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## Kennedy Assassination

Was the President Killed by a Lone Gunman, or Was There a Conspiracy?

### The Issue



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**The issue:** On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was shot and killed in Dallas, Texas. The following year, the Warren Commission concluded that Kennedy had been killed by a lone gunman (Lee Harvey Oswald), who fired three shots, and that Oswald had not been part of a conspiracy against the president. However, a House commission in 1979 concluded that there had likely been two gunmen shooting at the president that day, and that there was likely a conspiracy. Was Oswald the only one to shoot at Kennedy? Or was there a second gunman?

- **Arguments in favor of a lone gunman:** All of the bullets fired at the presidential limousine came from above and behind the car--from the Texas School Book Depository. The medical evidence shows that both Kennedy and another occupant of the president's limousine, Texas governor John Connally, were shot from behind. That rules out the possibility that a second gunman could have fired from a grassy knoll ahead of the limousine. Furthermore, while there is much evidence from the Book Depository linking Oswald to the crime there is no evidence linking a second gunman to the crime.
- **Arguments in favor of a second gunman:** A wound in Kennedy's throat was an entrance wound, not an exit wound, which proves that

Kennedy was shot from the front, likely from the grassy knoll. A home movie shows Kennedy's head jerking backwards when the bullet strikes his head; that also proves that Kennedy was shot from the front. Furthermore, witnesses to the assassination said that they heard more than three shots fired, and said that it sounded like shots had come from the grassy knoll. Photographs taken that day also show a man behind a fence on the grassy knoll.

## Background

On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy (D, 1961-63) was riding through downtown Dallas, Texas, in an open convertible when he was shot twice. Kennedy was pronounced dead half an hour later, becoming the fourth U.S. president to die from an assassin's bullet. Shortly after the attack, the police had a suspect in custody, a young man named Lee Harvey Oswald. Two days later, while he was in police custody, Oswald himself was shot to death by local nightclub owner Jacob Rubenstein (known as Jack Ruby).

Those are among the few facts about Kennedy's assassination on which everyone can agree. Most other aspects of the case spark heated debate, making the assassination one of the nation's most enduring controversies. The focal point of the debate has been whether Oswald acted alone or whether there was a second gunman, which would indicate that Oswald had been part of a conspiracy to kill the president. [See Warren Report: 'Speculations and Rumors' (primary document)]

At the age of 43, Kennedy, had become the youngest person ever elected president. (Theodore Roosevelt became president at 42, but he assumed the office after President William McKinley [R, 1897-1901] was assassinated.) The charismatic young president had offered hope for change through the "New Frontier," which included efforts to fight poverty and secure greater civil rights for African Americans. Kennedy also sought to instill a sense of public service in Americans, exhorting them in 1961, "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." However, his administration was also known for the challenges it had faced. Kennedy had experienced difficulty in securing passage of his antipoverty and civil rights measures. Furthermore, in 1961 the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) initiated a failed attempt to overthrow communist leader Fidel Castro in Cuba, and the following year the U.S. experienced a tense standoff with the Soviet Union over the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba.



President John F. Kennedy and his wife, Jacqueline Kennedy, arrive in Dallas, Texas on November 22, 1963.

Facing the prospect of a tough fight for reelection in 1964, Kennedy had traveled to Texas a little less than a year in advance of the 1964 election to shore up support in that state. In Dallas, Kennedy had planned to deliver a speech at the Dallas Trade Mart, and was just five minutes from his destination when he was shot. The presidential limousine had just passed the Texas School Book Depository in Dealey Plaza when the shots were fired. Another occupant of the president's limousine, Texas governor John Connally (D), who was sitting directly in front of Kennedy, was also struck by a bullet. Kennedy's wife, Jacqueline, who was sitting next to Kennedy in the backseat, and Connally's wife, Nellie, who was sitting next to her husband, were both uninjured.

Kennedy was rushed to nearby Parkland Memorial Hospital, where efforts to resuscitate him failed. He was pronounced dead at 1 p.m. At 2:39 p.m., Vice President Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as president aboard Air Force One as it sat on a runway at Love Field in Dallas.

Later that day the police apprehended Oswald, 24. Oswald was an employee at the Book Depository, from which the shots were believed to have originated, and several witnesses had provided the police with a description of a suspect that matched his description. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) determined that he was the owner of a rifle found hidden on the sixth floor of the Book Depository, and early on November 23, Oswald was formally charged with killing the president. However, the following day, as Oswald was being transferred from the city jail to the county jail, Ruby approached him and shot him in the stomach.

The murder of Oswald before he could give testimony, and the fact that he was a Marxist and had lived in the Soviet Union for two and a half years, gave rise to speculation that he had been part of a conspiracy to kill the president. Johnson quickly appointed a commission, headed by U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, to examine the assassination.

The Warren Commission issued its findings in 1964. According to the commission, Oswald had killed the president, firing three shots from a window on the sixth floor of the Book Depository. One shot had passed through Kennedy's neck and hit Connally, who was sitting in front of him; one shot hit Kennedy in the head; and one struck the curb, scattering fragments that injured a spectator. [See Warren Report's 'Summary and Conclusions' (primary document)]

Those findings immediately sparked controversy. Critics accused the Warren Commission of covering up or ignoring evidence that there had been a second gunman either in the Book Depository or on a "grassy knoll" ahead of the presidential limousine. The presence of a second gunman meant that there was a conspiracy to kill Kennedy, they said.

Allegations of conspiracy refused to die down, and in 1978 the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) began holding hearings about the assassination. In a report issued the following year, the committee disagreed with the conclusion of the Warren Commission. According to the HSCA, evidence indicated that a second gunman had fired on the presidential limousine. It criticized the Warren Commission for failing to seriously investigate the possibility of a conspiracy. [See Summary of Findings of the 1978 Select Committee on Assassinations (primary document)]

However, the HSCA said that it could not identify who was involved in the conspiracy. Over the years, speculation centered largely on the Mafia, angered at the Kennedy administration's efforts to shut down the mob. Supporters of that theory claimed that Ruby killed Oswald on behalf of the Mafia, to keep Oswald from talking. Others blamed Castro, who supposedly sought revenge for U.S. assassination attempts against him. Still others accused the Soviet Union, where Oswald, an avowed Marxist, had lived. [See Did the Mafia Conspire to Kill President Kennedy? (sidebar)]

The 1978 report ensured that the controversy surrounding Kennedy's death would continue. Had Oswald acted alone in killing the president? Or was there a second gunman, indicating a conspiracy to kill the president?

