter Cronkite that "he studied the JFK assassination perhaps more than any other network newsmen". He goes on to say that Twyman appears to have been taken in by a four-part CBS series broadcast in 1967 (that was narrated by Walter Cronkite), but that he (Verb) was "not fooled by all of this". The discussion of Cronkite occurs in a long footnote on pages 198-199, where it is obvious that Twyman views the program he is discussing (the PBS NOVA documentary first shown in 1988) as filled with errors and distortions and believes Cronkite was manipulated by those who want to deny the truth! This note conveys severe criticism of Walter Cronkite, but that appears to have sailed over Verb's head.

(4) Verb then faults a chapter of ASSASSINATION SCIENCE by Ron Hepler in which Hepler discusses some reasons why Zapruder film evidence supports the conclusion that John Connally was hit by two separate shots, one at Z-315 (under his armpit) and another at Z-338 (his right wrist). According to Verb, the evidence for these two alleged shots is "shaky" and is "in no way

conclusive". He faults Hepler for relying upon *THE KILLING OF A PRESIDENT* (1993) by Robert Groden for support, claiming that Groden's reconstruction is "so utterly flawed it cannot be used as a guidepost". Verb might be right about all of this, but he offers no evidence in his support! He ought to have explained why Hepler is wrong: unsubstantiated opinions do nothing at all to advance the case.

(5) Next Verb considers the chapter of *ASSASSINATION SCIENCE* by Chuck Marler, which discusses the re-enactment of the assassination conducted on 24 May 1964. Using original measurements taken by the surveyors for the Warren Commission (measurements that were concealed or distorted by Arlen Specter in his role as a staff member), Marler calculates that the President's head and neck should have been visible during the Stemmons Freeway sign sequence (including Z-207 to Z-222). On this basis, Marler thinks that the Stemmons sign may have been enlarged to conceal what was going on in the vehicle, such as Kennedy's reaction to the first bullet.

Verb responds by arguing that the first bullet may have been fired at an earlier time, possibly even before Z-189. But even if this is indeed the case (as Twyman and Posner, among others, also appear to believe), it is no argument against an increase in the size of the sign that may have resulted from film editing (image alteration). Marler's calculations in fact corroborate David Mantik's discovery that the sign seen in the film displays magnification anomalies (pp. 319-320). There could have been various reasons for wanting to conceal information that would otherwise have been available. Verb attempts to explain why this should NOT have been done, but does nothing to challenge the evidence that it WAS done!

(6) Verb and Mantik agree that there were two head shots. Verb, however, does not explain where he places these two hits, nor does Verb indicate their temporal interval. Mantik has proposed two clearly separated head shots, with an interval much greater than that between Z-312 and Z-313. His arguments include eye-witness reports describing JFK's movements during this crucial interval—including a surprising absence of descriptions of a head-snap—corroborated by those who viewed an early version of the film the first few days. Moreover, of about twenty nearby Dealey Plaza witnesses, eight to ten report (hearing or seeing) another shot AFTER an obvious head shot. Verb, however, simply ignores all of these reports.

Mantik considers the head-snap that is seen in current versions of the Z-film in detail in his work, pages 279-284. He emphasizes the inability of a frontal head shot to BOTH lift the body against gravity AND to impart the observed recoil speed. This line of analysis was previously pursued by Itek, but has been refined by Mantik. Verb says nothing at all about any of these arguments: he does not even list them! Instead of offering a rebuttal, he simply begs the question, digressing to expend more than half of this section to discuss frames prior to Z-250, topics which are not mentioned in and are of scant relevance to Mantik's work on the film.

In relation to shots prior to Z-250, Verb insists that Mantik erred in placing the first shot, a point he raised in Dallas. Mantik's talk there was never intended as a disagreement with Verb, whose analysis he (Mantik) applauds. What he had to say there was intended as a disagreement with Warren Commission findings, where Verb has misinterpreted Mantik's meaning. The limousine stop (or near stop) reported by many eyewitnesses is a major reason for believing in film alteration and has always played an important role in this debate. Mantik discusses it at length (pp. 273-279). If any issue regarding film alteration deserves discussion, this is it, but Verb focuses his attention on events prior to Z-250 instead.

