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Kennedy Assassination: A Different View

Gun Expert Reasons Oswald Didn't Fire Fatal Shot

In 1967 CBS investigated the Warren Report of the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and televised its findings shortly afterward in a four-part series.

It had several gunning experts make test firings with the same make and model of the Mannlicher-Carcano Italian rifle Lee Harvey Oswald is said to have used. During these tests, Howard Donahue became the only man on record to equal and surpass Oswald's alleged ability with that type firearm. Under conditions nearly identical to those of the assassination, Mr. Donahue scored three accurate shots well within a much-disputed 6.5-second period, the time the assassin is thought to have had to fire.

This involvement intrigued Mr. Donahue, a gunsmith, and led him into a personal study of ballistic aspects of the assassination. After 10 years of trying to disprove his own reluctant conclusion, he is now convinced he knows who fired the shot that killed the President. He says it was not Lee Harvey Oswald.

This is the second of a two-part series.

By RALPH REPERT

AS HE read all evidence and speculation he could find about the assassination, Howard Donahue realized he might be lured into the trap which had ensnared the more vitriolic critics of the Warren Report. Most, he felt, had perpetuated oft-repeated criticisms of the report, emphasizing certain aspects while playing down or ignoring evidence which didn't fit their theories.

He reorganized the information he had assembled, then went carefully through it again, considering each item for its possibilities or impossibilities as a rifle expert and marksman would see them.

He decided not to concern himself with the many and often bizarre theories of assassination conspiracies.

"Perhaps there was a conspiracy to murder the President," he says. "Perhaps there wasn't. I haven't given that enough thought to even form an opinion."

Howard Donahue, of Towson, Says Guarded Spectrographic Tapes Could Prove His Theory Is Correct

When Mr. Donahue had read the news stories of the assassination he had noted ballistic inconsistencies, but attributed them to either careless reporting or well meaning but incorrect statements by spokesmen who weren't familiar with firearms. After he saw that many inconsistencies were included in widely accepted reports, he began scrutinizing them.

In his re-study, even the basic ballistics reported and accepted looked wrong.

"To oversimplify an example of ballistics performance," Mr. Donahue explains, "fasten a tin can to a fence post and shoot a hole through it with a .22 rifle. Run a soda straw through the holes in the can and (with the can in its original position) the straw will define the line of fire.

"A bullet fired from a window on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, the one which the Warren Report accepts as the fatal bullet, should have entered the rear, right, upper side of the President's head, and exited at the left, front, lower part of the skull. But, according to the evidence given to the Warren Commission, the bullet entered the right, rear part of the skull, somehow made a right turn after it penetrated, and blew out a right, front section of the skull, an area almost as large as a saucer.

"I realize bullets can take strange courses after they enter a body. Forensic medical investigations report many of them. But to accept this ballistical bit of evidence, we must accept it blindly as a highly unusual, completely unexplained factor."

Other evidence Mr. Donahue found hard to accept was a statement Roy Kellerman, a Secret Service agent, made after

the assassination. Mr. Kellerman, who had been riding in the right front seat of the presidential limousine, testified that as the firing began, he had heard the President exclaim: "My God, I am hit!" The agent was positive in this assertion.

"The Zapruder film," Mr. Donahue says, "indicates the President's first violent reaction to having been hit was from the bullet which entered his back, passed through his throat, nicked his necktie and went through Governor Connally's upper body and wrist and lodged in his thigh.

"That high-velocity bullet moved faster than the speed of sound. It would have been impossible for anybody in the presidential car to have heard the shot before the bullet hit," Mr. Donahue says. "With his larynx shattered by the bullet, how could the President have exclaimed anything?"

Inconsistencies in the comparative behavior of the two bullets that hit the President also bothered Mr. Donahue.

The bullet that entered the President's back and tore through his throat passed through Governor Connally's right side, near the armpit, shattering a portion of his right fifth rib. It came out of the Governor's right chest, just below the nipple, fractured a bone as it passed on through his wrist, and moved on to lodge in his thigh.

"This performance," Mr. Donahue says, "was normal for this particular type of bullet. It is a long, heavy, metal-jacketed, high-velocity bullet designed to penetrate and pass through cleanly, no matter what part of a body it strikes. How well that bullet performed as it was designed to can be seen by the fact that after hav-

ing passed through the President, then twice shattering bone, breaking Governor Connally's rib and wrist, it remained intact. It still held its clean shape, remaining close enough to its original form that it has often been referred to in official reports as 'the pristine bullet.'

Now let's compare the 'twin bullet' which seconds later inflicted the President's fatal head wound. It is accepted by the Warren Report that this was fired by Oswald, and was an identical piece of ammunition fired from the same rifle.

