

END TO NAGGING RUMORS;

The six critical seconds

By Paul Mandel

"I would say without any doubt that he is the killer."

-- Dallas District Attorney Henry Wade

The Dallas D.A. was satisfied, but nobody else was. President Johnson wasn't. He ordered an FBI investigation and promised to make all evidence public. Congress wasn't. Senator James O. Eastland's Judiciary Committee plans to examine the double murder. Even Texas wasn't. The state's attorney general has ordered an inquiry. The public especially wasn't satisfied and, accordingly, it was a week of breathless rumors: that Oswald had been a hired killer; that Oswald had used an accomplice; that Oswald had not killed the President at all; that Oswald had been framed and then shot to silence him. The rumors flew because the best evidence which could dissolve them, the contents of Oswald's mind, was now irretrievable. But even though the investigations were just under way, there was already enough other evidence on hand to answer some of the hard questions.

Was It Really Oswald

Who Shot the President?

Yes. The evidence against him is circumstantial and it received an incredibly bush-league battering around by the Dallas police, but it appears to be positive.

Three shots were fired. Two struck the President, one Governor Connally. All three bullets have been recovered -- one, deformed, from the floor of the limousine; one from the stretcher that carried the President; one that entered the President's body. All were fired from the 6.5mm Carcano carbine which Lee Oswald bought by mail last March.

The murder weapon, although subsequently manhandled for the benefit of TV, still showed Oswald's palm print. His own carbine was missing from its usual place. A witness had seen him bring a long, gun-sized package to work. And threads from Oswald's clothing were found in the warehouse sniper's nest.

Many rumors have grown out of the presumed difficulty of firing three accurate shots in the time Oswald had and at the ranges over which he fired. But an 8mm film of the assassination (LIFE, Nov. 29) provides a frame-by-frame chronology of events, and from the movie camera's known speed of 18 frames a second -- two frames a second faster than it should have run -- it is possible to reconstruct the precise timing and placing and feasibility of the shots.

The first strikes the President, 170 feet away, in the throat; 74 frames later the second fells Governor Connally; 48 frames after that the third, over a distance of 260 feet, hits the President's head. From first to second shot 4.1 seconds elapse; from second to third, 2.7 seconds. Altogether, the three shots take 6.8 seconds -- time enough for a trained sharpshooter, even through the bobbing ~~sight~~ field of a telescopic sight.

Clayton E. Wheat Jr., director of the National Rifle Association, fired an identical-make rifle with an identical sight against a moving target over similar ranges for LIFE last week. He got three hits in 6.2 seconds.

Oswald was an ex-Marine sharpshooter, and he was firing from a perfect sniper's position. He had piled some boxes to prevent being seen from an adjoining building. He had put another box off in a corner so he could sit on it and look out the window-- again so as not to be seen. Finally, in front of the window he had stacked three boxes as a rest for his carbine. Two big pipes ran vertically along a wall near his window, natural braces for a shoulder. His position while shooting at a car going away to his right would have been comfortable and rock-steady, and Oswald had both the time and the ability to zero in three times.

The description of the President's two wounds by a Dallas doctor who tried to save him have added to the rumors. The doctor said one bullet passed from back to front on the right side of the President's head. But the other, the doctor reported, entered the President's throat from the front and then lodged in his body.

Since by this time the limousine was 50 yards past Oswald and the President's back was turned almost directly to the sniper, it has been hard to understand how the bullet could ~~have~~ enter the front of his throat. Hence the recurring guess that there was a second sniper somewhere else. But the 8mm film shows the President turning his body around to the right as he waves to someone in the crowd. His throat is exposed--towards the sniper's next--just before he clutches it.

Had authorities been
watching Oswald?

They had, but not when it mattered. Oswald first came to the FBI's attention when he tried to defect to Russia in October, 1959. On Aug. 10 this year the FBI interviewed him again, in New Orleans, after he had been arrested for passing out pro-Castro leaflets. On Sept. 26 Oswald went to Mexico and stayed there for one week trying to get a visa either to Cuba or to the Soviet Union, and likely, U.S. agents were against interested in what he was up to.

But the fact seems to be that whoever was keeping an eye on Oswald before he returned to Dallas in October quit when he got there. The FBI did not advise the Dallas police that he was in town -- if they themselves knew his whereabouts. Dallas police insist, "We never heard of him until after the shooting."