Indeed, nowhere are the limitations of Verb's research methodology more apparent than in relation to his criticism of work on the editing (altering) of the film. Jack White's observations and David Mantik's studies provide evidence of many kinds in their support, including eye-witness testimony, disagreements between early viewers of the film and what is currently available, inconsistencies between the film and other photographic evidence, between the film and the first two re-enactments, and inconsistencies internal to the film itself. Independent evidence of editing (altering) continues to be discovered by others, including Michael Parks, Michael Griffith, and Ron Redmon. None of these can be overcome by Verb's PRESUMPTIONS about the shot sequence, which—based as they are on the existing film—have themselves now been undermined.

(7) Verb then returns to page 368 of *ASSASSINATION SCIENCE*, where I am said to have simply repeated "the often told story" that three "tramps" who were photographed being escorted by police through Dealey Plaza after the assassination were Chauncey Holt (wearing a hat), Charles Harrelson (the tallest), and Richard Montoya (the best dressed). Verb claims that Ray and Mary

LaFontaine discovered "documents" proving who they really were and that they were not the persons I identified. Anyone who takes a look at their book, *OSWALD TALKED* (1996), will find that the records to which Verb refers do not appear there. The NAMES they claim belong to those photographed—Gus W. Abrams, John F. Gedney, and Harold Doyle, respectively—are provided, but the only photograph is of Harold Doyle.

The photograph of Doyle (p. 27) does not look even remotely like the best dressed "tramp" in Dealey Plaza photographs, but it is impossible to judge from the poor quality print of the "tramps" they use (p. 26). They dismiss Chauncy Holt's identification of himself as the oldest of the "tramps" by observing on page 328 that "Holt's assertions haven't been affected by the appearance of mere pieces of paper, like arrest records!" But "mere pieces of paper" are easily faked and have to be the least reliable evidence available. Indeed, in relation to Abrams and Gedney, they produce no other evidence at all! Anyone who thinks that the LaFontaines could waltz into the Dallas Police Department and settle this question based on what they found must be extremely naive.

The "arrest records" the LaFontaines claim to have found have been shown on television and appear to have been filled in rather hastily with very sketchy information, yet they are not published in this book. Even the best photographic evidence they claim to have unearthed (pp. 324-325) is not presented here. While the LaFontaines abruptly dismiss *COUP D'ETAT IN AMERICA* (1975-92) by Alan Weberman and Michael Canfield—who identify the "tramps" as E. Howard Hunt, Frank Sturgis and Daniel L. Carswell, respectively—it includes many photographs of the "tramps" and of their alleged counterparts. The LaFontaines do not even mention *THE MAN ON THE GRASSY KNOLL* (1992) by John Craig and Philip Rogers, an inquiry about Charles Rogers, who may well be the best dressed "tramp."

Among the most important indications that the three "tramps" really are those identified in *ASSASSINATION SCIENCE* is that studies by Lois Gibson, perhaps the nation's leading forensic artist, who still works for the Houston Police Department, concluded that they were Chauncy Holt, Charles Harrelson, and Charles Rogers (aka Richard Montoya), a matter she investigated for *THE MAN ON THE GRASSY KNOLL*. What Craig and Rogers discovered during their study of Charles Roger's apparent 1965 murder of his parents was interesting enough

that they were both invited to present their work at ASK, which Martin Shackelford summarized in his "Report from Dallas: The ASK Symposium, November 14-16, 1991," published in *THE THIRD DECADE* (January—March 1992), pp. 1-7.

Among the important points included in Shackelford's summary is that Lois Gibson felt her identification of the three "tramps" was supported by all points of identification and that Craig reported that the Houston police had verified Holt's ties to the CIA. As someone who has devoted considerable effort to investigating Holt's claims—through the study of audio and video tapes, manuscripts and correspondence, meeting him in person and discussing him with his daughter and his friends—I have become convinced that Chauncey Holt was one of the three "tramps" as he has maintained: he looks the look, walks the walk, and talks the talk. The best available evidence supports the identifications I provided in *ASSASSINATION SCIENCE* rather than the LaFontaine's dubious alternatives.

(8) Verb's entire response to Mantik's query of why the re-enactments locate a shot where JFK is not visible (p. 306) assumes Mantik has proposed that the Stemmons sign was altered after Z-207. Yet Mantik has specifically claimed (p. 306) that the superior edge of the sign (the critical edge for this purpose) was NOT altered! The focus of Mantik's discussion concerns the possible role of a missing film in carrying out the re-enactments, namely, a motion picture taken from the location of the Babushka lady (CD-298, p. 11). Although this film is described in some detail, those descriptions are not consistent with the Nix film, which is the name that has (improperly) been assigned to it, a matter substantiated by an interview with the photographer (CD-2, p. 310.) None of these issues is discussed by Verb, who misses the point here.