"But how drastically different can two pieces of supposedly identical ammunition perform? This second one did not come close to passing cleanly through. Upon penetration, it blew the President's skull apart in an explosion of fragments, leaving a huge exit portal. It performed not as a bullet encased in a rigid metal jacket would have performed, but more as a frangible, soft or hollow-nosed missile, with a thin metal jacket (if any at all) traveling at a high velocity which might measure at around 3,000 feet per second.

Among other metal fragments, 30 to dustlike particles of the disintegrated bullet are said to have been visible on X-rays taken after the President's death.

"Had this type of bullet entered the President's back, it would have killed instantly."

Mr. Donahue studied pictures of the jacket and other bullet fragments removed from the President's skull during an autopsy performed at the National Naval Medical Center at Bethesda, Md., under the direction of Cmdr. James Humes. He (Mr. Donahue) was convinced that two of the fragments were from different types of ammunition. He wrote to the National Archives and Records Service of the United States General Services Administration, asking for more information.

"... The two bullet fragments to which you refer are Commission Exhibit B," answered Miss Jane Smith, director of Civil Archives Division. "We shall be pleased to show you this exhibit in the National Archives."

But in the following paragraph Miss Smith wrote:

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"Enclosed is a copy of our regulations concerning access to security classified documents. *We are not aware of any researchers who have been given access to classified documents in the records of the Commission by the agencies that prepared the documents, through the procedures listed in these regulations.*" (Italics added.)

Mr. Donahue replied, trying to learn if there were some reason he shouldn't be given permission to look at the evidence, but he never heard from the agency.

He wrote to the Secret Service, asking for the names of the agents riding in the car behind the President. He asked if they were still agents and, if so, in what capacity; what weapons they had, their caliber, and if any changes had been made in the agency's weapons since the assassination.

He received a copy of a letter the Chief of Secret Service had written in answering similar questions (from the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy) four years earlier. The President's follow-up car had been driven by Samuel Kinney, and also had been occupied by Emory Roberts, Clinton Hill, William McIntyre, John Ready, Paul Landis, Glen Bennett and George Hickey, all Secret Service special agents. Also in the car were Dave Powers and Kenneth O'Donnell, assistants to President Kennedy, who were not armed.

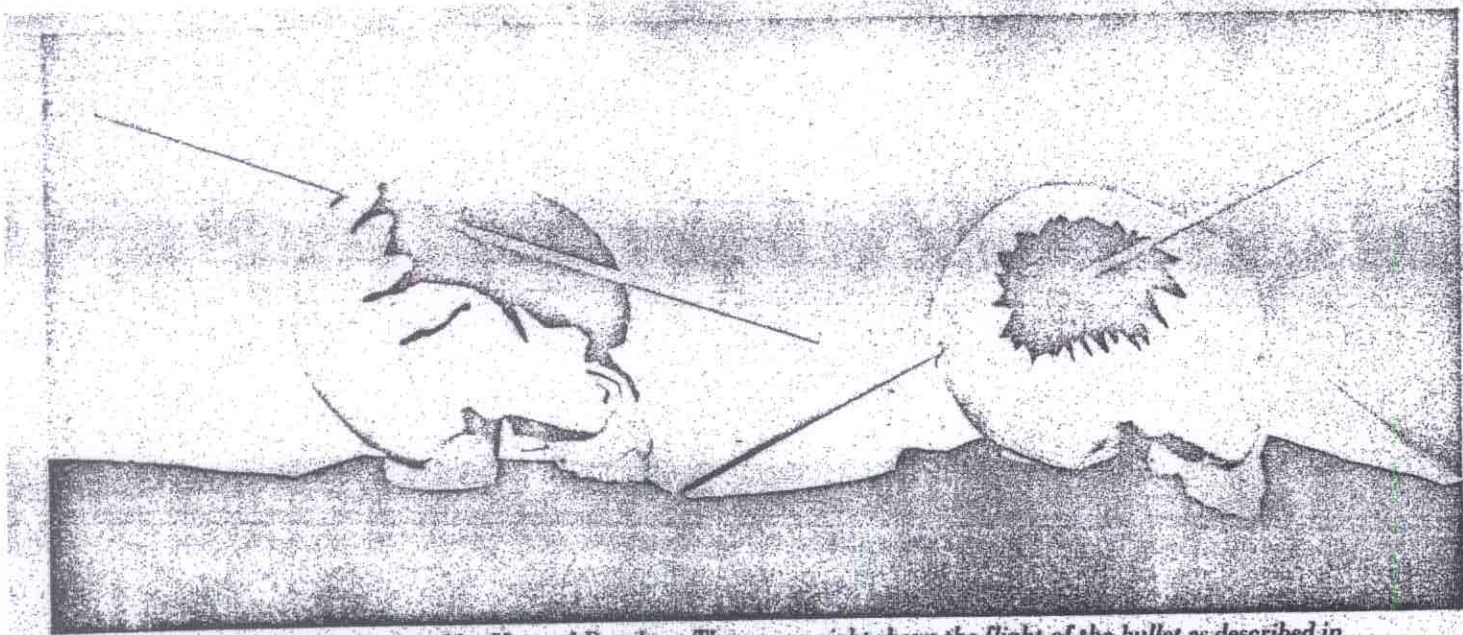
In answer to a subsequent letter to the agency, in which he repeated his questions, Mr. Donahue was informed that the Secret Service did not disclose the types of weapons it used, other than its issue of .38-caliber revolvers, and that no shots were fired by the Secret Service at the time of the assassination.

