

[Return to JFK Main Page](#)
[Return to Zapruder Film Page](#)

A Brief Overview of the Zapruder Film Alteration Argument

by Martin Shackelford, 12/98

In the early 1990s, researchers whose theories weren't fitting well with the available evidence began to argue that the evidence that didn't fit was faked.

There had already been some questioning of the leaked autopsy photos, as well as documents (and there were some fake documents circulating, as well as some that appeared in two versions in government files - documents are among the easiest things to forge, especially in the computer age).

Unfortunately, my colleague, Harrison Livingstone, opened the floodgates with a concept he called "the smorgasboard of evidence," suggesting there were two of everything, and that the Zapruder film had been altered. It seems that two people who had worked with him picked up on the idea: Dr. David Mantik and Prof. James Fetzer.

Fetzer had tried to promote himself with the medical evidence, but had little success.

There followed a muddy period about which I know very little. During that time, I and others had explored a few alteration issues, and found most of them unconvincing, though a few seemed worth pursuing.

By November 1996, Prof. Fetzer was leading the charge of those advocating that the Zapruder film had been altered: He unveiled a seven-part video overview of the assassination; he was promoting Dr. Mantik, a medical researcher, as "the world authority on the Zapruder film; and he had gathered a few others who believed in alteration (Jack White, Roy Schaeffer, David Lifton, etc.) to join them on a totally one-sided double panel arguing their case. Just to make certain that things would go his way, he took complete control, juggled panel members around, and gave long-winded introductions essentially telling the audience what they were expected to believe at the end of the presentations (I wonder if this is how he lectures at the University of Minnesota at Duluth?)

Again, there seemed a lot of nonsense, but a few points worth pursuing. Livingstone decided to have nothing to do with the extreme alterationists, though he remained on good terms with Dr. Mantik, with whom he had worked on medical evidence issues.

The Zapruder panels gained the kind of attention Prof. Fetzer had been looking for. There were heated debates in private e-mail lists, then on Internet newsgroups. In 1997, the book Prof. Fetzer edited, *Assassination Science*, was released, with a long chapter by Dr. Mantik on Zapruder film alteration, as well as a few others on the topic.

Around the same time, Noel Twyman came out, somewhat less fervently, for alteration in his book, *Bloody Treason*. This was the peak, and the alterationists rode the wave for a while.

There had always been those who were skeptical of the bulk of the alterationist claims. As the debate continued, more of the "anomalies" were explained, and the points which had seemed worth pursuing began to fall by the wayside, but the alterationists had a tendency to do three things:

1) A phenomenon I call "Anomaly of the Week," which meant that no matter how many alterationist claims were proven wrong, new ones cropped up like weeds, some of them increasingly far-fetched, and quickly discarded in the face of evidence;

2) A tendency to wait until the controversy over something had died down, and then resurrect it as

though it were "new evidence;" and

3) An increasing tendency to launch personal attacks on unbelievers, accusing them of being "Lone Nutters," or "disinformation agents," or "anti-conspiracy" (as though theirs was the only valid conspiracy theory), or "too dumb" to understand the "startling evidence" which had "already proven" alteration true.

The Assassination Records Review Board looked into the alteration allegations, concluded the film was authentic, and made sure to preserve all available Archive copies. The Zapruder family worked with MPI video to release a high-resolution digital copy for study, in video and DVD formats. Robert Groden had already released a video which included a variety of Zapruder films (a 35mm copy of the damaged original, an intact Secret Service copy, an early bootleg, etc.). Then the ARRB released the 600 page technical reports and documentation by retired Kodak 8mm expert Roland Zavada, which an alterationist described as "devastating" to proponents of alteration.

The alteration proponents, as even some of them conceded, suffered a blow at the 1998 JFK Lancer conference's Zapruder film panel, the first time they had to publicly face opponents of their views in a forum. Prof. Fetzer made a scene, and effectively eliminated the question and answer period. Since the conference, a fissure has developed between the "realist" alterationists and the "ideological" alterationists, with some bitterness resulting. Jack White has released a videotape which the "ideological" wing believes to be overwhelming evidence that the film was altered, and which the "realist" wing feels is unconvincing, an embarrassment, and a setback to those who believe there is genuine evidence of alteration, but are having doubts.

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[Return to JFK Main Page](#)
[Return to Zapruder Film Page](#)