

The CBS Production Of The Warren Report

By JACK BLOCK

The four-hour CBS inquiry last summer into the Warren Commission findings may well be viewed by the American public as "a more thorough examination of the facts" (Flaherty in the San Francisco Chronicle) than the Warren Report itself. The series of programs was prepared, according to CBS news chief Richard Salant, because "the assassination as a news story was . . . more alive than ever (and) because the controversy over the Warren Report finally reached the point where we felt that the public issues required further explanation . . ."

Modestly, CBS news has accepted the encomiums awarded it by television columnists for finding a job that needed doing and doing it well. But how well, really, was the job done? When looked at more closely and with some concern for rigor, a rather different evaluation leaps forward. The deficiencies of the CBS production are instructive, both for what is suggested about the general quality of television news reporting and for what it may imply about the assassination investigation itself.

Although CBS found reason to chastise the Warren Commission on various counts, the conclusions of CBS are essentially identical to those contained in the Warren Report. I am no "assassination buff," but I have for many years taught university courses in the scientific evaluation of data. Quite frankly, I was appalled by the incorrect logic employed by CBS at several crucial junctures in its presentation. Besides flagrant error, the CBS arrangement of evidence was extraordinarily selective. Consider the following errors and selectivities in the CBS inquiry.

Item 1. It is important to establish the shooting time available to Oswald, as the presumed assassin. If the time Oswald had was too brief for him to get off the shots that were fired, then another assassin necessarily was involved. The Zapruder film indicated that the final shot hit the President at Frame 313. There is also clear indication that the President was hit no earlier than at Frame 210. By simple subtraction, 103 frames of film passed through Zapruder's camera between these two accurate shots. If one accepts the *conjecture* of CBS, contrary to the Warren Commission, that an earlier inaccurate shot was fired at Frame 136 through a gap in a tree, then 127 frames of film cover the shooting.

If we know the rate at which the Zapruder camera used film, it is a simple matter to calculate the time that must have been available to Assassin Oswald. The FBI timed Zapruder's camera to use film at the rate of 18.3 frames per second. Dividing 103 frames by 18.3 gives the familiar answer of 5.6 seconds shooting time, the longest Warren Commission estimate. Dividing the CBS speculation of 127 frames by 18.3 gives the answer of 6.9 seconds, a longer and more favorable but still short time for Oswald.

At this point, CBS makes a remarkable error which Walter Cronkite solemnly transmitted nationwide. CBS suggested that Zapruder unwittingly had switched his camera to a slow-motion setting, thus causing it to run at 24 frames per second. Whereupon CBS concludes that at the slow motion setting, the Zapruder film strip represented a longer period of time (up to 9 seconds for Oswald).

Apparently, CBS became confused and committed the childish error of forgetting the nature of the units being dealt with. Their figures come from the mistake of *multiplying* the Warren Commission time by the ratio, 24 over 18.3. This is wrong. In order to calculate the elapsed time, the number 24 must be entered as the denominator of a ratio, with the numerator being the total number of film frames. And the larger the denominator of a ratio, the *smaller* the answer that results (try 103 divided by 24 to see). A 12-year-old could tell the CBS news staff a good deal about arithmetic, it appears. When properly corrected, the speculations of CBS give Oswald embarrassingly little time to be so accurate (no more than 5.3 and as little as 4.3 seconds).

Item 2. Still trying to elongate the time available to Oswald and thus make his accuracy more likely, CBS decided to dispute the timing of the Zapruder camera which was *unavailable to them for measurement*. Since CBS could not measure the timing of the relevant camera, they decided to measure the timing of irrelevant cameras. This is an error. Then, CBS "discovered" in their "experiment" that cameras differ slightly among themselves in their timing. Like watches, some cameras run slow and some cameras run fast. From this not new finding, CBS drew another incorrect conclusion. CBS chose to conclude that the differences between cameras meant that the Zapruder camera itself was highly variable. Here CBS has confused timing variation *between* cameras with timing variation *within* a camera. They are not the same and, indeed, it is well known that the tendency of a watch or camera to be slow or fast is highly consistent. It is not slow one day and fast another. If the Zapruder camera was clocked at 18.3 frames per second by the FBI, we can depend upon this figure to be highly repeatable. It is simply nonsense to introduce with fanfare the somewhat different timings of other cameras as having a relevance to the assassination. This kind of reasoning can only be described as incompetent.

Item 3. CBS constructed another "experiment" to demonstrate that a single bullet could have gone through the President's body and through Governor Connally's body, wrist, and thigh emerging unmarked. The ballistics experts interviewed by CBS agreed in saying a perfect bullet, after such passage, is theoretically possible but highly improbable. CBS fired a similar bullet through a similar gun into gelatin slabs (to simulate flesh) and masonite (to simulate bone) and found that the bullet "could" have had sufficient penetrating power. The validity of their simulation experiment is unknown, but even within the CBS experiment, the bullet on occasion failed to penetrate all the obstacles in its way.

CBS failed to display its own experimental bullets after firing. We do not know whether they were deformed or inviolate after firing. How could CBS fail to show these bullets to their audience when the perfection of the accused bullet is so much of an issue? Is this omission simply an astonishing oversight and therefore a further indication of reportorial insufficiency or is a selectivity in reporting being manifested?

Item 4. Perhaps the most exciting new information developed by CBS comes from their interview with Captain Humes, the naval surgeon who signed the disputed autopsy report. Captain Humes brushed aside the autopsy sketch made at the time which shows a bullet hole in the President's back. He declared instead that the precise figures recorded on the autopsy report could be relied upon but that the sketch was only approximate.