"As a gunsmith," Mr. Donahue recalls, "I had a natural curiosity about the different kinds of firearms and ammunition known to have been in and around Dealey Plaza on the day of the assassination. The difference between the legal and the illegal ammunition known to have been there would be as different as black and white."

"The type of penetrating military bul-

let fired by Oswald, for example, although a good choice for a sniper, would never be carried by bodyguards or anybody else who might have to fire at somebody in a crowd. That type of bullet could pass through three or four people and possibly kill the fifth.

"For use in a crowd a bodyguard's weapons could sensibly be loaded only with frangible, self-destructive bullets. A high-velocity automatic or semi-automatic .22, such as the M-16, would be an ideal



Plaster skulls were drilled and painted by Howard Donahue. The one on right shows the flight of the bullet as described in the original autopsy. Skull, left, is Mr. Donahue's interpretation of the path of the bullet as redefined by four investigating physicians. It indicates the bullet moved from the left rear to the right front, which Mr. Donahue feels would rule out a shot from the book depository.

weapon. Loaded with hollow-point or thin-jacketed bullets, soft-nosed missiles like the Hornady super explosive would satisfy two most important requirements—they would immobilize an enemy instantly by creating shock and a massive wound, and they would disintegrate in whatever they hit, moving no farther to harm anybody else."

Mr. Donahue's continuing study of the President's head wound turned up a puzzling inconsistency. The Warren Report had accepted the idea that the bullet that inflicted the fatal wound had entered the right, rear area of the skull at a point somewhat below the outermost protuberance; at about the same level, for example, as the upper part of the ear. Apparently, he says, the accepted diagram of the wound was drawn freehand during or after autopsy proceedings.

The gunsmith had accepted this diagrammed evidence, too, until he read a report prepared by a panel of four physicians who met in 1968, at the request of Ramsey Clark, the Attorney General, "to examine various photographs, X-rays, films, documents and other evidence pertaining to the death of President Kennedy, and to evaluate their significance in relation to medical conclusions recorded in the Autopsy Report on the body of President Kennedy. . . ." the report which had been signed by Commander (now Admiral) Humes and his associates at the autopsy.

The team of investigating physicians

included two from Baltimore: Dr. Russell S. Fisher, professor of forensic pathology

at the University of Maryland and chief medical examiner for the state of Maryland, and Dr. Russell H. Morgan, professor of radiology at the School of Medicine and professor of radiological science at the School of Hygiene and Public Health at the Johns Hopkins University. The other two were Dr. William H. Carnes, professor of pathology at the University of Utah and a member of that state's Medical Examiner's Commission, and Dr. Alan R. Mortiz, professor of pathology at Case Western Reserve University and former professor of forensic medicine at Harvard.

None of these physicians had any connection with prior investigations of the assassination.

"I was puzzled to read in their report," Mr. Donahue says, "that the four doctors found the point of entry to be 'approximately 100mm above the external occipital protuberance.' That would put it about 100mm away from the point of entry accepted by the Warren Report. I smiled a forgiving smile and concluded that obviously the report of the 1968 Panel doctors had contained a typographical error, obviously meaning a distance of 10mm. That would be less than half an inch, and would be an understandable and admissible error, even in the medical report turned in by the original autopsy team.

"But later I learned that the report

meant exactly what it stated. The entrance in point-of-entry locations indicated by the two autopsy teams actually measured about 100mm. I was astounded. A discrepancy of 10mm I could understand. Less than half an inch. But a difference of 100mm! That's about 4 inches! A new diagram of the head wound, executed by careful measurements from pictures and X-rays, put the bullet's point of entry at the top of the skull."

Mr. Donahue ran into another startling discovery when he obtained two plaster casts of a human skull and marked on one the path of the bullet the Commission had accepted, on the other the path indicated

by the 1968 Panel's new medical report drawings.

"The path of the bullet, indicated in the second autopsy report," Mr. Donahue says, "was from left-rear to right-front. It is beyond my comprehension how anybody could deduce from that drawing that the bullet had moved from right-rear to left-front.

"This left me with the puzzling conclusion that, considering the President's position in the car, and the position of his head at the time he received the fatal wound, the shot that killed him could not possibly have come from the Texas School Book Depository, which was located behind and to the right.

"The President's head at the instant of the fatal wound was tilted slightly forward, and inclined very slightly to the left. The Zapruder films bear this out, and so do the Muchmore films and various still pictures taken by news photographers.