Supporters of the theory that Oswald was the lone gunman asserted that all of the bullets fired at the presidential limousine had come from above and behind the car—from the Book Depository. The medical evidence showed that both Kennedy and Connally had been shot from behind; that ruled out the possibility that a second gunman could have fired from the

grassy knoll, which was ahead of the limousine, they said. Furthermore, they argued, while there was much evidence was found in the Book Depository linking Oswald to the crime, no evidence was found linking a second gunman to the crime.

Lone gunman supporters noted that only three bullets were fired that day, the empty cartridges of which were found on the sixth floor of the Book Depository. The theory that one of those bullets hit both the president and the governor was consistent with the largely undamaged condition of a bullet found on Connally's stretcher at the hospital, they said. While passing through Kennedy and Connally, the bullet passed through soft tissue rather than solid bone, they noted, so it would receive only minor damage.

On the other hand, those who argued that there was a conspiracy against the president cited testimony that the wound in Kennedy's throat had been an entrance wound, not an exit wound; that proved Kennedy was shot from the front, likely from the grassy knoll area, they said. Furthermore, they pointed to a home movie that was taken of the event showing Kennedy's head jerking backwards when the bullet struck his head. That also proved that Kennedy had been shot from the front, they argued. Others claimed that the authorities had planted all of the "evidence" found in the Book Depository to frame Oswald as part of a larger conspiracy.

Believers in a conspiracy also argued that it was highly improbable that a bullet could pass through two men—breaking the wrist of one of them—and remain in nearly pristine condition. Therefore, they said, Connally and Kennedy had to have been hit by separate shots. That meant that at least four shots had to have been fired that day. Furthermore, they said, a home movie of the event showed that Connally was hit just over a second after Kennedy was shot, but the rifle found in the Book Depository could only fire every 2.25 seconds, which meant there had to have been a second gunman.

## **A Suspect Apprehended, and Murdered**

Dallas, which had largely voted against Kennedy in 1960, was one of several Texas cities Kennedy had planned to visit in an attempt to secure Texas's 25 electoral votes in the 1964 election. The motorcade's route through downtown Dallas, meant to maximize the number of spectators, was published on November 21.

The motorcade was traveling along Elm Street, and had just passed the Book Depository, when the president was shot twice at 12:30 p.m. local time. A home movie taken by a spectator, Abraham Zapruder, shows Kennedy waving to the crowd and then reaching for his throat. Roughly a second later, Connally begins to crumple, and then another bullet strikes Kennedy in the head. [See Governor Connally and His Wife Describe the Kennedy Shooting (primary document)]

Kennedy's doctors at Parkland said that he might have been able to survive the shot through the throat, but that because of the second shot to the head, "his condition was hopeless," and he was pronounced dead shortly after his arrival at the hospital. Connally was also seriously injured but the doctors were able to save him. They determined that the bullet had entered the right side of Connally's back, exited through his chest, continued on to hit his right wrist, which was resting in his lap, and then lodged in his thigh.

Within hours of the shooting, police arrested Oswald, a former Marine sharpshooter and an avowed Marxist. After he had left the Marines in 1959, Oswald had moved to the Soviet Union and tried to renounce his U.S. citizenship. However, his citizenship was never officially revoked, and Oswald chose to return to the U.S. two and a half years later, accompanied by his Russian wife, Marina, and their baby daughter. In the U.S. he held a succession of low-paying jobs, from most of which he was fired. Oswald moved around in 1963, finally settling in Dallas in October after a visit to the Cuban and Soviet embassies in Mexico City the previous month, where he unsuccessfully sought visas to travel to Cuba and the Soviet Union. In mid-October, Oswald got a job at the Texas School Book Depository. A month later, Kennedy's motorcade made its fateful voyage through Dealey Plaza. [See 'Lee Harvey Oswald: Background and Possible Motives' (Excerpts) (primary document)]

After the president was shot, Oswald left the Book Depository and returned to his boardinghouse where he was living at the time (while his family was staying with friends in nearby Irving, Texas). There, he retrieved a handgun and then set off on foot, his ultimate destination unknown. Some claimed he was heading to a Greyhound bus terminal to catch a bus to Mexico. Wherever he was going, on the way he encountered police officer J. D. Tippit

roughly 45 minutes after Kennedy was killed. Tippit stopped Oswald, whose description had been broadcast over the police radio. After Tippit stepped out of his patrol car, Oswald shot him four times, killing him.

The police apprehended Oswald in a movie theater at 1:40 p.m. after a witness, having heard on the radio about the Tippit shooting and noticing the suspicious behavior of a man who matched Oswald's description, followed him to the theater. He asked a cashier there to call the police when he saw Oswald enter. When the police approached him, Oswald aimed his revolver at them but did not fire. Police quickly determined that the shell casings from the bullets that had hit Tippit had come from Oswald's gun, and they formally charged him with Tippit's murder that evening.



AP Photo

Lee Harvey Oswald in police custody at the Dallas, Texas, police station. On November 23, 1963, he was formally charged with killing President John F. Kennedy.

In custody, Oswald denied any involvement in the shooting of Kennedy or Tippit and insisted that the murder weapons did not belong to him. However, officials claimed that the evidence against Oswald was overwhelming. Roughly an hour after the shooting, a sheriff had discovered a pile of boxes around the window in the southeast corner of the Depository's sixth floor and also found three cartridges from bullets that had been fired. Shortly after that, another deputy sheriff discovered an Italian rifle with a telescopic sight hidden between two rows of boxes near the staircase landing on the sixth floor. [See Report of Captain Fritz on the Interrogation of Lee Harvey Oswald (primary document)]

Oswald's palm print was later discovered on the barrel of the rifle, which had been bought through the mail under the name Alek J. Hidell, one of Oswald's known aliases. (A selective service card with a picture of Oswald and bearing the name Alek J. Hidell was found in Oswald's wallet.) Furthermore, police found that the handgun used to kill Tippit had also been purchased through the mail by Alek J. Hidell and shipped to the same post office box as the rifle. Expert analysis matched Oswald's handwriting with that on the gun order forms and the rental form for the Post Office box to which the guns were delivered.

