

Some Questions about the Assassination

by Jack Minnis and Staughton Lynd

Jack Minnis did graduate work in Political Science at Tulane University and now works in the South.

Staughton Lynd received his Ph.D. in History from Columbia University. His articles and reviews have appeared in Commentary, the Political Science Quarterly and the William and Mary Quarterly.

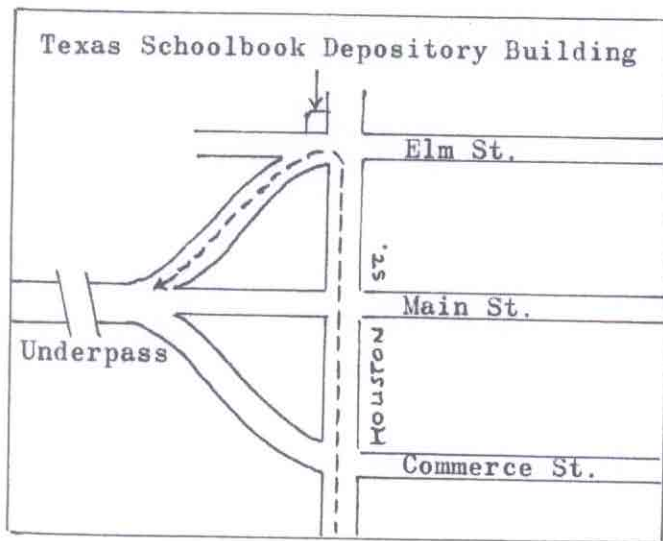
On December 3, newspapers reported that the Federal Bureau of Investigation would confirm in all essentials the version of the President's assassination previously presented by the Dallas police and by Gordon Shanklin, FBI agent in charge in Dallas. According to these accounts the FBI will state that: (1) Lee Oswald, without accomplices, fired three shots at President Kennedy from a sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository Building; (2) about five and one-half seconds elapsed between the first shot and the last; (3) all three shots came from behind and slightly to the right of the President's car; (4) the same weapon fired all three shots.

It has not been announced how long the Presidential commission of inquiry will take to reach a finding, but meanwhile certain questions pose themselves:

(1) How Lee Oswald, from a position behind and slightly to the right of President Kennedy, fired a shot which entered the President's neck just below the Adam's apple; (2) how Oswald, using a bolt-action rifle, fired three shots with deadly accuracy in five and one-half seconds at a target 75-100 yards away moving about 25 miles an hour; (3) how the three shots could have produced four bullets; (4) how Lee Oswald did all the things he is supposed to have done in the 15 or 30 minutes (there are two different accounts) between the time the President was assassinated and the time Oswald allegedly ran into his apartment four miles away.

### The Target

On Page 15 is a rough diagram of the assassination scene constructed from a map of the area printed in The New York Times of November 23 and from the pictures of the scene found in other newspapers.



The leading vehicle in the motorcade was the Presidential limousine with Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy in the rear seat, the President on the right. On jump seats facing forward, were Mr. and Mrs. Connally, Governor Connally on the right. The second car was filled with Secret Service men. The third car carried Vice President and Mrs. Johnson and Senator Ralph Yarborough. In the fourth car were Secret Service agents protecting the Vice President.

At about 12:30 p.m., November 22, the President's limousine made the turn at Elm and Houston Streets into the approach to the underpass leading to Stemmons Freeway. The car was traveling about 25 miles an hour, or about 12 yards per second. The distance between the turn at Elm Street and the underpass is about 220 yards. Thus at the speed at which most witnesses agree the motorcade was traveling, the maximum time it could have consumed traversing this distance would have been 20 seconds.

It is difficult to determine, with precision, the exact point in the traversal of the 220 yards at which the shooting occurred. However, some definite limits can be set. Experienced newsmen reporting in the New York Times, the New York Herald-Tribune, the Washington Post, The Atlanta Constitution, and for both Associated Press and United Press International, estimate that the President's car was 75-100 yards past the turn at Elm and Houston when the first



shot was fired; others, persons on the spot at the time, say the President's car was midway between the turn and the underpass; Mrs. Connally says the car was almost ready to go underneath the underpass; Governor Connally says the car had just made the turn at Elm and Houston.