"The President's body position at that time is an ironic thing. Had his chronic back trouble not necessitated his wearing a brace, which held his body in an inflexible position, he might have slumped after that first shot passed through him and into Governor Connally. Had he slumped in a natural manner, the fatal bullet probably would have inflicted only a shallow wound, or 'crease,' in his scalp. One-half inch would have made the difference between a hit and a miss."

Something else Mr. Donahue hadn't noticed earlier turned up in the 1968 Panel report: "... Also there is, embedded in the outer table of the skull close to the lower edge of the [point of entry] hole, a large metallic fragment which on the antero-posterior film (1) lies 25mm to the right of the midline. This fragment as seen in the latter film is round and measures 6.5mm in diameter. . ."

"I looked into that aspect of the report," Mr. Donahue says. "What it amounts to, with no disrespect intended for the doctors' medical terminology, is that the metal fragment broke the skin but

piercing the skull."

Mr. Donahue was also vaguely aware of some irritating inconsistencies which he couldn't immediately identify. Finally he recalled an eyewitness's account of the assassination, that of Ralph Yarborough, the Texas senator who had been riding with Vice President Johnson two cars behind the President's limousine. Speaking later of the tragedy and of the terrible minutes which followed, in which the procession sped to the emergency entrance of Parkland Memorial Hospital, Mr. Yarborough said again and again: "I smelled gunpowder . . . It clung to the car near all the way to the hospital."

The smell of gunpowder!

Some 90 yards from Oswald's position on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, even farther away from the much discussed grassy knoll and bridge atop the triple underpass, from which some assassination theorists believe at least part of the gunfire originated, Senator Yarborough had smelled gunpowder!

Seth Kantor, a Scripps-Howard newspaperman riding in the press bus far

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back in the procession, also had smelled gunpowder.

Mr. Donahue returned to his growing library of assassination books and articles and read the testimony of S. M. Holland, an elderly man who wears eyeglasses, who had viewed the assassination from the bridge. Mr. Holland had drawn considerable attention by claiming to have seen the now much discussed puff of smoke nearby.

In "The Scavengers and Critics of the Warren Report," a book written by Richard Warren Lewis based on an investigation by Lawrence Schiller, the investigator destroyed some of the credibility of Mr. Holland's remarks. After describing the puff of smoke he claimed to have seen, Mr. Holland said he had also seen a Secret Service man stand up in the presidential car. The Zapruder film discredited this, showing only two Secret Service men in the presidential car—William Greer, who was driving and had both hands on the wheel, and Roy Kellerman, who remained seated.

However, Mr. Holland had asserted: "... Just about the same time the President was shot the second time. He [the Secret Service man] jumped up in the seat and was standing up in the, on the seat. Now I actually thought when they started up, I actually thought he was shot, too, because he fell backwards just like he was

shot, but it jerked him down when they started off . . ."

When asked what the Secret Service man had done when he stood up, Mr. Holland replied: "He pointed this machine gun right towards that grassy knoll behind that picket fence."

In his "The Death of a President," Wil-

liam Manchester did not mention an interview with S. M. Holland, but he did refer to the President's follow-up car in which Secret Service men were riding. He spoke of two agents in the back seat, . . . and on the seat between them lay an AR-15 .223 automatic rifle, with a muzzle velocity so powerful that should a bullet strike a man's chest it would blow his head off . . ."

A few pages later, describing the moments of panic which followed the shots, Manchester includes the observation of an agent as he " . . . raises the barrel of the AR-15 and points it about aimlessly . . ."

(Mr. Donahue believes Secret Service agents actually are armed with another automatic weapon, the M-16, quite similar in appearance and performance to the AR-15. The two, he says, could easily be confused.)

On November 24, 1967, almost four years to the day after the assassination, *Life* magazine published Gov. John Connally's version of the tragedy. It was well illustrated with photographs. Mr. Donahue had glanced through the magazine, but hadn't read it carefully.

"It wasn't until much later," he recalls, "in 1969, that I was brooding over the pictures in that magazine one evening when all parts of the puzzle which had been bugging me suddenly fell into place.

"My perplexed curiosity was at last satisfied. I would have bet my last dollar then, and I would bet it now, that at last I had stumbled upon the source of the bullet which killed President Kennedy.

"In front of me was a photograph, and among other individuals in the photograph were two men, one of whom must have fired the fatal shot.

"I didn't want to accept the working

hypothesis which had leaped out at me from that magazine picture. In the months since 1969 I have tried, point by point, to discredit it. I haven't been able to disprove or even shake a single factor of it.

"Here, in my sad judgment, is what happened:

"I accept the evidence that Lee Harvey Oswald was trying to kill the President. Don't ask me why. Who knows what goes on in the mind of a man like that?"

"I think Oswald's first shot missed the presidential car, hit the pavement, and broke up, spraying fragments of metal. It is a matter of record that five metal fragments were picked up later in the car. There is pictorial evidence of their hitting the windshield and also denting a piece of chromework near the rearview mirror.