However, Oswald would never stand trial. Two days after Kennedy was killed, on the morning of November 24, police were preparing to transfer him from the city jail to a nearby county jail. The event was being broadcast live, so thousands of Americans saw Ruby walk up to Oswald and shoot him. Oswald was pronounced dead at Parkland at 1:07 p.m.

Ruby was immediately arrested. He pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity, but on March 14, 1964, he was convicted of murder and sentenced to death. He appealed, but died from a blood clot in his lungs in January 1967 before his new trial could begin.

## Warren Commission Concludes Kennedy Was Shot by a Lone Gunman

Kennedy's family had his body flown to the Washington, D.C., area, where an autopsy was performed at Bethesda Naval Hospital by James Humes on the night of November 22. In his final autopsy report, issued on the morning of November 23, Humes concluded that the second bullet to hit Kennedy entered "in the rear of the president's head" and exited through the "region of the skull over the right ear." [See Autopsy Report on President Kennedy (primary document)]

The first bullet to hit Kennedy was more problematic. Humes initially determined that it had entered Kennedy's upper back but he could not find where the bullet had exited. Upon hearing that a bullet had been found on a stretcher in the Parkland emergency room he reached a tentative conclusion that the bullet had entered Kennedy's back and then fallen out.

However, after speaking with Parkland doctors the next day and learning that they had performed a tracheostomy over a bullet wound in Kennedy's throat in an attempt to save him, Humes concluded the wound in the throat was the exit wound. Humes wrote in the final report that the first bullet fired "entered Kennedy's upper back above the shoulder blade, passed through the strap muscles at the base of his neck" and then exited the front of the neck.

Meanwhile, there were growing calls for an investigation into the assassination. Under pressure, Johnson issued an executive order on November 29 establishing the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, known more commonly as the Warren Commission. The commission examined several aspects of the assassination, including Oswald's activities on November 22; Oswald's background, with particular focus on his military service and time in the Soviet Union; and Ruby's background and his shooting of Oswald.

On February 3, 1964, the commission began holding hearings, which were not open to the public or the press. Overall, it heard testimony from 552 witnesses, including medical and ballistics experts as well as people who were at Dealey Plaza on the day Kennedy was shot. The commission also considered Kennedy's autopsy report, although Warren withheld the autopsy photographs and X-rays from the commission, stating that he did so out of respect for the family, who had requested that they not be shown. Warren, however, did view them.

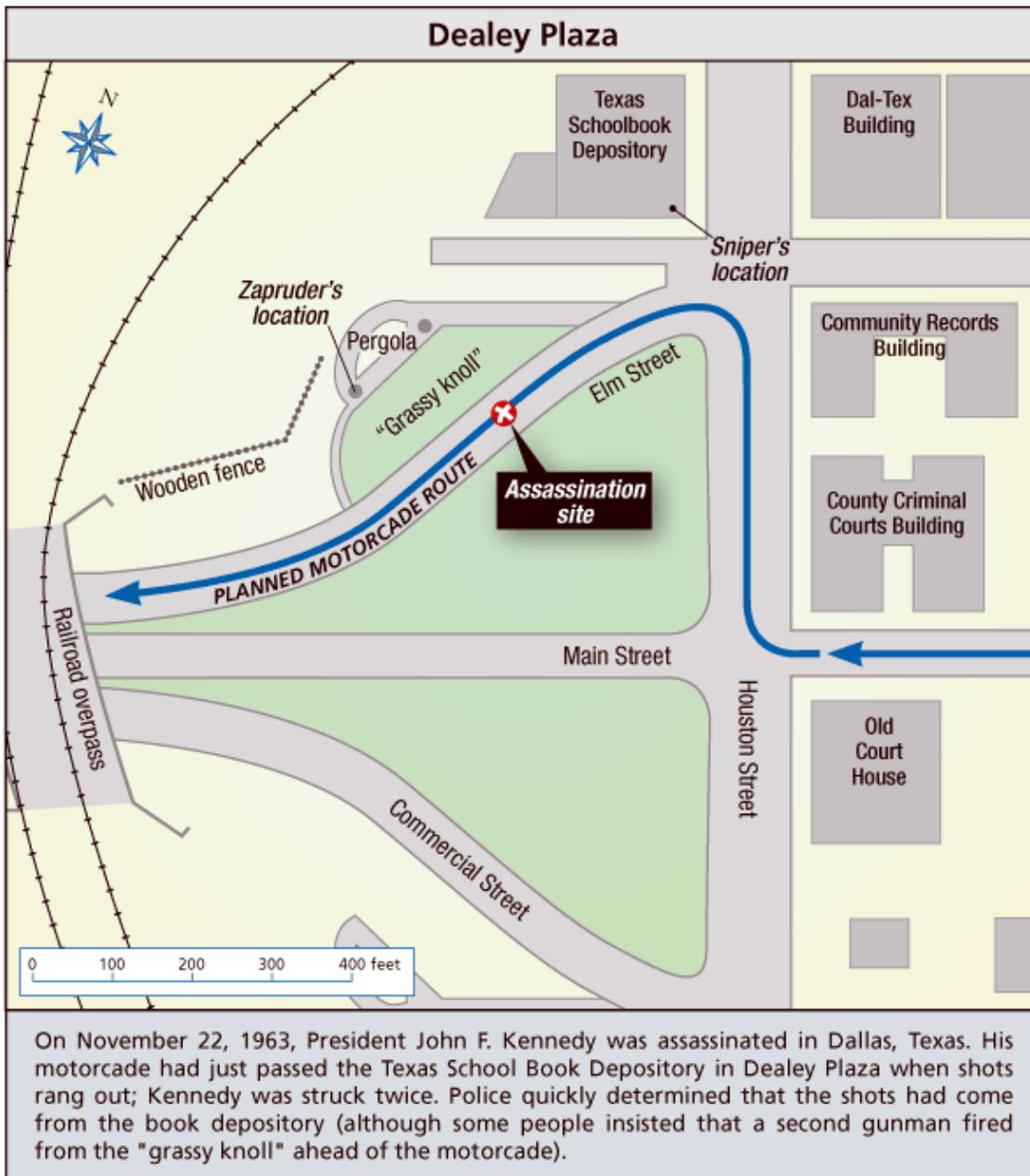
One of the issues before the commission was the number of shots fired and the timing between the shots. The FBI had concluded that Kennedy and Connally were struck by separate bullets. However, the commission determined that Oswald would not have had enough time to fire the shot that hit Kennedy and the one that hit Connally. Based on what was happening in the individual frames from the Zapruder film, and taking into account the speed of the camera, it was determined that an estimated 1.3 to 1.8 seconds had passed between Kennedy being hit the first time and Connally being hit. However, the rifle found in the Book Depository could be fired only every 2.25 seconds.

