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The Zapruder Film Comes to Home Video

By Jim DiEugenio

In July, the Zapruder film finally became accessible to the American public. Arguably the most important piece of evidence in the JFK case, it had been returned to Abraham Zapruder's survivors (Zapruder had died in 1970) in 1975 by its original purchaser, Time-Life (now Time-Warner). What has provoked the sudden availability of the film today? An educated guess would be that good old American standby: greed. One of the most astute decisions made by the Assassination Records Review Board was to recommend that congress go after the film as a government "taking." The Review Board held hearings on this issue on April 2, 1997 (see *Probe* Vol. 4 #5). To our knowledge, the government is now negotiating with the Zapruder family over purchasing the film. The family, advised by a law firm, wants a Michael Jordan type sum; in various reports the numbers have gone as high as the eighteen to thirty million dollar range. The government has not been willing to go nearly that high but they have offered around a million dollars for the film, and presumably will go a bit higher if necessary.

Consider what the Zapruder family and Time-Life have done with this important film to this date. Within 24 hours of the assassination, Abraham Zapruder had the media at his front door ready to bid for rights to it. Dan Rather was there for CBS and Richard Stolley for Time-Life, among others. Stolley got print rights to the film for \$50,000. Two days later, after viewing the film in New York, Time-Life decided to buy all rights for \$150,000. So at that time Henry Luce and his corporation—which had strong ties to the government, especially the CIA—controlled access to the film. (A very poor black and white still photo series, with frames out of place, was in the Warren Commission volumes). Reportedly, C. D. Jackson of Time-Life, who was close to Allen Dulles, was so upset by what the film depicted he decided to restrict what that company would show through its mass market magazines. This is strange because *Life* was mod-

eled on what Luce called "photojournalism"—a reliance on pictures to actually carry a story with the words serving as a counterpoint. *Life* magazine never showed the film in even an approximation of its entirety. In fact, as Jerry Policoff noted in his important article "How the Media Assassinated the Real Story" (*Village Voice* 3/31/92), the company did all it could to conceal the fact that Kennedy's body is slammed backwards at the fatal bullet's impact (Zapruder frame 313). They went as far as stopping the presses *twice* to mold the 10/2/64 issue to fit the Warren Commission's formulation of the crime i.e. switching the depicted frames in the issue as well as replacing the commentary that accompanied the frames. And according to Stolley, Time-Life never authorized the film's use for television or films (*Burden of Proof* 7/18/98.) They even sued someone they did authorize to see the film, Josiah Thompson, so he could not use stills of the film in his book *Six Seconds in Dallas*.

In 1969, at the trial of Clay Shaw in New Orleans, Jim Garrison subpoenaed the film from Time-Life. He showed it to the jury, which was so surprised that it requested numerous reruns of the film in court. The media did all it could to conceal the impact the film had from the public. In fact, according to Art Kunkin of the *L.A. Free Press*, FBI informant James Phelan led a nightly caucus for the reporters at a rented house so the media could collectively put out the right spin on the daily testimony. According to Kunkin, Phelan was the first person to put out the concoction that the fast rearward movement of Kennedy's body was caused by a "neuromuscular reaction."

In 1975, Robert Groden and Dick Gregory secured access to a copy of the film and showed it on ABC television. Groden's version was enhanced—it was a sharper version that was slowed down. Therefore, its impact was even stronger than the version shown in New Orleans. Now, without the media to neuter the reaction, the public was allowed to see the film for the first time. The reaction was nothing less than sensational. It was one of

the major reasons why the House Select Committee was created the next year. (See accompanying article "The Sins of Robert Blakey" for a more detailed version of its impact on the HSCA.)

At this point a funny thing happened. Time-Life decided it didn't want the Zapruder film anymore. It literally gave the film back to the Zapruder family (it was a paper transaction worth one dollar.) Why did this very money conscious Wall Street oriented firm decide to become philanthropic at this precise moment? Why didn't Time-Life give it to the National Archives? Why put it back into the hands of a private party? We can only speculate. But if, as the record shows, Time-Life was determined not to show the film to the public in its strongest version, Groden and Gregory had now defeated its strategy. And now, with public knowledge of what the film showed, they could be *further* accused of making money off future showings of the film. (Of course, Time-Life could have just struck high-quality prints of the film at cost for interested parties, but that appears never to have been a viable option.)