"Such a fragment, hitting the President in the back of the head, was that 6.5mm piece of metal the 1968 Panel doctors found lodged between skin and bone. It would sting, as a shot from a BB gun would sting, and after having been hit by it the President could have made the exclamation Roy Kellerman said he made, 'My God, I am hit!'

"Oswald's second shot was the so-called miracle bullet which pierced the President's back and throat and passed through Governor Connally. Unlikely as it may seem, that high-velocity bullet would be easily capable of doing exactly what the Warren Report accepted as actuality.

"I think that was the full extent of the damage Oswald inflicted upon the President, and for it alone he could have been booked only for attempted murder. Governor Connally recovered from his wounds. I

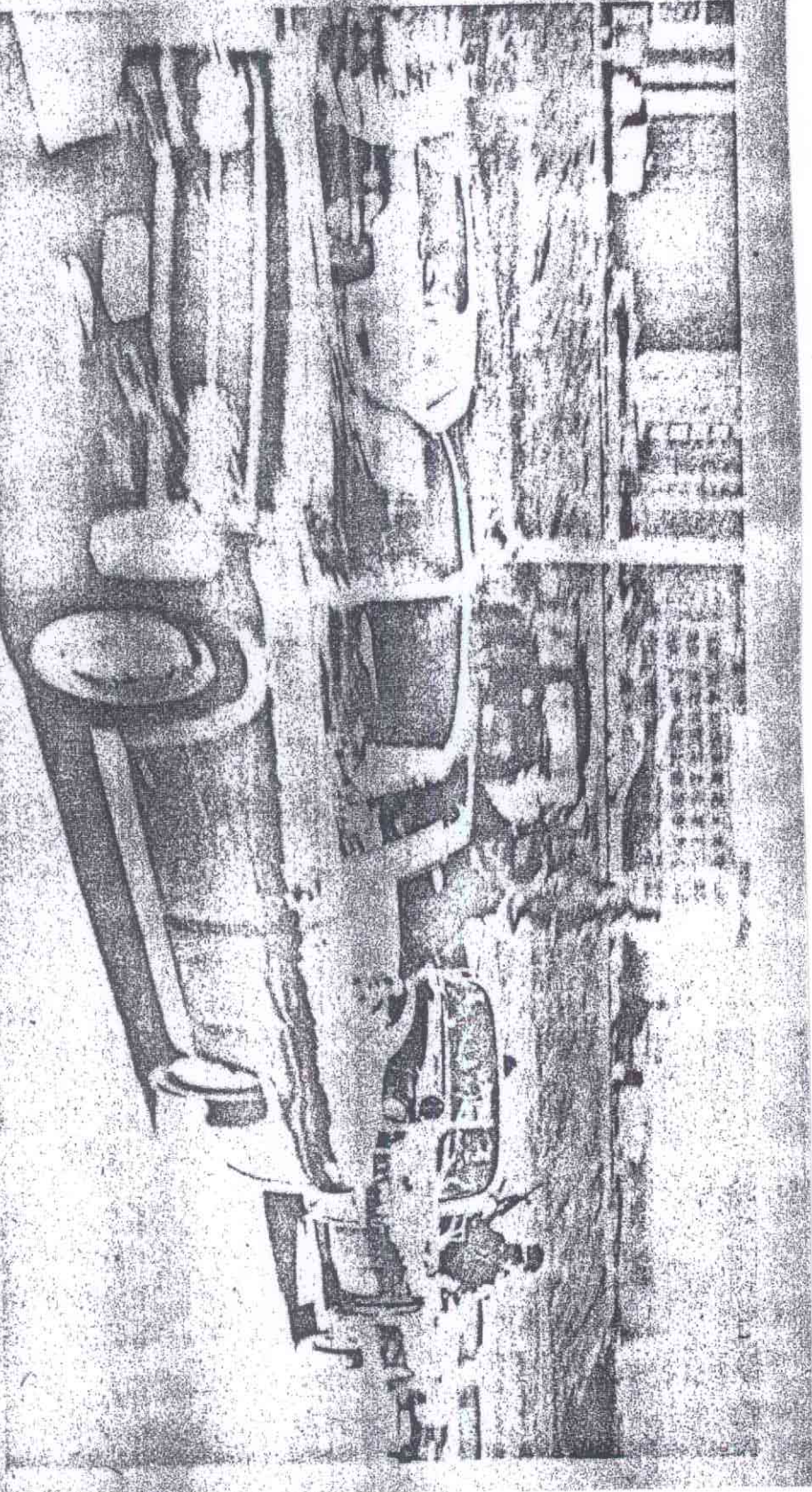
think the President could have, too, although possibly his voice might have been impaired.