There could be just two explanations. First was the possibility that a second gunman had fired one of the shots. However, the commission noted that Connally had been sitting directly in front of Kennedy, so the bullets that hit Kennedy and Connally would have had to follow the same trajectory; the commission concluded it was highly improbable that two gunmen would have been able to fire bullets that followed the same path. The commission then considered another option, first proposed by a junior counsel on the commission, Arlen Specter: One of those bullets had hit both men, striking Kennedy in the back of his neck, exiting through his throat, and then striking Connally. The commission adopted that explanation.



National Archives

Pictured is the bullet that the Warren Commission concluded passed through President John F. Kennedy and into the back of Texas Governor John Connally, who was seated in front of Kennedy.



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Dale Williams

On September 24, 1964, the Warren Commission presented President Johnson with an 888-page report. The report, released to the public three days later, concluded:

*1. The shots which killed President Kennedy and wounded Governor Connally were fired from the sixth floor window at the southeast corner of the Texas School Book Depository.... 2. The weight of the evidence indicates that there were three shots fired.... 3. Although it is not necessary to any essential findings of the Commission to determine just which shot hit Governor Connally, there is very persuasive evidence from the experts to indicate that the same bullet which pierced the President's throat also caused Governor Connally's wounds.... 4. The shots which killed President Kennedy and wounded Governor Connally were fired by Lee Harvey Oswald.... 11. On the basis of the evidence before the Commission it concludes that Oswald acted alone.*

## Criticism of Warren's Findings Prompts Congressional Investigation

The Warren Commission's report immediately came under fire by critics, especially with regard to the theory of a single bullet—which critics dubbed the "magic bullet"—hitting the

two men. The bullet determined to have caused the injuries to both men had been found on a stretcher at the Parkland emergency room. (It was initially said to have come from Kennedy's stretcher but was later described as coming from Connally's stretcher.) The bullet (marked exhibit 399 in the Warren hearings) was relatively undamaged.

However, critics concluded that a bullet that had passed through the neck of one man, then through the back and wrist of another—breaking the wrist bones—would be significantly damaged. They also cited the Parkland doctors and the FBI report, both of which claimed the throat wound was an entry wound, indicating that a gunman had fired from somewhere in front of the president.

Expressing dissatisfaction with the Warren report, numerous people and organizations, including *Life* magazine in November 1964, called for a new inquiry into Kennedy's murder. According to *Life*, there was "reasonable—and disturbing—doubt" that Oswald had acted on his own. In the mid-1960s, the first wave of books alleging a conspiracy were published, including Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment* (1966), which spent six months on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

In 1966, the Kennedy family turned the president's autopsy photographs and X-rays over to the National Archives under a deal that strictly limited public access. In November, the Justice Department requested that Humes and the doctors who had assisted him in the autopsy examine the materials. (Immediately after the autopsy, the Secret Service had given the photographs to the Kennedy family, so Humes had never seen them.)

After examining the photographs, Humes stuck to his original conclusions. In 1968, an independent panel convened by Acting Attorney General Ramsey Clark reached the same conclusions as Humes, although the panel disagreed with him on one point. Humes had placed the bullet's point of entry in Kennedy's upper back, but the Clark panel said that the bullet had entered through the neck, roughly four inches above the point where Humes had placed it. However, the fact that Humes and the Clark panel agreed that Kennedy had been shot from behind did not quell the controversy.

In 1967, conspiracy theorists were given their first major boost when Jim Garrison, the district attorney of New Orleans, Louisiana, announced that he had begun an investigation into what he believed had been a conspiracy to kill Kennedy. On May 1 of that year, he arrested New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw on charges of conspiring to kill the president. In 1969, Shaw was unanimously acquitted in a jury trial and Garrison was widely criticized for bringing him to trial on the basis of "flimsy" evidence. However, Garrison's defeat only temporarily slowed the momentum of the conspiracy theories. [See New Orleans Attorney General Prosecutes Alleged Kennedy Conspirator (sidebar)]

Belief in a conspiracy and a government cover-up about the truth behind the assassination was fueled by revelations of government misconduct in the 1970s, causing an overall loss of trust in the government. For instance, President Richard M. Nixon (R, 1969-74) resigned in 1974 after he was shown to have been connected to a 1972 Republican break-in at the Democratic National Headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C. In the mid-1970s, various investigations also found that the CIA had spied on Americans involved in the anti-Vietnam War effort and had plotted with Mafia members to kill Castro. If government officials could not be trusted in other areas, skeptics asked, why should they be trusted to tell the truth about the Kennedy assassination? [See Watergate Affair]

Further fueling the controversy, in March 1975, the Zapruder film was finally shown to the American public on national television. Seeing Kennedy's head snap backward when he was supposedly shot from behind—which critics said defied the laws of physics—intensified accusations of a conspiracy and cover-up by the government and the Warren Commission.

