

Findings on Tape 'Beyond a Reasonable Doubt'

Second JFK Gunman, Experts Say

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By George Lardner Jr.
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Two acoustics experts told the House Assassinations Committee yesterday their tests showed "beyond a reasonable doubt" that a second gunman fired at President Kennedy in Dallas 15 years ago from the area of the so-called grassy knoll.

They said the Warren Commission could have done the same work, and reached the same conclusion, back in 1964, without any great difficulty. Far from practicing any "modern electronic witchcraft" on a police recording of the sounds in Dealey Plaza when Kennedy was killed, the experts assured the committee that they used nothing more than "simple, basic physics and geometry," without the help of any newfangled gadgets.

"This is not an arcane science," one of the experts testified emphatically. "It is taught in high school and college-level physics . . . and I think [it] can be understood by anybody who has ever heard an echo."

With less than a week left before it goes out of business, the committee listened to the last-minute evidence with perplexed fascination. The members capped the day-long public hearing by moving into executive session for a potentially divisive

series of votes on its findings in the president's murder. The findings are due next Wednesday.

A majority was expected to agree that someone in addition to Lee Harvey Oswald shot at the president just before he sustained a wound that literally exploded his head on Nov. 22, 1963. That, in turn, as Chairman Louis Stokes (D-Ohio) observed at the close of the hearing, "could point to a conspiracy in the assassination of President Kennedy."

The new findings involve a tiny segment of a police recording that started shortly before the assassination when a motorcycle patrolman left his microphone switch in the "On" position, deluging his transmitter channel with what seemed to be a lot of background noise.

The experts, Mark Weiss and Ernest Aschkenasy of Queens College in New York City, said they were sure of their findings even though they reached them only with trepidation. Weiss said he and his colleague were well aware of the "enormous impact" of their study. Stokes said it could "change the course of history."

With two gunmen firing at the presidential motorcade in Dealey Plaza within the same split second that day, Stokes observed in understated

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fashion, "one can assume an association" between the two assailants and, from that, "one can make a legal assumption of conspiracy."

Weiss nodded. One of the six experts who served on the court-appointed panel that found a series of evidently deliberate erasures in one of President Nixon's Watergate tape recordings, Weiss said during a break that the JFK tape study was by far the more onerous assignment.

"I can't tell you how many times we went through the agony of doing our calculations over and over again," he said during a break. In the Watergate tapes, he said, "there were six heroes" around to console each other and, even then, they kept calling each other and asking, "Are you sure?" This time, he pointed out, there were only two of them, himself and Aschkenasy, and, he emphasized, "we were nervous" when they realized what their study showed.

"Our initial reaction [to the police recording] was 'somebody's got to be kidding; these can't be gunshots,'" Weiss told the committee. But, he said, "the results of our analysis convinced us."

Aschkenasy agreed. "The numbers could not be refuted," he said, pointing out that he and Weiss used nothing more complicated than a hand calculator to do their computations, again and again.

The only other instruments they used Weiss indicated, were pieces of string to measure distances on a 1963 survey map of Dealey Plaza, some thumbtacks to pinpoint locations, an oscilloscope to observe the waves and shapes of the sounds on the Dallas

police recording, and another device to reproduce the waves graphically.

The two experts concentrated almost exclusively on a segment of the tape lasting only three-tenths of a second, which an earlier study had pinpointed as the possible impulse of a shot from the grassy knoll. That study, conducted by James Barger of the Cambridge, Mass., firm of Bolt, Bernak and Newman, had found a high degree of probability that three shots were fired at Kennedy, all from above and behind him, all from the di-

Stokes observed "one can make a legal assumption of a conspiracy."

rection of the Texas School Book Depository where Oswald was said to have set up his sniper's nest. To the committee's chagrin, however, Barger calculated the odds on a fourth shot from the grassy knoll at an ambivalent 50-50.

Weiss and Aschkenasy said they were able to determine the location of Dallas policeman H. B. McLain's motorcycle, which inadvertently transmitted the sounds to a Dictabelt at police headquarters, with much more precision.

Their study indicated the motorcycle had just turned onto Elm Street, 120 feet in back of the presidential limousine, when the third shot rang out, leaving a telltale signature or "fingerprint" on the police tape. Weiss said they found 10 echo patterns within the three-tenths of a second segment that precisely matched

sounds emanating from the grassy knoll, traveling carefully measured distances to nearby buildings, and then bouncing off them to hit the motorcycle transmitter at the exact location predicted for it, give or take 18 inches.

He said they were similarly able to place the unknown gunman behind a picket fence at the top of the grassy knoll, MM in front of and to the right of the presidential limousine. Weiss said they were confident of that position, give or take five feet.

He and Aschkenasy added that they were sure, by 95 percent or better, that the sound they had traced was not simply a motorcycle backfiring, or a firecracker, but was indeed a bullet, probably a rifle bullet.

"If I were a betting man, I would say the odds are 20 to 1 [that this is not noise]," Weiss said. "What we're dealing with here is not noise, but in fact a bullet."

The tape also contained strong indications that it was a rifle bullet since the recording showed a so-called "N," or shock, wave traveling faster than the speed of sound and hitting the motorcycle transmitter milliseconds before the arrival of the noise of the muzzle blast itself.