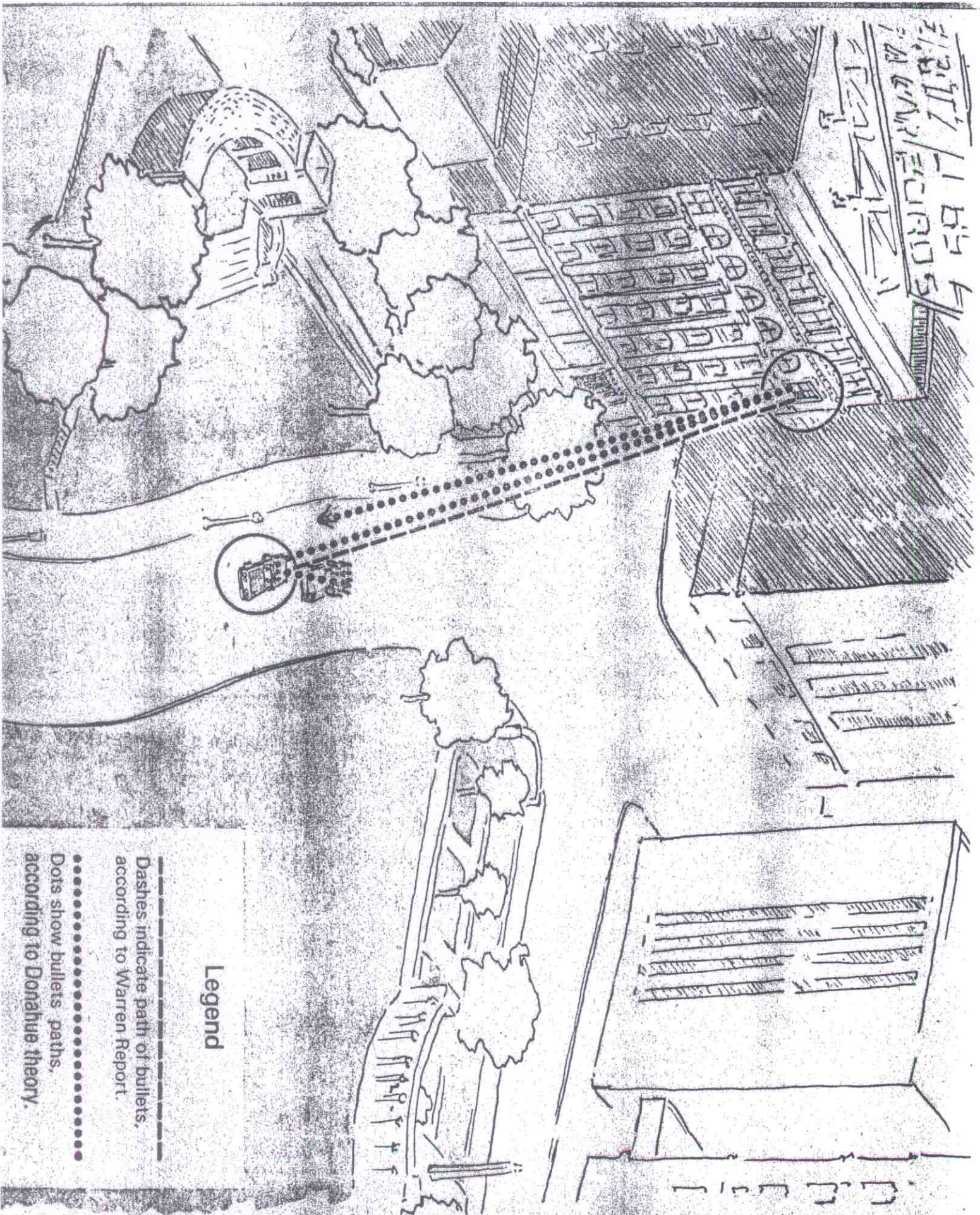
"As to the source of the fatal shot, we must go back to the part of Mr. Holland's testimony which dealt with his having seen a Secret Service man standing up with a machine gun, and stumbling.

"I realize Mr. Holland said he saw that man in the presidential car, and that later it was determined that nobody actually had stood up in the presidential car. But I think it certainly within the realm of understandable human error that what Holland saw was not in the presidential, but in the follow-up car. God knows that most of the scores of witnesses who saw what happened during the minutes of panic during the tragedy came up with different stories of it later. In my mind I am satisfied that Mr. Holland saw what he said he saw. He just had the cars mixed up.

"Why didn't the hundreds of spectators in Dealy Plaza that day see the Secret Service man with the automatic weapon? I don't find it hard to accept. There were ten men in and on the follow-up car—two standing on the left running board, two standing on the right, two in the front seat, two in the jump seats, and two in the back seat. The Secret Service men in the back seat were shielded from view, much as a quarterback is shielded by his blockers

Moments after President Kennedy was fatally wounded and was being rushed to the hospital in the limousine, foreground, a Secret Service man rides with raised machine gun in follow-up car.





