



University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

College of Letters & Science
Department of History

Stevens Point, WI 54481-3897 (715) 346-2334

June 25, 1991

Editor
Journal of American History
1125 Atwater,
Indiana University,
Bloomington, Indiana
47401

To the Editor:

Cynthia A. Brandimarte's review of the Dallas County Historical Foundation's exhibit on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and its investigation reveals the necessity for subject matter knowledge of this complex crime not merely public history expertise when making evaluations.

I would disagree that the purpose of history or an exhibit of this nature is to heal. What is to be healed? Is it the outrage over the fact the Warren Commission wrote its conclusion and outline of its Report before it began its "investigation"? Or, is it the realization that every institution of society from media to politics failed to function properly during the crisis of the death of the executive? How can these elements be healed? I would encourage her to see that the end of history is to define the world in its meaning wherever that path might lead and at whatever cost it might entail to person and society, past and present as the only enprincippling ground to civic action.

The concept of a museum exhibit on the assassination of President Kennedy in the Texas School Book Depository was unwise, for it meant inevitably that history consists of the official mythology, with an attempt at balance by including unofficial mythologies in a minor role. Even the title is tinselled propaganda--"the Memory of the Nation."

When describing the assassination scene she omitted what most historians usually do (and presumably so too the Dallas museum folk) one of the individuals wounded that day, citizen James T. Tague. The place he stood near the triple underpass and the time of his wound are incompatible with official findings that a single person fired all shots that day.

"Official investigations determined" that Oswald fired all the shots from there, she says. This is not true. They theorized, or concluded, but they did not and could not "determine" what was false. For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Secret Service both disagree with the Commission's conclusions that the first shot struck both JFK and Connally, a sine qua non for holding Oswald was the sole assassin.

The "glass" bubble removed from the limousine was actually plexiglass, stored in the trunk, and in any event was a weather shield and absolutely no protection from a bullet. It was not "a group of conservative businessmen" who took out the ad. Instead they paid the costs of the ad prepared by extreme extremists, who "took it out."

The reference to "Mary Woorman," is a typographical error for Mary Moorman who snapped a Polaroid picture from the interior of the plaza toward the north grassy knoll. It was imperative for the reviewer to have critically noted which of the three basic forms of the photograph the museum chose to display. The evidence in each conflicts with the others. It is an error of fact to say the photograph was taken "as a bullet struck President Kennedy's head." Why would she or the exhibit say this when it is so clearly seen on Zapruder frame z313?

James Altgens was not a "witness standing" in Dealey Plaza. He was an AP photographer who roved around taking pictures, including one of the most important of the still photographs. She says "fatal shots" but there was only one fatal shot.

To merely relate that the exhibit says small extremist groups were active in the community imparts the impression of some exotic fringe political activists around and ought to have been accompanied with critical judgment of the obscurant nature of the phrase and the disservice the exhibit does to the American and Dallas scene. A few days before November 22 a para-military group known as the Minutemen met in secret session thirty miles north of Dallas and vowed to kill President Kennedy when he came to Texas. Warren Commission Document 710, not published but officially listed as a number assigned but not used (but exists in fact) relates the informant account of the meeting. In the time frame of the murder there were at least two threats on his life from elements of the National States Rights Party. A tape recording exists of an anti-Castro Cuban public meeting in Dallas where threats were made to kill him.

While no known evidence connects any of these threats upon President Kennedy's life with his murder, they were never investigated by federal authorities. Other threats in

Texas, New Orleans and Miami are known. One of the several in Miami was taken seriously by the Secret Service who forced JFK to helicopter to his speech rather than motorcade. An exhibit even mildly interested in a valid picture of the era ought to have provided the public with a panel or two on this facet of the milieu that by no standard qualifies as merely extremist and ought not have slavishly mirrored the federal investigators desired views. It would have of course made the assassination museum seem oddly placed in an old Book Depository.

The photograph and the caption contain errors. The Dallas Foundation does not faithfully reproduce the alleged sixth floor perch of the assassin in the Texas School Book Depository. The evidence does not exist to do this. As they testified before the Warren Commission Dallas officials upon entering the floor in a search almost immediately began moving around the boxes and raised and lowered the window before photographs were taken. Even the official photographs taken later clash with one another in major ways. The final artificial scenario decided upon by the Warren Commission absolutely physically refutes its own eyewitness testimony, which is gotten around by accepting both as legitimate. A reviewer ought not gloss over the central question of the integrity of the objects displayed.

The photograph should also have been labeled "Lee Harvey Oswald's alleged perch," in the language Cynthia Brandimarte employs in the text. One central issue in the controversy over President Kennedy's death is the relationship of Oswald to the murder. Serious scholarship finds no credible evidence connecting Oswald to the sixth floor or to the murder--that is, fingerprints, eyewitnesses, physical factors, carrying the rifle to work, and so forth in the kit bag of the federal solution, does upon careful scrutiny immediately break down as untenable. At the same time credible evidence in the official records removes Oswald from the sixth floor.

Almost all commentators on the assassination avoid this hard question and instead happily focus on theories rather than on the integrity of the facts of the charges against Oswald. For the Dallas County Historical Foundation to erect a museum on the sixth floor of the Book Depository is an assertion that consciously devised myth is reality; it is not history.

In her references to the various investigations she means by the House Select Commission the House Select Committee. Her grouping the several investigative bodies into one sentence obscures the quite different nature of the commissions and committees, the former from the executive

branch and the latter the legislative with distinct mandates. She omits federal panels, investigations by agencies, special scientific teams, and departments as well as the Texas Court of Inquiry. All told the federal government conducted over twenty-five investigations. Well over one hundred Freedom of Information Act lawsuits have been brought, some of them were fifteen years in duration. One case generated over three feet of documents on the ballistic evidence hotly contested every step of the way by the government. A six minute film and a few boards cannot even have time and space to list the names let alone pretend to draw appropriate inferences on the results of these complicated inquiries.

The reviewer as well as the Dallas museum have fallen into the conventional view avidly promoted by the those who wish to commercialize the tragedy and the egotist "writer-experts" loose in the media and publishing pastures who see two basic positions on the assassination, the official finding and theories. A third is ignored. Throughout the many years of controversies responsible critics have diligently sought the evidence and its right definition in a struggle against the propaganda of both the wretched theorists and the federal conclusion which is itself merely a theory.

Deeply informed responsible critics who work with the evidentiary base who have viewed the exhibit do not find it to be "intelligent," but see it as most irresponsible, the work of ignorant mythologists who have blindly affirmed official doctrines and peddle them daily to tourists as "history."

The ignorance of basic facts reflected in this review and in the editing which did not pick those errors up, is the unfortunate reality of the failure of professional historians to make the required inquiry into the assassination of President Kennedy and its investigation. In this they perpetuate the official mythology. To whom did the editors send this for review who had factual knowledge? Any authentic subject expert would have seen the errors and flaws. Is this the way to run The Journal of American History?

David R. Wrone
University of Wisconsin-
Stevens Point