Responding to calls for a further investigation, in 1976, the House established the Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA), which examined both the Kennedy killing and the murder of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. On September 6, 1978, the House began hearing testimony from ballistics experts and medical professionals who examined autopsy photographs and X-rays. Unlike the Warren Commission hearings, the HSCA hearings, which lasted three weeks, were held in public.

In early December, the HSCA was reportedly preparing to issue a draft report that upheld previous medical findings and concluded that Oswald had acted alone. However, in late December the committee heard testimony from acoustic experts Mark Weiss and Ernest Aschkenasy regarding a recording of sounds transmitted over the radio of a motorcycle police

officer on the day of the assassination. The motorcycle's microphone had been stuck in the "on" position, picking up noise that some said sounded like a gun being fired from the grassy knoll. A recording of the transmission was made on a machine called a Dictabelt.

Based on experiments to recreate what had happened while the radio was stuck in the "on" position, Weiss and Aschkenasy concluded that the acoustical evidence from the Dictabelt recording showed "a probability of 95% or better" that a shot had been fired from the grassy knoll. Another acoustics expert had previously testified that evidence from the Dictabelt recording showed that there was only a 50% chance of the shot having come from the grassy knoll, but said he was convinced by the testimony of Weiss and Aschkenasy.

In light of the new acoustical data, the HSCA issued a "summary of findings" on December 29, 1978, in which it determined that "scientific acoustical evidence establishes a high probability that two gunmen fired at President John F. Kennedy." It further determined "that President John F. Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy," although it said that it was "unable to identify the other gunman or the extent of the conspiracy." The HSCA urged the Justice Department to open an investigation into the assassination.

## The Case that a Lone Gunman Killed Kennedy

### Medical Evidence

Supporters of the theory that Oswald acted alone contended that Kennedy's and Connally's wounds showed that they had both been shot from behind (from the Book Depository) rather than from the front (from the grassy knoll). The direction of the bullet that hit Connally was not in question, they noted, and the Kennedy autopsy found that the wound to the president's throat had been an exit wound rather than an entrance wound. The Parkland doctors were wrong in stating that Kennedy's neck wound was a bullet entrance wound, lone gunman theorists insisted; they had been busy trying to resuscitate the president and never turned him over so they did not see the actual entrance wound.

In testimony to the Warren Commission, pathologist Pierre Finck, who assisted Humes on the autopsy, explained that they concluded the neck wound was an exit wound because "this wound was relatively small with clean edges. It was not a jagged wound, and that is what we see in [a] wound of entrance at long range." Supporters also defended the placement of the wound four inches higher than Humes placed it. Because Humes had not been able to refer to the photographs when writing his report the following day, he had had to rely on memory and simply made a mistake, they asserted.

Regarding the claim that because Kennedy's head had jerked backward he had to have been struck from the front, lone gunman supporters said it was not impossible for his head to have jerked backward even though he was hit from behind. In a book about the assassination, *Should We Now Believe the Warren Report?* (1968), Stephen White, director of special projects at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, noted that simple physics did not always apply when dealing with a bullet striking a head.

White wrote that "the motion of a head struck by a bullet will depend in large part on the neuromuscular state of the man who is struck. What is present is no longer a simple collision, but a complicated nexus of forces and counterforces." He said those circumstances particularly applied in the case of Kennedy, whose body was already reacting to being shot the first time. Overall, White concluded, "There is nothing in that motion that would lead a physiologist to deduce from it the direction of the bullet."

They also insisted that Kennedy and Connally had been struck by the same bullet. The nearly "pristine" condition of the bullet marked exhibit 399 did not disprove that theory, they said; a bullet that did not strike solid bone would not suffer major damage. In 1978 testimony before the HSCA, pathologist and medical examiner Michael Baden was asked if it was possible for a bullet to cause as much damage as it did to both men and remain relatively undamaged. Echoing the conclusions of the Warren Commission, Baden replied that it was possible because "this bullet struck little that would deform it." He elaborated:

*The track through President Kennedy is essentially through soft tissue which does not deform a bullet. The only injury to the chest of Governor Connally that could have damaged the bullet would have occurred if it struck the fifth rib. But the rib is a very thin bone and striking a rib does not significantly deform a copper-jacketed bullet. So, the only impact that caused any appreciable damage to that bullet occurred when it struck the lower forearm.... It is the*

*opinion of the panel that the impact with the radius bone did cause some flattening of the bullet, but it would not necessarily be a very marked deformity.*

Supporters also pointed out that the nature of Connally's wounds showed that the bullet was wobbling when it hit the governor; it must have struck something to make it wobble, but nothing else in the car showed damage. Therefore, they concluded, the bullet must have come from Kennedy. Taking all of the evidence into account, "the findings are entirely consistent with a single bullet exiting the front of the President's neck and reentering in the back of the Governor," Vincent Guinn, professor of radiochemistry at the University of California, testified in 1978.

Supporters of the lone gunman theory acknowledged the argument that Connally did not react immediately after he was supposedly hit by the bullet that had passed through Kennedy (which critics said proved that Connally had been hit by a later bullet). However, they said, it was not unusual for a person not to react right away to an injury. "The problem that we, as physicians, have is there is no way to compare how people react to fatal gunshot injury. There often is delay time between an injury and a person manifesting the effects of such injury," Baden testified. He continued, "Although it appears incongruent clearly we of the panel have all had experience in which persons have been seriously injured and have not known they were injured for a few minutes."

### **Other Evidence**

All of the evidence proved that Oswald had shot the president from the Book Depository, supporters of the lone gunman theory said. They pointed out that witnesses reported seeing a man firing a rifle from the southeast corner of the sixth floor of the Book Depository; Oswald's palm print was discovered on the barrel of a rifle found hidden on the sixth floor; and his palm print and fingerprints were found on boxes surrounding the window where the shooting took place. Furthermore, they said, one witness, Howard Brennan, who had been standing directly across from the Book Depository, gave a detailed description of the man he had seen fire the rifle from the window. His description accurately applied to Oswald, they said.