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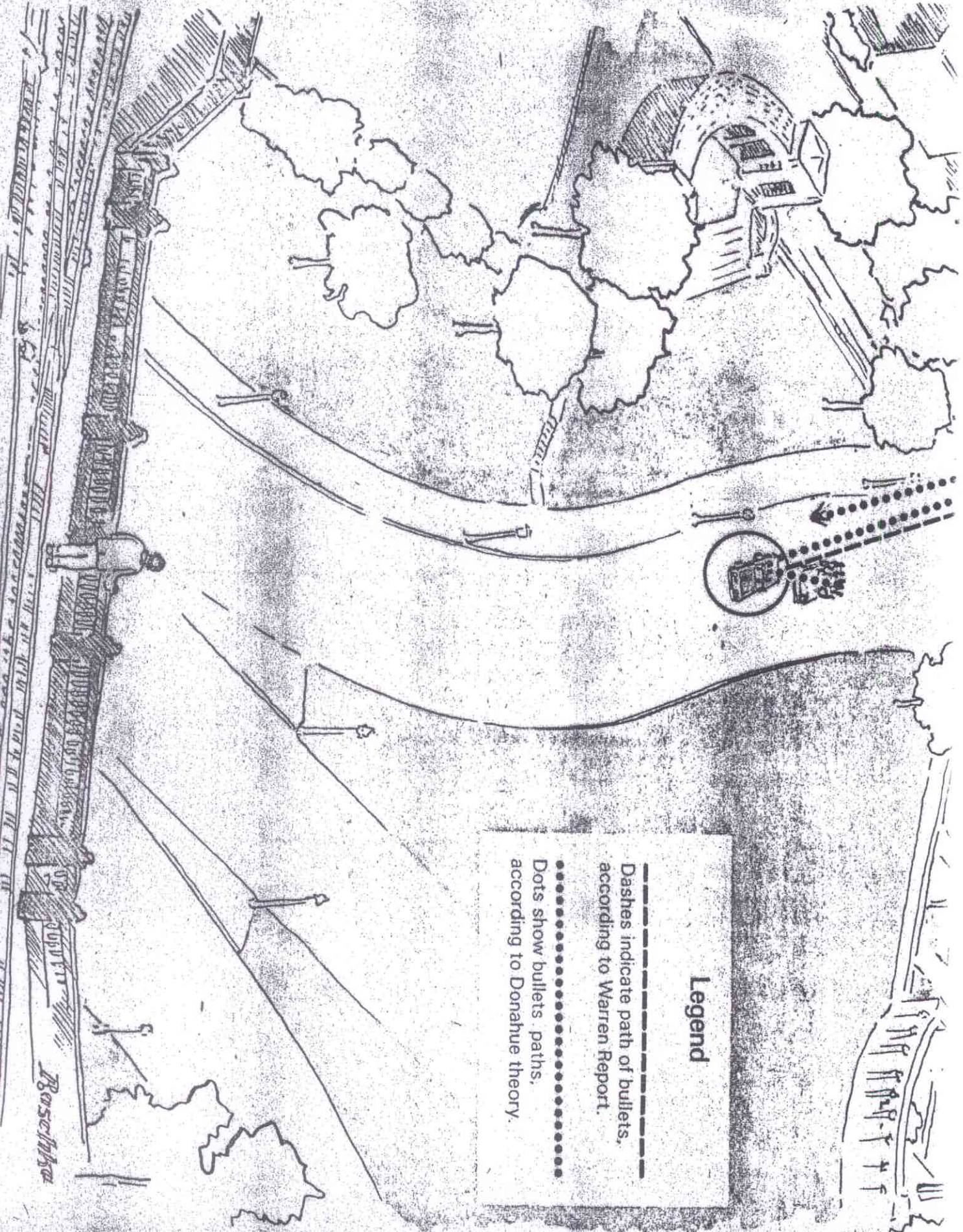
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 according to Warren Report.

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 Dots show bullets paths,
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Legend

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Drawing of Daily Plaza in Dallas, with the Texas School Book Depository, upper left, and the overpass, foreground, where S. M. Holland said he was standing.

when he drops back to pass.

"Did Oswald get off a third shot? If he did, it could have gone wild, and the sound of it could have blended with the sound of the shot (the fatal one) fired accidentally by a Secret Service man from the follow-up car. It is a ballistically unshakable fact

that the fatal shot came from a position behind and to the left of the President.

"Several witnesses standing within the Texas School Book Depository at the time of the assassination have said they heard only two shots. Policemen later found



three spent cartridge cases on the sixth floor of the building, but one of them was so badly bent it couldn't have been inserted into a rifle breech, not in the condition in which it was found."

Mr. Donahue believes the true cause of

the President's death was known within a few minutes, and that an important decision from one or more high-ranking government officials dictated the events that followed.

"The President's brother, the late Robert Kennedy, was the take-charge sort of man who might have made the decision to withhold the fact that our country's Chief Executive had been killed accidentally by one of his own bodyguards.