The figures vouched for by Captain Humes testify that a bullet hole was observed 11 centimeters (about 4½ inches) from the right acromion and 14 centimeters (about 5½ inches) below the tip of the right mastoid process. *These figures necessarily place the bullet hole somewhere in the upper back.* They are absolutely irreconcilable with the further declaration by Captain Humes, accompanied by an after-the-fact artist's drawing,

showing that the bullet went through the President's neck. I have consulted with two physicians well-versed in anatomy to verify this contradiction in the statements of Captain Humes.

This discrepancy is fundamental in its implications because the figures that Captain Humes verifies locate the wound in the President's back (as do the FBI photographs, not presented by CBS, of the jacket and shirt the President was wearing). Hence, the artist's drawing now presented by Captain Humes cannot be correct. What accounts for this obvious discrepancy and why could not CBS recognize the obvious?

CBS had an opportunity to perform a magnificent public service bringing new light on a matter that greatly troubles the American people. They presented a careful, polished, designed-to-be-impressive series of programs in what clearly was a major effort of the network. Yet, behind the rhythmic incantations of catechism and answer by earnest news-speaker Walter Cronkite, and behind the dazzling gloss of sophisticated television technique, there was little of substance. The CBS coverage was superficial and gimmicky, rather than probing and incisive. In fundamental respects, it was transparently incompetent. If the CBS analysis could have been better and was not, then we must ask why. If it is the best we can expect of television reporting, then we are badly off indeed.

Finally, as a concerned citizen, I must comment about the pejorative way in which CBS treated the "conspiracy psychology" of the great majority of Americans who now doubt Oswald's solitary guilt. No one *wants* a conspiracy to be found. Despite the diametrical pronouncements of my former Berkeley colleague, Seymour Lipset, most Americans would prefer that the assassination be truly determined to have been simply a tragic, chancy, essentially unrepeatable event. If the randomness of fate struck John Kennedy down, we can accept our mourning and go on. But if some kind of conspiracy was involved and may still operate, then we would be ostriches to deny its existence. It is not a "conspiracy need" that has Americans pre-occupied with the facts of the assassination. It would be much easier psychologically to abide with the Warren (and CBS) conclusions. But there is something rotten about what went on in Dallas and the way the investigation was shaped and issued to the American people. Only if the National Archives are opened up and a less constrained investigation of the assassination is undertaken can the gnawing suspicions be allayed. Dare we undertake a new investigation? Dare we not to?

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DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA 94720

30 June 1967

Editor
San Francisco Chronicle
Fifth and Mission Streets
San Francisco, California

Dear Sir,

I would greatly appreciate your publication of the attached letter as a Letter To The Editor. If it is too long for publication as such a letter, then you may wish to have an article written that is based upon the facts and argument contained in it. If there is to be appreciable editing of the letter, I wish to be consulted for approval of the resulting document. Should you wish to call me, for any reason, my home telephone number is 524-5231.

Sincerely,

Jack Block
Jack Block
Professor



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Item 1. It is important to establish the shooting time available to Oswald, as the presumed assassin. If the time Oswald had was too brief for him to get off the shots that were fired, then another assassin necessarily was involved. The Zapruder film indicates that the final shot hit the President at Frame 313. There is also clear indication that the President was hit no earlier than at Frame 210. By simple subtraction, 103 frames of film passed through Zapruder's camera between these two accurate shots. If one accepts the conjecture of CBS, contrary to the Warren Commission, that an earlier inaccurate shot was fired at Frame 186 through a gap in a tree, then 127 frames of film cover the shooting. If we know the rate at which the Zapruder ~~camera~~ used film, it is a simple matter to calculate the time that must have been available to Assassin Oswald. The FBI timed Zapruder's camera to use film at the rate of 18.3 frames per second. Dividing 103 frames by 18.3 gives the familiar answer of 5.6 seconds shooting time, the longest Warren Commission estimate. Dividing the CBS speculation of 127 frames by 18.3 gives the answer of 6.9 seconds, a longer and more favorable but still short time ~~for~~ Oswald. At this point, CBS makes a remarkable error which Walter Cronkite solemnly transmitted nationwide. CBS suggested that Zapruder unwittingly had switched his camera to the slow-motion setting, thus causing it to run at 24 frames per second. Whereupon CBS concludes that at the slow motion setting, the Zapruder film strip represented a longer period of time (up to 9 seconds for Oswald). Apparently, CBS became confused and committed the childish error of losing sight of the units being dealt with. Their figures come from the mistake of multiplying the Warren Commission time by the ratio, 24 over 18.3. This is wrong. In order to calculate the elapsed

time, the number 24 must be entered as the denominator of a ratio, with the numerator being the total number of film frames. And the larger the denominator of a ratio, the smaller the answer that results (try 103 divided by 24 to see). A 12-year old could tell the CBS news staff a good deal about arithmetic, it appears. When properly corrected, the speculations of CBS give Oswald embarrassingly little time to be so accurate (no more than 5.3 and as little as 4.3 seconds).

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Item 4. Perhaps the most interesting information developed by CBS comes from their interview with Captain Humes, the naval surgeon who signed the disputed autopsy report. Captain Humes brushed aside the autopsy sketch made at the time which shows a bullet hole in the President's back. He declared instead that the precise figures recorded on the autopsy report could be relied upon but that the sketch was only approximate. The figures vouched for by Captain Humes testify that a bullet hole was observed 11 centimeters (about 4 1/2 inches) from the right acromion and 14 centimeters (about 5 1/2 inches) below the tip of the right mastoid process. These figures necessarily place the bullet hole somewhere in the upper back. They are absolutely irre-

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