In addition, supporters noted that the rifle found in the Book Depository and the handgun used to kill Tippit had both been shipped to Alek J. Hidell, an Oswald alias. The handgun found on Oswald in the movie house accounted for the empty cartridge cases of the bullets fired at Tippit "to the exclusion of all other weapons"; therefore, David Belin, a counsel on the Warren Commission, insisted, "The murder of J. D. Tippit is virtually an open-and-shut case because Oswald was apprehended with the murder weapon in hand."

The gun that Oswald was proven to have fired was the one that had been purchased by Hidell, supporters said, and since "Hidell" was one of Oswald's aliases, that meant that the rifle had also been purchased by Oswald. That conclusively linked him to the rifle used to shoot the president from the sixth floor of the Book Depository, they said.

Not only did the evidence conclusively determine that shots had been fired from the Book Depository, lone gunman theorists said, but in addition, there was no conclusive evidence that shots had come from elsewhere. They discounted as unreliable the witness testimony about shots coming from the grassy knoll. For one thing, they said, it was very difficult for people to determine the direction bullets had come from, particularly in a place such as Dealey Plaza, where there were several buildings that would create an echo effect.

People directly in line with the shot (whether it came from in front of or behind them), as opposed to those to the left or the right of the bullet's path, would have been better able to judge the shot's direction, they said. They noted that both Connally and his wife, who were directly in line with the shot, insisted that all of the bullets had come from behind them.

It was also difficult, they said, for people to determine how many shots had been fired. In a memorandum to Warren Commission lawyers, assistant Warren counsel Melvin Eisenberg quoted a firearms textbook stating that "little credence...should be put in what anyone says about a shot or even the number of shots." Eisenberg went on to explain that people could be inaccurate about the number of shots fired because when a gun was fired it made three noises: muzzle blast, noise of bullet firing and noise of impact. "Each of these noises can be quite sharp and may be perceived as separate 'shots' by an inexperienced or confused witness," Eisenberg concluded.

The Dictaphone evidence that shots came from the grassy area was also unreliable, lone gunman supporters asserted. They noted that right after Kennedy was shot there were

immediate sounds of sirens and vehicles accelerating quickly. However, HSCA member Rep. Harold Sawyer (R, Michigan) pointed out in his 1978 dissent from the committee's final report, "No change in the rhythm or intensity of the motorcycle noise appears anywhere on the relevant Dictabelt. There is no audible sound even resembling sirens until a full two minutes following the last of what is interpreted by the acoustical experts as the shots."

Supporters also discounted photographs allegedly showing the figure of a man behind a fence on the grassy knoll and others showing a second man in the Book Depository window. (Believers in a conspiracy said those photographs were evidence of a second gunman.) According to White, "The technique usually has been to scrutinize such a picture carefully until one is able to recognize, lurking behind fences, on fire escapes or in shadows a figure of a mysterious stranger, or better still, of several.... The eye searching for patterns in a soft picture will find them."

As for a "puff of smoke" that witnesses reported seeing coming from the knoll at the time the president was shot, White said, "No modern firearm produces puffs of smoke that hover in the air—the best one can expect is a very light, very fugitive puff which appears only directly at the muzzle of the gun and vanishes almost the moment it is seen." Therefore, supporters said, it is highly unlikely that witnesses would have seen smoke from a gun being fired.

Supporters acknowledged that several police officers ran to the grassy knoll, by the railroad. However, they said, the police did so not because they believed shots had been fired from that location but because they believed it to have been an area where a gunman would have fled. For instance, they pointed to the testimony of police officer David Harkness: "I...started searching behind the railroad yards, not because I thought shots had come from there, but because we were looking for...somebody running, trying to get away," he said.

Finally, supporters of the lone gunman theory said, although the Warren Commission and HSCA could find no motive for Oswald to kill the president, he had the personality of someone who would have committed such a crime. They pointed out that in December 1963 the FBI came to believe that Oswald had tried to kill a retired, right-wing army general, Edwin Walker, the previous April. According to the FBI, during its investigation into the Kennedy assassination Oswald's wife told them Oswald had confessed to her that he had shot at Walker but had missed. That proved that Oswald was prone to murderous violence, they said.

The Warren Commission described Oswald's life as "characterized by isolation, frustration and failure." It continued, "Oswald was profoundly alienated from the world in which he lived.... He was never satisfied with anything." His motive for assassinating Kennedy, the commission speculated, could have been his "deep-rooted resentment of all authority, which was expressed in a hostility toward every society in which he lived" and an "urge to try and find a place in history."

## **The Case that There Was a Conspiracy to Kill Kennedy**

### **Medical Evidence**

All evidence pointed toward a second gunman shooting at the president, which meant that there had to have been a conspiracy, supporters of the conspiracy theory argued. First, they said, medical evidence showed that the first bullet to hit Kennedy came from in front of him. Since it was well-established that the second bullet hit him from behind, they said, that meant that there had to have been a second gunman.

They noted that the Parkland doctors described the wound in the front of Kennedy's neck as being an entrance wound. Parkland doctor Ronald Jones maintained, in his Warren Commission testimony about the throat wound, "The hole was very small and relatively clean cut, as you would see in a bullet that is entering rather than exiting from a patient. If this were an exit wound...and if this were a missile of high velocity, you would expect more of an explosive type of exit wound, with more tissue destruction than this appeared to have on superficial examination."

Some believers in a conspiracy also questioned whether the bullet that hit Kennedy in the head had actually come from behind. They pointed out that the Zapruder film showed Kennedy jerking backward and to the left after being hit in the head. According to the laws of physics, the shot had come from in front of him, they said; he was moving in the direction of the force of the bullet. Mark Lane asked in *Rush to Judgment*, "How could the Commission explain the sudden violent move of the President's body directly to the left and to the rear? So long as the Commission maintained that the bullet came almost directly from the rear, it

implied that the laws of physics vacated in this instance, for the President did not fall forward," as he would have if he had been shot from behind.

Those who believed in a conspiracy particularly denied that it was possible for the same bullet to have struck both Kennedy and Connally. And if Kennedy and Connally were hit by separate bullets that meant that at least four bullets had to have been fired: the two that hit Kennedy, one that hit Connally and one that hit the curb. Since evidence showed that Oswald had only fired three shots, and that Oswald would not have had enough time to fire the first shot that hit Kennedy and the shot that hit Connally, there had to have been a second gunman, they insisted.