Did Oswald have help ?

No. The rumors include a mysterious Cuban named "Scentor"; an unidentified millionaire right-winger; Oswald's killer, Jack Ruby; and Oswald's wife. So far the police and federal investigators, chasing down hundreds of leads, have found no actual links to anybody.

Despite previous reports, Oswald evidently did not know Ruby and had never been in his club. Oswald's wife seems to have been generally ignorant about his activities and particularly about his assassination plot. When police officers came to ask her, after the shooting, whether her husband had a gun, she said he had, led them to the place where Oswald usually kept his carbine -- and gasped, as they did, to find that it was not there and that she had hopelessly incriminated her husband.

There ~~are~~ still are gaps in the story of Oswald's associations. Unemployed, he nevertheless came by enough money to travel to Mexico. A man with no previous pattern of hiding, he used an alias while rooming alone in a Dallas rooming house. It may turn out that Oswald was indeed associated with secret organizations, doing subversive things. But authorities think he plotted and completed his last, most outrageously subversive act absolutely alone.

How did Ruby get to him ?

Jack Ruby explained in remarkable casual fashion the circumstances that enabled him to shoot Oswald. "I was walking toward city hall," he says. "I saw a policeman who I walked past and I guess they didn't notice me. I walked on down into the area where Oswald was being led out."

This story leaves some problems for the investigators -- and for Ruby's jury trial -- to settle. For Ruby actually was in and out of city hall frequently after Oswald was captured.

On the very afternoon of the assassination, when the press was battling and snapping for news -- any news -- in the city hall corridors, Ruby was already there. Said one policeman, "Jack, what the hell are you going up here?" He was back again that night. He appears to have been free to come and go -- and eventually to shoot -- and the question is, why ?

There seem to be at least two preliminary answers. One is that Ruby, owner of a striptease joint, had long cultivated the police as a desirable business tactic. They simply knew him so well that his presence was not challenged -- perhaps on the grounds that each officer thought another had invited Ruby along.

The second answer seems to be that the police in Dallas, a prideful town (see p. 158), were appalled that the President of the U.S. had been assassinated in their city, under their protection. Accordingly they treated the press with extreme gentleness. They allowed reporters and TV crews to roam freely around the city hall. They docilely brought Oswald out into the corridor for intermittent, ambulatory press conferences -- ostensibly while he was en route to the bathroom. They had what amounted to a fullscale and formal exhibition of their prisoner on the night of the assassination. And, as everyone knows, they ~~planned~~ planned to transfer him at a stated hour because that is what they promised the press they would do.

Were the security
preparations for
the visit adequate ?

Not really, it appears, in the face of prior evidence that there could be trouble. The President had decided in September to go to Texas. But on Oct. 24, in Dallas, Ambassador Adlai Stevenson was struck with a demonstrator's sign and spat on after a talk supporting the U.N. The attack, according to Dallas police, was not a minor incident; it was close to a riot.

Shaken, Stevenson told presidential adviser Arthur M. Schlesinger there was "a mood of unpredictable madness" in Dallas and asked that the President reconsider his trip. A few days later Stevenson called Schlesinger back and said he had changed his mind: a cancellation of the trip would be too obvious a slap in the city's face.

Nothing changed. Schlesinger had not relayed the first warning. Two presidential advance men flew to Texas from Washington to complete arrangements for the visit. The Secret Service inspected and approved the parade route -- including the car-slowng curve in the highway lying under the windows of the Texas School Book Depository.

But the only special precautions were taken by Chief Curry. He put some 20 known Dallas extremists under surveillance of one kind or another and assigned most of his 48-man intelligence unit to guard the Trade Mart. In addition, he said 15 detectives downtown to keep an eye on the crowd, just in case rabid right-wingers like the ones who had nearly mobbed Stevenson acted up. The President's route was not release to the public until 72 hours before his arrival -- but the job Oswald held gave him solitary access to the windows commanding the route.

The fact that Oswald apparently decided to take a particular job in a particular building on the chance it might lead to a shot at the President stretches the credibility of any rational observer. But Oswald was not rational, and the incredible may have seemed commonplace to his fixed-focus mind. We will never know what went on in that mind, Ruby saw to that.