So now after having already been paid a large sum for the film, the Zapruder family had it back for free. Now *they* had the problem of being accused of making money off the most important film of JFK's murder. Apparently, the moral dilemma didn't bother them much. Since 1975, any private or public entity wishing to use the film in a public showing or in a book, TV show, or film must inquire through an attorney, and in most cases, must pay a fee. As many have found out, it isn't cheap. As David Lifton testified before the ARRB in Los Angeles, his publisher could not afford the price to include stills in his book. No one really knows how much the Zapruder family has made from this process but it must be a ducal sum.

After over two decades, the Review Board has now tried to revert the film back to its proper owners: the citizenry of this country. Who knows what would have happened if this film would have been shown on national tele-

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vision in 1963? Would the Warren Commission have been able to complete their white-wash? After all, in 1969 the film helped convince a jury that Kennedy had been killed as a result of a conspiracy. Yet even though the film is prime evidence in a case that theoretically has never been closed, the Zapruder family is still allowed to collect fees for its showing. And now that they are about to collect what will probably be a multi-million dollar payoff from the government (i.e. the taxpayers), they have now chosen to market the film to the public through MPI home video. They have also hired famed Washington lawyer-lobbyist Robert Bennett to negotiate a higher fee for them; and, of course, for himself.

The first report *Probe* saw on this pecuniary sideshow was in June in the *Los Angeles Times*. In July, a flurry of television and print stories appeared as the MPI video neared its release date. In a quite questionable statement made in the *L. A. Times* (7/11/98), lawyer James Silverberg, a representative of the Zapruder family, stated "The family has never been interested in commercially exploiting the material." Really. Then why the demand for 18 million? Why hire Bennett? Why wait until this moment to let MPI market the film?

Whatever the results of these negotiations it seems that this video version of the film is, in some ways, even better than the one shown by Groden in 1975. MPI hired two companies to work on the transferal to video, McCrone Associates of Westmont, Illinois and Chicago-based There TV. The former actually photographed every still frame of the film in the National Archives. These stills were enlarged to 4-by-5 transparencies. There TV then fed these images into a computer where they were scanned and digitized. Finally they were re-animated into a cohesive video. This process has resulted, first, in improved clarity and resolution. Second, the hand-held shakiness of Zapruder's 8 mm. camera is minimized. But most importantly, the information formerly lost between the sprocket holes area of 8 mm. film is now visible. (Silent film has areas at the edge of the film that are punctured with holes to allow the film to travel through the camera and projector. Although this film is exposed, it does not show up upon projection.) This has already led to a major discovery. In the July 28, 1998 issue of the tabloid *Globe*, Robert Groden and David Wrone analyzed the new video. Photographer Phil Willis had always claimed that he took a shot of Kennedy when he heard the first shot ring out. The

problem for the Warren Commission was that he said he took this shot *before* Kennedy disappeared behind the Stemmons Freeway sign. As Wrone points out, with this new version of the film, you can actually pick out Willis and see him raise the camera to his eye. And the timing of that motion corresponds to Willis' original story of taking the shot before frame 199, or before Kennedy disappears behind the sign. As Wrone states:

You see the photographer [Willis] in frame 183 and in 199 with his camera to his eye. At frame 204 he's put down his camera and is moving out of the picture. This information has never been seen until now. (p. 25)

The Warren Commission held that Kennedy was hit while he was behind the sign, at around frame 210 or later. One reason they held to this was that Willis' story would have been in conflict with the Commission admission that earlier, Oswald would have to have been firing through the branches of an oak tree. Therefore he could not have been the likely sniper on this earlier shot.

Another interesting aspect of the MPI version is that there are still frames missing from it. In one replay of the film there is a frame counter in the upper left corner. According to that counter, frames 208-211 are gone. These

are the very last frames before Kennedy's head disappears on a vertical axis behind the sign due to the slight incline of the road. In 1993, Groden showed a version of the film at Har-

vard which included those frames. As Josiah Thompson told the Board at the aforementioned hearing, some frames had been damaged at Time-Life. But because three other copies had been struck by Zapruder and the Secret Service in Dallas, it is possible to reconstruct that sequence from the other first day copies. Somehow, Groden did. And what I recall most from that viewing is Kennedy's head buckling thus leaving me with the clearest visual impression I ever had that Kennedy was hit before disappearing behind the sign. Which is further corroboration for

Willis. Why that was not included in this new version is a point I have not seen discussed anywhere. There have been further reports, which we can't verify yet, that some frames are out of order, other frames have been misidentified with wrong numbers, and that additional frames are missing beyond known problem frames. It would be a shame if after all this time and effort, we still have not received an accurate replica of the original film. ♣

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