A reader, making use of the tree, the lamp post, and the ornamental wall shown in pictures on pages 24, 25 and 32H of Life magazine for November 29, can approximately identify for himself the point at which the President, smiling, waving and looking straight ahead as the limousine moved away from the Depository Building and toward the underpass, suddenly made a "clutching movement toward his throat."

John Herbers, writing in The New York Times of November 27, comments on the 15-second movie sequence of the assassination taken by an amateur photographer (from which the pictures in Life magazine were selected). He says five seconds elapsed from the first shot until the President's car disappeared into the underpass. If the President's car continued at 25 miles an hour after the first shot, then it traveled about 60 yards during this five seconds and, therefore, must have been about 160 yards from the turn at Elm and Houston when firing commenced. If, as most witnesses believe, it accelerated rapidly after the first shot, then it traversed considerably more than 60 yards during those five seconds. On the evidence of the movie, we would estimate the distance between the turn at Elm and Houston and the site of the first shot at something less than 160 yards, not appreciably out of line with the estimates of witnesses and newsmen, and the anticipated conclusion of the FBI report.

Having established, with some certainty we think, the fact that the Presidential car was approximately 100 yards past the turn at Elm and Houston when the first shot was fired, we can move to a consideration of the wounds themselves.

#### The Wounds

Tom Wicker, in The New York Times of November 23, wrote that Doctors Malcolm Perry and Kemp Clark, who attended Mr. Kennedy in the emergency room of the Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas immediately after the shooting, described the President's wounds thus: "Mr. Kennedy was hit by a bullet in the throat, just below the Adam's apple. ... This wound had the appearance of a bullet's entry. Mr. Kennedy also had a massive, gaping wound in the back and on the right side of the head." Dr. Perry was the first physician to treat the President. Dr. Clark

was summoned and arrived in a minute or two.

We saw nowhere in the newspapers nor heard in any of the earlier radio or TV accounts any attempt to reconcile a wound in the front of the President's throat with the theory that the shots came from the Texas School Book Depository, 75-100 yards to the rear of the President at the time the first shot was fired. Nor did we see or hear any suggestion that the original accounts of where the President's car was at the time of the shooting might be inaccurate. This could, perhaps, be attributed to the fact that identification of the throat wound as one of entry was tentative, and that it would be reasonable to suppose a bullet entering the back of the President's head, fired from an angle of about 45 degrees above him, might exit at the Adam's apple. The examining doctors, as they were quoted in the early press accounts, seemed to be unsure as to whether one bullet or two had inflicted the head and throat wounds of the President.

However, John Herbers, in a follow-up story in the Times of November 27, cleared this up. Herbers quotes Dr. Kemp Clark, the Dallas surgeon who pronounced the President dead, as saying that two bullets hit the President. One entered through the throat just below the Adam's apple and ranged downward, without exiting. The other struck the right side of the back of the President's head tangentially (that is, it smashed in and out, traveling on a tangent to his head).

From this description, it would seem that one bullet was fired from in front of the President. Herbers tries to reconcile the frontal wound with the supposed position of the assassin in the School Book Depository Building by suggesting that the gunman could have fired as the President's car was approaching the building, then swung the gun through an arc of almost 180 degrees and fired twice more.

But this reconciliation ignores the uncontroverted accounts of many eyewitnesses as to where the President's car was at the time the first shot was heard. It appears well-established that the first shot was fired only after the President's car was more than 75 yards past the building. Indeed, Herbers' own interpretation of the 15-second movie sequence supports this. In order for the assassin, from his supposed position in the building, to have wounded the President frontally, he would have had to fire while the Presidential car was entering the turn at Houston and Elm, or before the car had halfway completed the turn. By all accounts this would have been six to eight seconds before a shot was heard. According to a New York Times dispatch from Dallas dated November 27, the Secret Service conducted a re-enactment of the



assassination that day. The dispatch reported that "the consensus was that the shooting began after the President 's car had made the turn."

We see no way to reconcile the conclusion attributed to the forthcoming FBI report, that "it has been established that all three shots came from the same direction, behind and slightly to the right of the President's car" (AP dispatch datelined Washington, Atlanta Journal, Dec. 3), with the statement of Dallas doctors that one bullet struck the President at about the necktie knot "in the mid-section of the front part of his neck" (New York Times, Nov. 24 and 27). Indeed, the bullet that struck the President's throat was sufficiently frontal that Dr. Clark at first thought the same bullet might have entered through the throat and exited through the upper rear of the President's head. (See "The Kennedy Wound," New York Times, Nov. 24, for an account based on this supposition.)