This supersonic phenomenon is characteristic of rifle bullets, but the committee's chief deputy counsel, Gary Cornwell, informed the members that there were handguns available in 1963 that also shot bullets at supersonic speeds.

Since the basic findings of the study were made public more than a week ago by Rep. Harold Sawyer (R-Mich.), there have been contentions that the recording could not have been made in Dealey Plaza, but Aschkenasy made short shrift of such suggestions.

For Conspiracists, Vindication Day

'Government Is Beginning to Acknowledge What Really Happened'

By Bill Peterson

Washington Post Staff Writer

The old guard, the zealots who have been preaching into the wind about cover-ups and conspiracies these many years, had a rare day of vindication yesterday.

Outwardly, they sat in the front row of the circus tent-like hearing room with their overstuffed briefcases, complaining about how the House Assassinations Committee had stolen their research, and fiddled away its millions.

"There's nothing of any substance that has come out of these hearings that wasn't already in the public domain," declared Harold Weisberg, the Patriarch of them all, who had boycotted most of the previous months of hearings.

But beneath the crusty exterior of the critics was a quiet sense of inward pride, a feeling of vindication, that slowly and reluctantly their theories and research were getting an official stamp of approval.

"The government is beginning to acknowledge what really happened in Dallas," said Carl Oglesby, co-director of the Assassination Information Bureau, a nonprofit clearinghouse.

The star of the day's show, Mark Weiss, a professor with a salt and pepper beard and ramrod straight back, was not one of their own. He is a scientist, one of the acoustics experts whom Judge John Sirica called in to listen to the Watergate tapes.

In the world of lawyers and congressional hearings, scientists with big bucks to spend always have more credibility than free-lance investigators who operate on a shoestring, regardless of what they have to say.

The nuts and bolts of Weiss' startling findings—that new tests had found that a second gunman had fired a shot at President Kennedy from a grassy knoll in Dealey Plaza in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963—leaked out a week ago. But now he was performing for the record at a specially called hearing after the committee had all but completed its work.

Weiss performed well, very professionally, not giving an inch as he said there was a "95 percent probability" that two gunmen had shot at Kennedy in a crossfire. If he were a lawyer, he quickly added, he'd say the evidence was "beyond a reasonable doubt."

This, of course, is what many con-

spiracists have been saying for years. Weisberg first wrote about it in his 1965 book "Whitewash I." David Lifton, another well-known critic, reached a similar conclusion in a 1967 article in Ramparts magazine, although he maintained there were three, not two assassins, involved.

Lifton found a certain irony in it. "None of this is new to us (Conspiracy theorists)," he said. "But look at it this way. It's dignified for a lawyer to stand up in front of a room and call on an acoustics expert. It's like an event that's been playing for years has finally gotten a sound track."

It all added credibility to Lifton and the rest. He was beaming. A publisher, he said, had finally agreed to print his book about medical evidence in the case, which he's been working on for 10 years. Oglesby was also in demand, providing color commentary on the Public Broadcasting System.

"It's hard to find a word to describe our feelings," said Oglesby. "You don't want to say, 'I've been vindicated. Nobody can delight in proving the fact that the country was badly misused by its institutions. But then, it's good to see it moving in the right direction again.'"

But there was a certain beleaguered resentment among the researchers and theorists, many of whom have devoted years of their lives to investigating the assassination. Many of them hold little truck with their fellow critics, even less with the House Assassinations committee.

"It's a miracle that so much evidence in the case has been turned up by a group of freelancers working on a shoestring," Lifton said. "We couldn't be in this room if it hadn't been for the freelance investigators."

The assassination community, as the researchers and theorists have come to be called, was an odd lot as it gathered yesterday.

Each member carried a briefcase, stuffed with newsletters and documents to use as "proof" that his work was the first and the best on the subject.

Weisberg, who has spent most of the last 15 years investigating the Kennedy assassination, sat in the front row, his feet on his briefcase, a wry smile of contempt on his face as he slipped notes to reporters on the fine points of the case.

On one side was his lawyer, James Lesar, the attorney for John Ray, brother of James Earl Ray, convicted of killing the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. On the other was Dr. James Barger, the committee's medical examiner, whom Weisberg has called "a liar."

When the committee broke for lunch, the conspiracists gathered

around the witnesses, pitching questions at them, and complaining among themselves. "I made those pictures they were showing up there," complained Robert Groden, a 32-year-old photographic critic. "And here they're not giving me any credit."

Weisberg, the dean of them all, held back, talking only to a few allies and reporters. A former champion chicken farmer and Senate investigator, he has worked for years on the assassination from his lonely, Waldenesque home in Fredrick, Md., alone and with little monetary gain or recognition.

He does his own investigating, prints his own books (there are six of them ranging from "Whitewash I" to "Post Mortem"), and distributes them all from his home, sending a couple out every day by mail.

If there's a bitterness in his voice, it's understandable. He has lived on a shoestring, financing his own investigations. The House Assassinations Committee ignored him, he said yesterday.

The only time anyone from the committee got hold of him was to ask for a couple of his books, he said. And then he had a devil of a time getting the panel to pay for them.

"The only things they've come with that weren't on the public record are fabrication and conjecture. It's a tragedy," he said. "This case has been one of the greatest causes of disenchantment and distrust with our government. And this committee is just making it worse."