"Perhaps it wasn't so much a deliberate decision to cover up, but merely a numbed, heartbroken acceptance to continue a cover-up that had already set in.

"Many incidents that transpired in the wake of the assassination fall neatly into place to support my conclusions.

"A glaring inconsistency is the way in which the President's body was removed, firmly, quickly and illegally, from Dallas, and flown across the country to a military hospital where all phases of the pathological examination were conducted under strict government supervision.

"By Texas law, an autopsy of the deceased should have been made in Dallas. Two Dallas officials told members of the President's staff the body could not be removed from the city until an autopsy was performed. Over their protests, the President's body was moved into an ambulance and taken to the airport. There, concerned that local officials might try to keep the plane from leaving, one Secret Service man asked the pilot to take off immediately. (He was told the take-off would be delayed until Vice President Johnson was sworn in.)

"A statement attributed to Chief Justice Earl Warren has plagued me since the

Howard Donahue works in his gun shop in Towson. "As a gunsmith," he says, "I had a natural curiosity about the different kinds of firearms and ammunition known to have been in and around Dealy Plaza on the day of the assassination."

early days of the assassination investigations. I heard it in a radio newscast. Others interested in the assassination have told me they, too, heard it, and some of them tell me they saw the remark repeated in the newspapers, although they can't remember where.

"I cannot quote the remark verbatim, but I remember the substance of it. After being briefed on various aspects of the assassination, Justice Warren was quoted as having said, as closely as I can recall his phrasing: 'The initial (or did he use the word *cursor*?) findings of this case are so earth-shaking that it will be decades before the American people can be told.' The item was not repeated in subsequent newscasts."

Mr. Donahue ran across an intriguing post-assassination item in "LBJ: The Way He Was," a book written about the late Vice President and President by Frank Cormier, of the Associated Press, a long-time White House correspondent.

In the book, Mr. Cormier recounted a visit LBJ had made to Texas shortly after he had become President, a trip which included a Christmas Eve visit with his old friend A. W. Moursund, a Johnson City lawyer, at Round Mountain Ranch, for some deer hunting. A group of reporters tagged along.

With Mr. Moursund driving and LBJ happily pointing out white-tailed deer in rough growth along the trail, the President became annoyed by the close-following vehicle in which his guard of Secret Service men rode. He had Mr. Moursund

stop the car, and an agent came hurrying forward to ask what the trouble was.

"Dammit," the President snapped at him, "I don't want you tailgatin' me! Now you keep that wagon back outta sight or I'm gonna shoot out your tires!"

President Johnson, Mr. Cormier continued, demonstrated genuine, if somewhat sporadic, affection for some agents, but could also be perversely cruel towards his bodyguards.

"In an off-the-record talk at the White House, a few weeks earlier," Mr. Cormier wrote, "Johnson had shocked me by exploding: 'If I ever get killed, it won't be because of an assassin. It'll be some Secret Service agent who trips himself up and his gun goes off. They're worse than trigger-happy Texas sheriffs.'"

But reports such as these, and reports of destroyed notes, destroyed pathological examination pictures of President Kennedy's wounds, and pictures, X-rays and other bits of evidence still kept from public view in the National Archives, would have to be classified, Mr. Donahue feels, as vague bits of evidence which could be used to support many different assassination theories.

"Since 1969," he says, "I have been unable to turn up evidence that shakes any part of my conclusion."

"But one such possible piece of evidence does exist. In the pathological examination and the first autopsy performed on President Kennedy, metal particles—fragments of cores and/or jackets of bullets—were removed from his brain. A test sample was also cut out of the 'miracle bullet' which had passed through both Kennedy and Connally. All these particles were later subjected by the FBI to spectrographic analysis, a high-precision procedure in which the chemical make-up of an unknown element or compound of elements can be determined. The results of such analyses come out on spectrographic tapes, and on such tapes the colored, fine-

*'Over their protests, the President's
body was moved into an ambulance
and taken to the airport'*

ly lined pattern of each element or compound analyzed is as distinctive as a fingerprint.

"The spectrographic tapes are guarded, hidden from public view, and their whereabouts kept secret. As far as we have been able to learn, the man or men who made these spectrographic tests were not asked to contribute their knowledge to the Warren Report. Certainly we can find no record of such testimony in the Warren Report or elsewhere.

"If an investigator could view the tapes, he could determine in an instant an important part of the story which unfolded at Dealey Plaza in Dallas in 1963.

"If all the bullet fragments recovered were analyzed, and if the spectrographic tapes of all match up perfectly, then the evidence becomes overwhelming that Lee Harvey Oswald's rifle was the only weapon involved in the assassination.

"But if any one of those tapes differs from the others, then a second type of bullet, fired by somebody else, from a different position and with a different type of firearm, was without a doubt one of the bullets which killed President Kennedy.

"I think the American people have the right to know whatever story the tapes have to tell."