On December 5, 13 days after the assassination, "federal investigators" were still simulating the crime with car, camera and surveyor's transit on Elm Street in Dallas, in an attempt to answer the question "how the President could have received a bullet in the front of the throat from a rifle in the Texas School Book Depository Building after his car had passed the building and was turning a gentle curve away from it" (Joseph Loftus in the New York Times, Dec. 6).

Finally, what is the explanation of the reports of Frank Cormier of the AP and of Richard Dudman of the St. Louis Post-dispatch of a small hole in the windshield of the President's limousine?

#### The Weapon

First press accounts quoted various members of the Dallas police force as saying the assassin's weapon was a .30-caliber Enfield and a 7.65mm Mauser. One Secret Service man said he thought the weapon was an "Army or Japanese rifle" of .25 caliber. The same accounts reported that the rifle was found on the second floor of the building by a window, in the fifth-floor staircase, by an open sixth-floor window, and hidden behind boxes and cases on the second or sixth floors.

It was not until the FBI said it had discovered that Oswald had purchased an Italian-made 6.5mm rifle from a Chicago mail-order house that the confusion was dispelled. Then all accounts and all sources agreed: The former .30 caliber-Enfield-7.65 Mauser was now a 6.5mm Italian-made rifle with telescopic sight. It was also at this time that all sources began agreeing that the gun had been found on the sixth floor - though some still held out for the open-window location,

while others argued for the buried-behind-the-boxes theory.

We did not at that time have a very clear idea of the precise number of seconds within which the shots had occurred, but we were uneasy about anyone's having got off the reported three shots with a bolt-action rifle from that distance at a target moving 12 yards a second, with that accuracy and quickly enough to have created such confusion about who got hit first, the President or the Governor.

On November 25 The New York Times reported that "a group of the nation's most knowledgeable gun experts, meeting in Maryland at the time of the shooting, agreed that, considering the gun, the distance, the angle and the movement of the President's car, the assassin was either an exceptional marksman or fantastically lucky in placing his shots." The Times account does not indicate whether the experts also considered the extreme rapidity with which the shots were fired.

Then on November 27 the Times ran another story telling about tests which had been conducted by a "firearms expert from the National Rifle Association" in Washington. The expert had used a "Model 1938 6.5mm bolt-action rifle." His target had been 50 feet away. He was able to get off three shots in 11 seconds and they struck within a one-inch circle. On a second try the expert was able to get off three shots in eight seconds with comparable accuracy. Using this performance as a basis for speculation, the expert reasoned that a person well-practiced with the use of the gun could have done as well or better under the conditions of the assassination in Dallas. (The story did not indicate whether or not the target used in these tests was stationary or moving.)

Others did not agree with this expert. The Italian newspaper Corriere Lombardo of Milan said, as reported in the same Times story, that if the Model '38 were used and that if more than one shot had been fired "there must have been a second attacker." In Vienna, the Olympics champion shot, Hubert Hammerer, said that the initial shot could have been made under the conditions in Dallas when Mr. Kennedy was killed, but he considered it unlikely that one man could have triggered three shots within five seconds with the weapon used.

All these judgments were made on the theory that the shots were fired as the Presidential car sped away from the gunman, with the gunman having to allow only for the forward movement of the car. This supposition, of course, takes no account of the marksman himself having to move in order to swing the gun through an arc of 180 degrees.



These experts were also proceeding on the theory that Lee Oswald was a crack marksman. However, Oswald was only an "average" marksman in the Marines (Laurence Stern and Alfred E. Lewis, writing in The Washington Post, December 1). Of course, he could have improved with practice since his Marine service. On December 9, Fred Powledge, reporting from Dallas to the New York Times, quoted several persons as saying they had twice seen Oswald firing at a practice rifle range within three weeks of the assassination. One remembered him coming "alone in a battered automobile." But Mrs. Michael Paine, with whom Lee Oswald's wife had been staying, is quoted as saying that "in late October or early November she tried to teach (Oswald) how to drive her car in a parking lot, but that (he) did not even learn to park it."

#### The Bullets

There is general agreement among the witnesses and newspaper accounts that three shots were fired. Typical is Senator Ralph Yarborough's description, quoted by The Washington Post of November 23: "I heard three loud explosions that sounded like shots from a deer rifle. You could smell powder."