(9) Verb makes much of his belief that a "preponderance" of evidence suggests that a shot occurred SLIGHTLY BEFORE Z-206, thereby disputing Twyman's inclination to tentatively adopt the Warren Commission's conclusion that Jack was hit somewhere between 206 and 210. This is not the last word on the subject in *BLOODY TREASON*, however, and Twyman is only accepting one of the Commission's premises for the time being in an effort to use its own data to prove the Commission was mistaken, a common practice in courts of law. Verb's preoccupation with the shot sequence distorts his judgment about other issues discussed in

BLOODY TREASON, including other aspects of (2), where Verb is blinded to the fact that the timing of the first shot—which he and Twyman both think was around Z-152—is irrelevant to Twyman's proof of Z-film alteration.

(10) Verb concludes with a discussion of what he refers to as "the back of the head argument," which he appears to be dreadfully unqualified to examine. He questions whether it is true that eyewitnesses described a back-of-the-head blow-out and recites several statements by physicians from Parkland and by Secret Service agents he interprets as evidence to the contrary. No one who looks at Groden's *THE KILLING OF A PRESIDENT* (1993), pages 86 to 89, or who is familiar with Gary Aguilar's studies of the descriptions of the wounds could reasonably be persuaded by what Verb has to say here. He not only ignores the Prologue, where I note that Aguilar has collated the testimony of more than 40 eyewitnesses who reported a wound of this kind, but also a chapter by Charles Crenshaw, who discusses this matter in detail. By now, Verb's incompetence regarding even elementary matters has become all too painfully apparent.

A book review comes about as a causal interaction between a book and a referee. Sometimes the referee takes the measure of the book and sometimes the book takes the measure of the referee. In this instance, the referee has committed serious sins of omission as well as sins of commission. He overlooks or ignores large parts of both books, including the extensive discussion of possible participants in the conspiracy and the cover-up, which is the major focus of *BLOODY TREASON*, and hard evidence of the fabrication of x-rays, substitution of photographs and drawings, and other distortions of the evidence explored in *ASSASSINATION SCIENCE*.

He asserts disbelief in x-ray alteration without offering any argument! He thereby dismisses Mantik's important study of the addition of a 6.5 mm "metal" object, which not only cites a contemporaneous textbook that explains how x-rays can be copied, but was reviewed by the chief medical physicist at Kodak! Perhaps this should come as no surprise, however, considering that, of the 11 criticisms that Verb advances as his best shots, 10 either are based upon misunderstandings or else are false. The only complaint that might be correct, which is (4), is left completely unsupported. Since Hepler supplies reasons for his opinions, while Verb does not, even this point favors *ASSASSINATION SCIENCE*.

Let me close by observing that I consider Hal Verb to be a very sincere person who has given a great deal of serious thought to the assassination of JFK. Were sincerity and serious thought all that is required to come to grips with these issues, then this case would have been solved long ago.

* David Mantik and Noel Twyman have reviewed this article and concur with it insofar as it offers replies to criticism of their work specifically.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the editor: I was disappointed to see *The Fourth Decade* give so much editorial space to Harrison Livingstone's attack on the Coalition on Political Assassinations and other members of the research community in its recent issue ("Address To the 1997 Summer Meeting of COPA," *Fourth Decade*, March 1998). Livingstone made many good points, but like much of his other prose he made them in a rambling style with other points that should not go unchallenged. His accusation that Robert Groden has made "ongoing adjustments" to the Zapruder film is not even thinly veiled. And just who does Livingstone think the "dishonest operatives" are in COPA? John Judge? Phil Melanson? Cyril Wecht? Does it serve even Livingstone's own research concerns to aim vague suspicion at people who work hard to keep the critical forum alive, warts and all?

I also disagree with Livingstone's conclusion that the critical community needs to reshape itself for more acceptance by the mainstream. As Dick Gregory puts it, the truth does not need to be validated by a lie. Also, the compulsion to "solve the case" and close up shop would have put Livingstone's own recent explorations about falsifications of the evidence in the dust bin of history before it ever reached them. The research community has thirty-five years of cases to solve - corrupt politicians, complicit media figures, a guilty military and various cons to make it all look like democracy is still in tact. The wide-ranging and open debate Livingstone calls for over issues involving the assassination, however, should also apply to his criticisms of the critical community.

— Kenn Thomas, Steamshovel Press,
P.O. Box 23715, St. Louis MO 63121