Supporters of a conspiracy theory argued that the "magic bullet" theory was disproved by the evidence. First of all, they said, the Zapruder film showed that the two men were not properly aligned in the limousine for the bullet to have hit both of them. They also pointed out that the bullet supposedly recovered from Connally's stretcher was in pristine condition. However, they insisted, a bullet that had passed through two men and inflicted a great deal of damage on both of them would have been more damaged. "I feel that there would be some difficulty in explaining all of the wounds as being inflicted by bullet Exhibit 399 without causing more in the way of loss of substance to the bullet or deformation of the bullet," physician Robert Shaw testified before the HSCA in 1978.

They also noted that at the time Connally was supposedly hit by the bullet, he did not react to being shot, and in fact continued to hold a hat in his supposedly injured hand. That proved Connally was not hit by the bullet that exited from Kennedy, they concluded, but rather that he was hit later by a different bullet.

Pointing to the relevant frames of the Zapruder film, physician Cyril Wecht stated before the HSCA in 1978, "This is again a very alert individual, under a very special circumstance, and I do not believe or accept for one moment the story that we must accept under the single bullet theory that this gentleman, at this point, one and a half seconds previously, has already been shot through his chest, through his wrist, and into his left thigh." Wecht said it appeared that Connally had actually been shot roughly a second after the Warren Commission said he was shot. "The body is turning, the cheeks are puffing out, there is a noticeable grimace on his face...and there seems to be some dishevelment of his hair....There is no question in my mind that the Governor has now been hit," Wecht stated.

Furthermore, conspiracy theory supporters said, Humes had placed the bullet entry wound in the upper back, not the neck, and the initial FBI report also claimed that the bullet had hit Kennedy at that spot before falling out. That was consistent with the condition of Kennedy's shirt, which had a bullet hole in it at the upper back, conspiracy theory supporters stated. But even if the bullet had passed through Kennedy, they said, its trajectory would not have allowed it to hit Connally; it would have exited through a lower part of Kennedy's body, not his throat. "The logical consequence of this commission finding is that the missile, when fired downward, entered the president's back, was not deflected yet inexplicably rose upward to exit at the throat," Lane declared. "A back entrance wound was therefore inconvenient.... The commission found instead that the bullet had entered 'the back of President Kennedy's neck,'" he concluded.

Connally and his wife both insisted that Connally had not been hit by a bullet that struck Kennedy, believers in a conspiracy noted, and they were in the best position to judge, since they were both right there. In testimony before the Warren Commission in 1964, the governor declared, "There is my absolute knowledge, and Nellie's too, that one bullet caused the President's first wound, and that an entirely separate shot struck me." Nellie Connally elaborated in 1978 testimony before the HSCA: "I heard three shots, I had three reactions, three separate reactions. The first shot, then I looked and saw the President, the second shot, John, and the third, all this [brain and skull] matter all over us."

### **Other Evidence**

Those who believed there had been a conspiracy pointed out that dozens of witnesses said they had heard more than three shots fired, and that they heard a shot coming from the grassy knoll. In 1965, writer Harold Feldman examined the testimony of 121 Warren Commission witnesses and found that 51 said the shots came from the grassy knoll while just 32 said shots came from the Book Depository, with 38 saying that they could not determine where the shots came from. Feldman's research led him to conclude that "there was at least one other assassin firing at President Kennedy from the vicinity of the grassy knoll." He asked, "In what other murder case would the testimony of 51 sworn and many

other unheard witnesses be dismissed so cavalierly as 'no credible evidence'?"

Believers in a conspiracy also cited the Dictaphone evidence establishing with 95% probability that a shot had come from the grassy knoll. They also pointed out that immediately after the shots were fired several police officers and spectators ran to the grassy knoll. For instance, patrolman J. M. Smith, who had been standing in front of the Book Depository at the time of the shooting, wrote in his report of the incident, "I heard the shots and thought they were coming from bushes of the overpass," in the direction of the grassy knoll.

In addition, conspiracy theorists pointed to the testimony of S. M. Holland, who said that right after Kennedy was shot he saw a "puff of smoke" in the area of the grassy knoll. The smoke was the result of a rifle being fired, conspiracy theorists asserted. Holland, who worked with the Union Terminal Company, was on the bridge spanning Elm Street, very close to the grassy knoll, when the shots were fired. Holland said that upon hearing the shots he looked to his left, at the grassy area. According to his affidavit:

*I was standing on top of the triple underpass and the President's car was coming down Elm Street and when they got just about to the arcade I heard what I thought for the moment was a firecracker and he slumped over and I looked over toward the arcade and trees and saw a puff of smoke come from the trees and I heard three more shots after the first shot but that was the only puff of smoke I saw.*

Another witness reported that a "commotion" in the knoll area had caught his attention. The witness, Lee Bowers, said he had been in the railroad tower near the Book Depository when, "At the time of the shooting there seemed to be some commotion, and immediately following there was a motorcycle policeman who shot nearly all of the way to the top of the incline [on the grassy knoll]....[S]omething occurred in this particular spot which was out of the ordinary, which attracted my eye for some reason, which I could not identify," he said. Bowers elaborated in an interview with Lane, saying that he saw "a flash of light or smoke or something which caused me to feel like something out of the ordinary had occurred there."

Conspiracy believers also contended that photographs taken at the time show that there was a person behind the fence on the grassy knoll during the shooting. In particular, they pointed to a Polaroid picture taken by spectator Mary Moorman. Gary Mack, the curator of the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, which opened in the old Book Depository building in 1987, said that after studying Moorman's photo he could make out an image behind the fence; he saw "eyes and ears and forehead and hair. And little by little the pieces of the image started to make sense to me."

After working to enlarge and enhance the photograph with a friend, Jack White, Mack said that "we could see more and more detail. And at one point we realized this fellow was probably wearing a police uniform, or close enough to what the Dallas police were wearing to pass as a police officer." White later remarked that he could also see a second man in the photo.