Yet there appear to be four bullets involved. In the New York Times of November 25, Fred Powledge's story from Dallas lists as part of the evidence supporting the Oswald-School-Book-Depository-Mannlicher-Carcano theory: "A bullet that Secret Service men removed from a stretcher at Parkland Hospital after the shooting, and two bullet fragments removed from the Presidential automobile matched bullets fired by the rifle (FBI) agents found inside the (warehouse)." Powledge cites Gordon Shanklin, FBI agent in charge in Dallas, as his source of information. This it would appear accounts for two bullets. In the Times of November 27, John Herber's story from Dallas says: "Three shots are known to have been fired. Two hit the President. One did not emerge. Dr. Kemp Clark, who pronounced Mr. Kennedy dead, said one struck him at about the necktie knot. 'It ranged downward and did not exit,' the surgeon said." Thus there is the bullet from the stretcher, the bullet which was found fragmented in the car, and the bullet that did not exit from the President.

An AP dispatch from Dallas in The Atlanta Constitution of November 23 quoted Dr. Robert R. Shaw, attending physician for Governor Connally: "(The Governor) seems to have been struck by just one bullet ... We know the wound of entrance was along the right shoulder. He was shot from above ... (The bullet) entered the back

of his chest and moved outward ... It emerged from his chest and struck his wrist and thigh ... The bullet is still in his leg."

Now we have the stretcher bullet, the fragmented bullet, the bullet that remained in the President and the bullet in the Governor's leg. Herbers, in the Times of the 27th, presumes "that the bullet that struck the President's head was the one recovered from the stretcher that bore the President into the hospital." He doesn't theorize about how the bullet got onto the stretcher. Dr. Clark stated that the bullet went "in and out" of the President's head. We assume this to mean that there was an exit as well as an entry wound in the President's head. Furthermore, it would seem rather likely that the fragmented bullet would be the one which made the head wound. LeMoyne Snyder, forensic medicine specialist, in his book Homicide Investigation, writes: "When a lead bullet is fired into the skull at an angle, it will sometimes fracture the skull bone in such a way that a sharp edge of bone is presented to the bullet. As a result, the bullet is cut in two lengthwise ... It is not likely to happen if jacketed ammunition is used."

It should be noted here, too, that while Herbers identifies the stretcher from which the bullet was removed, Powledge's story of two days earlier, in which he cites FBI agent Shanklin as his source, merely says: "A bullet the Secret Service men removed from a stretcher (our italics)."

We have no way of knowing whether the bullet remained inside the body of the President and was buried with him, or whether it was removed for evidence. Dr. Clark, in Herbers' story of the 27th, merely says that the bullet did not exit of his own accord. Then Herbers writes: "The bullet that did not exit from the President's body may have since been removed in an autopsy, but the Parkland Hospital said no autopsy was performed in Dallas." An AP dispatch in the Dallas Morning News of November 27 states that "the White House has so far declined to say whether an autopsy was performed on the body of slain President John F. Kennedy. For approximately nine hours, the body was at Bethesda, Md., Naval Hospital last Friday night and early Saturday morning (November 22 and 23)." An AP dispatch which appeared in the Pine Bluff (ark.) Gazette of November 27 stated that "doctors at the Bethesda (Maryland) Naval Hospital made a post-mortem examination of Kennedy's wounds."

The hospital authorities also stated, according to Herbers, that "the medical report of President Kennedy's assassination, written in



longhand by Dr. Clark, chief of neurosurgery at Parkland, had been given to the Secret Service and the hospital had no copy."

Another puzzling fact is that apparently the two bullets with the cloudiest pedigree are the ones that link the shooting to the gun the investigators finally settled on. Powledge's story of the 25th, quoted above, states that the stretcher bullet and the fragmented bullet matched bullets fired by FBI men from the rifle found inside the building. The rifle (identified variously as an Enfield and a Mauser) was found early in the afternoon of November 22. So were the two bullets. They were in the possession of the Dallas police and the FBI presumably, from then on. Sometime on November 23, the rifle became a Mannlicher-Carcano. Is it the custom of Italian rifle-makers to leave their names off their products, so that they cannot be identified immediately? We don't know.