Overall, believers in a conspiracy theory argued, there was a great deal of evidence that a second gunman had fired at Kennedy. They accused the Warren Commission and representatives of government agencies, such as the CIA and FBI that testified before it, of having covered up any evidence that contradicted the theory that there had been only one gunman. According to Penn Jones Jr., the editor of a small newspaper in Texas, "There are deliberate errors in the [Warren] volumes." Jones further claimed that dozens of witnesses and people with information about the assassination had died "suspicious" deaths to keep the truth from being discovered. [See [Have Kennedy Assassination Witnesses Met with Suspicious Deaths?](#) (sidebar)]

Some went further and claimed that Oswald was not even the gunman. The conspirators had framed Oswald, for instance by planting his rifle at the Book Depository and planting incriminating evidence at the scene of the Tippit murder, they said. They acknowledged that Oswald's handprints had been found on boxes on the sixth floor of the Book Depository, but pointed out that he worked in the building; it was natural to find his prints there, they said. Some claimed that someone had been impersonating Oswald in the days prior to the assassination to make it seem more likely that he was the kind of person who would have wanted to kill Kennedy. In light of the evidence, District Attorney Garrison concluded, "It's my personal belief that Oswald did not kill anyone that day."

## Enduring Controversy

The death of the president on November 22, 1963, did not bring an end to the idealism that had characterized his shortened presidency. Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, maintained, as Kennedy had, that the government could improve people's lives through social programs. In the year following Kennedy's assassination, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, and President Johnson expanded on Kennedy's plans to fight poverty by launching a War on Poverty. [See Civil Rights Act of 1964, Great Society and the War on Poverty]



National Archives

Lyndon B. Johnson is sworn in as president aboard Air Force One on November 22, 1963, shortly after President John F. Kennedy was shot to death in Dallas, Texas.

However, Kennedy's death marked the beginning of a more turbulent 1960s as well. The decade was marked by the emergence of a counterculture, as young Americans rebelled against the conformity and materialism that had characterized the 1950s and protested the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Frustration with the seemingly slow progress of the civil rights movement led to the emergence of a "black power" movement that advocated greater militancy. The decade saw several other high-profile assassinations, including that of Malcolm X, a leader of the Black Nationalist movement, on February 21, 1965; that of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968; and just two months later, on June 6, that of Senator Robert F. Kennedy.

The Kennedy assassination has been one of the nation's most enduring controversies, with many people insisting that there was a conspiracy to kill him. Responding to persistent allegations of a conspiracy, in 1980 the Justice Department announced that it would open a "limited investigation" into the assassination, focused on the acoustical evidence. Seven years later the Justice Department said that it had found "no pervasive evidence" of conspiracy and was closing its investigation. Despite those findings, the controversy has continued.

Hundreds of books have been written about the assassination and several movies have been made about it, including Oliver Stone's *JFK* in 1991. *JFK* introduced the conspiracy theory to a new generation of Americans who had not yet been born when Kennedy was killed.

The following year, Congress passed the so-called JFK Act, which required the government, including the CIA, FBI and Secret Service, to release secret government documents related to the assassination. In accordance with the act, in August 1993, the National Archives released more than 800,000 pages of Kennedy files that had previously been classified, and by the end

of the decade almost all of the Warren records had been released. However, the documents contained no new evidence in the case.

More than four decades after Kennedy's murder, the belief in a conspiracy to kill the president continues. In fact, more people today believe there was a conspiracy than did so in the years following the assassination. A year after Kennedy's death, polls indicated that half the nation believed there had been a conspiracy to kill the president; today, roughly 70% of people polled believe in a conspiracy.

Why has the controversy lingered so long? Some claim that it was due in part to the way the Warren Commission handled the hearings, particularly the fact that it met in secret. If people had been able to watch the hearings and hear the testimony firsthand they would have had a better understanding of why the commission reached the conclusions that it did, they said. Adding to the suspicion, the CIA and FBI were later shown to have withheld sensitive information from the commission. (For instance, the CIA did not disclose its plots to kill Castro.)

Warren was also criticized for not allowing the commission to view the autopsy X-rays and photographs, a decision that several members of the commission called "disastrous." In doing so, critics said, it appeared as if the commission was covering up vital evidence and giving credence to claims that the government had altered Kennedy's wounds to make it appear as if he had been shot from behind. Spurring further charges of a cover-up was the fact that Humes burned his original autopsy notes. (Humes claimed that he did so because the notes were covered in blood from Kennedy's wounds and he was afraid they would become a grisly collector's item.)

Some historians also cite a general disbelief by the public that a "lone nut" could kill Kennedy and all that he represented. Tom Wicker, a former *New York Times* columnist, asserted that the Warren report conclusions were "not good enough for many Americans, who wanted a more serious cause—political, military or international—and a more plausible perpetrator for the murder of their president." On the other hand, conspiracy theorists say that the controversy has persisted because they have continued to gather evidence of a conspiracy that may have reached the highest levels of government.

On the 25th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination, Representative Louis Stokes (D, Ohio), who had served as the chairman of the 1978 House assassination committee, stated, "It does not seem likely that these mysteries will ever be solved. I think it's more likely than not that we'll never know." Twenty years later Stokes is still correct, and unless dramatic new evidence is unearthed, the controversy will likely continue unabated.

## Discussion Questions & Activities

1. Was Kennedy killed by a gunman who acted alone, or was his murder the result of a conspiracy?
2. Of what significance was the question of whether the wound in the front of Kennedy's throat was a bullet entrance wound or an exit wound?
3. Imagine that you were Jack Ruby's lawyer during his trial. Write an opening statement in which you explain why the jury should either acquit or convict him of killing Lee Harvey Oswald.
4. Why has the controversy surrounding who killed Kennedy persisted for so long?
5. Write a letter to the editor from the perspective of a person in 1979 arguing that the Justice Department should open an investigation into the Kennedy assassination.

## Suggested Web Sites

National Archives: "Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy"

National Archives: "Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations of the U.S. House of Representatives"

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