We do know that the more damage done to the surface of the bullet, the more dubious becomes the accuracy of laboratory comparison with other bullets to determine which gun of a given make it was fired from, even if the make of the gun can be determined. Thus the identification of the gun that supposedly fired the assassination bullets seems to rest primarily, not on the fragmented bullet, but on a bullet allegedly found by a Secret Service man on a stretcher in Parkland Hospital, Dallas, after the President was shot.

It is not clear at this point just where this bullet came from and how it came to be on "a stretcher".

#### The Murderer

The way the supposed assassination gun is linked to Lee Oswald is somewhat curious, too. Powledge's story of the 25th states: "The FBI agent (Gordon Shanklin) said the young man ordered a 6.5mm rifle with telescope sight from a Chicago store last spring. The rifle was sent to an 'A. Hidell,' at Oswald's post office box here. It arrived by parcel post on March 20. Samples of Oswald's handwriting were sent yesterday to the FBI laboratory in Washington where they were found to match the handwriting in the letter ordering the rifle." In his story of the 26th, Powledge again refers to the gun: "The district attorney said the police had traced the serial number of the murder weapon, an Italian rifle with a telescopic sight, to the Chicago mail-order house that had sold Oswald a rifle last spring." Thus all the FBI and the Dallas police appear to claim so far is that the gun which fired the stretcher bullet and the gun they say Oswald ordered came from the same mail-order house.

Moreover, in the early accounts it was being said that the gun, with telescopic sight, was purchased for \$12.78. But on November 25 The New York Times reproduced an advertisement from a mail-order house showing clearly that \$12.78 was the price of the gun without telescopic sight. Was the sight ordered in a separate letter, also in Oswald's handwriting and also signed "A Hidell"? Was there one money order signed by Hidell for \$12.78 and another for \$7.50? And if so, why was the latter information held back at the time the former was announced?

In his news conference of November 24, District Attorney Wade said that Oswald's palmprints were on the gun found in the warehouse. However, first he called them fingerprints, then palmprints. And on November 27, "Edward Bennett Williams, one of the nation's leading defense lawyers ... said the police's purported discovery of Oswald's palmprints in the room where the assassin lay in wait was not necessarily incriminating. 'Palmprints are not nearly as conclusive as fingerprints,' he said." (New York Post, November 27.)

In other parts of his November 24 conference, District Attorney Wade seemed so confused that we must question whether he really knew much about the evidence against Oswald at the time. As an example of his confusion, note the following exchange referring to the reported attempt by Oswald to shoot an arresting officer in the Texas Theater (taken from a transcript of the news conference published in The New York Times, November 26):

Q. Why didn't it go off?

A. It snapped. It was a misfire. Then the officers subdued him - some six officers - subdued him there in the theater, and he was brought to the police station here.

Q. Mr. Wade, why didn't the gun fire?

A. It misfired, being on the - the shell didn't explode. We have it where it hit it, but it didn't explode. It didn't fire the shell.

Q. There was one officer who said that he pulled the trigger, but he managed to put his thumb in the part before the firing pin. It didn't ...

A. Well ...

Q. ... strike the - the bullet didn't explode. Is that it?

A. I don't know whether it's that or not. I know he didn't snap the gun is all I know about it.



Now, either Wade had, as part of the evidence, the misfire bullet from the pistol, with a mark on it made by the pistol's firing pin, or he didn't. He didn't seem to know whether he had it or not.

All in all, it is hard to see how the District Attorney felt able then to conclude: "I would say without any doubt he is the killer," particularly in view of the fact that some of the evidence - such as the alleged statement by Mrs. Oswald that her husband had a rifle in their garage on the night before the assassination but that it was gone the next day - would never have been admissible in a Texas court, as the police readily admitted.

We will remark on only one other aspect of the case. Dallas District Attorney Wade offered to newsmen and to the public, as one of the links in the chain of evidence against Oswald, the fact that Oswald went to his home in Oak Cliff, changed his clothes hurriedly, and left (Wade's November 24 news conference as printed in the New York Times, November 26). According to a UPI dispatch datelined Dallas in The Atlanta Journal, November 23, "Mrs. R.C. Roberts, who works for the Johnsons (from whom Oswald rented a room in Oak Cliff), said that at about 12:45 p.m. (Dallas time) Friday she had just learned that Mr. Kennedy was shot. In rushed Oswald, 'On the dead run,' she said. 'He ran to his room, came running back with a gray zipper jacket and out the door'."

The assassin's bullets were fired between 12:30 and 12:31 p.m. (Dallas time). Oswald supposedly fired them from the sixth floor of the building where he worked. Then, supposedly, he hid the rifle behind some books and packing cases and made his way to the second floor of the building. Roy S. Truly, TSBD manager, and a policeman ran into the building immediately after the shots were fired. "The two men scrambled up the stairs to the second floor. As they made their way to the back stairway, the policeman saw Oswald standing beside a soft-drink machine, sipping from a coke bottle" (Washington Post, December 1). According to the New York Post (November 27) two noted criminal lawyers have puzzled over this account. Maurice Edelbaum said: "The main incongruity I see is the report of Oswald's swift descent from the sixth floor. The moment a policeman rushed into the building Oswald was there." Raymond Brown asked: "How did he get down? Were there steps or an elevator from the sixth floor? Did anybody see him?"

Then, according to Wade, Oswald left the building and walked four blocks west to Lamar Street where he boarded a bus. He rode the bus

an undetermined number of blocks and then got off. He hailed a taxicab and rode four miles to his room in the Oak Cliff section of Dallas. He arrived, according to Mrs. Roberts, just 14 minutes after the assassination. Now if the taxicab was able to average 20 miles an hour, which we think would be a maximum, the taxi ride would have taken 12 minutes. This leaves Oswald with just two minutes to shoot the President and Governor Connally, clean and hide the gun, run down four flights of stairs, search his pockets for coins, get a coke from the machine, open it, engage in some conversation with Mr. Truly and the policeman, make his way from the second floor out of the building, walk four blocks to the bus stop, board the bus and ride several blocks, and get off the bus and hail a taxi.

On December 1, however, The Washington Post quoted housekeeper Roberts as saying: "He came dashing in about 1 o'clock." This second version created new difficulties, for these reporters refer to "the floundering of the bus in the choked downtown traffic," and to the fact that Oswald "told the (cab) driver to drop him off at a corner five blocks beyond his rooming house." If the traffic was "choked" we probably need to cut in half the estimated average speed of the taxi over the four miles to Oswald's rooming house. At an average speed of 10 miles an hour, it would have taken the taxi 24 minutes to cover the distance. This would leave Oswald five minutes to shoot the President and Governor Connally, clean and hide the gun, run down four flights of stairs, search his pockets for coins, get a coke from the machine, open it, engage in some conversation with Mr. Truly and the policeman, make his way from the second floor out of the building, walk four blocks to the bus stop, board the bus and ride several blocks, and get off the bus and hail a taxi. And if we accept this version, we must allow, within the five minutes left to Oswald, the time necessary to walk the five blocks back to his rooming house from the corner to which the taxi took him.

#### Conclusion

Since the bulk of this analysis was written, the newsmagazines - Time, Life, Newsweek, and US News and World Report - have made public their versions of the assassination. They help add to the confusion. For example, Time (December 6) has Oswald buying rifle and sight for \$19.95, while according to Newsweek (December 9) he paid \$12.78. All early accounts of the assassination put the speed of the President's limousine at about 25 miles per hour, but now it has slowed to 15 miles per hour (Life, November 29), "no more than half the 25 miles per hour first



estimated by authorities" (Newsweek, December 9), and 12 miles per hour (US News and World Report, December 9). The latter magazine comments: "If President Kennedy's car had been moving even 20 miles an hour, the experts say, it might have made the lead time too difficult a problem for the sniper."

The central problem - the fact that the President was wounded in the front of the throat, "the midsection of the front part of his neck," according to "staff doctors" at Parkland Hospital on November 23 (New York Times, November 24) - remains. Life and Newsweek place the President's car 170 and 150 feet past the turn at the time of the first shot: a shorter distance than our estimate, but much too distant from the window for a shot through the front of the neck. Life (December 6) recognizes this problem, but solves it by saying that the President was turning far to the right at the moment of impact. This explanation appears to fail for two reasons. First, Life's own pictures of the event in the issue of November 29 show the President looking straight ahead. Second, Elm Street curves left as it passes the warehouse building (see the picture on page 32H of Life, November 29), in such a way that when the first bullet struck, the President's back was to the window. In order for a bullet to have entered "the mid-section of the front part of his neck" the President would have had to turn completely around just before the shot was fired.