

## **BLUNDERS AND WONDERS OF NOV. 22, 1963**

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In this article on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, I discuss a recent book.

It is *The Echo From Dealey Plaza: The True Story of the First African American on the White House Secret Service Detail and His Quest for Justice After the Assassination of JFK* (Harmony Books, 2007), by Abraham Bolden, the first black agent on the White House Secret Service detail. It was President Kennedy himself who invited Bolden to join the White House detail. *The Echo From Dealey Plaza* is the first JFK assassination book by a former White House Secret Service agent.

### **Failure of the Security**

One sentence in Abraham Bolden's doleful narrative haunts us: "*What I do know is that the president died because of a failure of the security around him, a situation that some of us saw coming.*"

It is now an accepted truth that, due to its own blundering, the U.S. Secret Service inadequately protected JFK in Dallas, Texas on Nov. 22, 1963. As the 1979 Final Report of the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations bluntly puts it, the Secret Service "was deficient in the performance of its duties." In addition to the Final Report, numerous books and articles set out the grim specifics of the Secret Service bungling.

There were shocking defects in the advance planning and the final arrangements for the presidential motorcade through Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. As a result, escort security for the motorcade was, in the castigatory words of the House Assassinations Committee, "uniquely insecure."

- In spite of the dictates of prudence, and notwithstanding Secret Service knowledge of several recent reported plots to shoot JFK while he was motorcading, the windows of buildings along the motorcade route, including the buildings in Dealey Plaza where the assassination took place, were not inspected, making it possible for hidden snipers concealed in tall buildings to fire at JFK.

- The Secret Service rejected a sensible proposal from Dallas police that a car filled with homicide detectives be inserted in the motorcade a few cars behind the presidential limousine.

- There were no Secret Service agents on the ground anywhere along the entire motorcade route.

- Contrary to standard practice, the president's open limousine made two sharp turns—first right, then left—in Dealey Plaza, and had slowed to an abnormally low 11.2 mph when it came under fire.

- The day before, in Houston, JFK's limousine had been flanked by six police motorcycles; on Nov. 22, however, on Secret Service orders, only four police motorcycles were assigned to escort the limousine, and they were instructed to remain at the rear of the limousine rather than flanking it.

When the shots rang out the Secret Service agents initially reacted with strange sluggishness. The limousine driver hesitated. He did not instantaneously put his foot on the accelerator; instead, swiveling his head twice to glance back at the stricken president, he actually put his foot on the brakes before eventually speeding off. The other agent in the front seat made no attempt to get to the president and push him down or shield him with his own body. After the explosion of gunfire, while JFK was visibly reacting to bullet wounds, agents on the running boards of the escort car behind the limousine stood there dully, some looking at him, some turning to look to behind them, but all of them doing nothing. In the classic words of French writer James Hepburn, the agents “neglected the first rule of security: They had lost their reflexes.”

### **Bolden's Revelations**

During his brief tenure (June to July 1961) on the White House detail, Abraham Bolden became alarmed by the drinking habits, sexual escapades, and arrogant overconfidence of many (but certainly not all) of the Secret Service agents guarding JFK. He witnessed agents drinking or drunk while on duty. He witnessed agents who womanized, and women being driven around late at night in Secret Service vehicles. After completing his probationary period of service on the White House detail, Bolden decided to opt out of protective work and return to criminal investigation, transferring to the Secret Service field office in Chicago. Before leaving Washington, in an exit interview with U. E. Baughman, then chief of the Secret Service, Bolden related his personal knowledge of the carousing of the White House detail. On arriving in Chicago, Bolden told every colleague or superior he could that he “didn’t believe the agents on the White House detail would act swiftly or appropriately to stop an attempt on the President’s life.” He always received the same response—that he was over-reacting.

After the assassination, Bolden contacted the Warren Commission and volunteered to testify not only about the laxity of the agents assigned to protect JFK, but also about a conspiracy involving four men with scope-mounted rifles who had plotted to assassinate JFK while he was on a proposed visit to Chicago on Nov. 2, 1963, a visit canceled just before it was to begin. The Warren Commission, however, refused to interview Bolden. Due to this, as well as a mysterious Secret Service coverup, the Warren Commission was unaware of the existence of the Chicago assassination conspiracy, and the Warren Report says nothing about the Chicago plot. (The Warren Commission also was not told and did not know that just weeks before the assassination the Secret Service had been alerted to other conspiracies, in Tampa and Miami, to kill JFK by sniper fire from a building, and had taken extra security precautions when Kennedy traveled to those cities four days before the assassination.)

In May 1964, in retaliation for his offer to testify before the Warren Commission, Bolden was arrested on trumped-up charges of bribery,

obstruction of justice, and conspiracy. After two trials he was convicted on all counts by an all-white jury and served five years in federal prison.

In 1978, after his release, Bolden testified before the House Select Committee on Assassinations, relating the story of the four plotters with scoped rifles and how the threat they posed resulted in a last-minute scrapping of JFK's plans to be in Chicago on Nov. 2, 1963. The documentary evidence supporting Bolden's story having been destroyed or hidden away, and with no other Chicago Secret Service agent willing to confirm Bolden's account, the House Assassinations Committee unfortunately regarded Bolden's testimony as of "questionable authenticity" and announced that it "was unable to determine specifically why the President's trip to Chicago, scheduled for November 2, was canceled."

The House Assassinations Committee's wariness of Abraham Bolden's testimony was, we now know, unjustified. Bolden's assertions that three weeks before the Dallas assassination a team of killers equipped with high-power rifles was plotting to shoot Kennedy in Chicago, and that JFK's planned trip to that city was canceled at the last moment, due to the dangers of the plot, have become widely recognized truths since publication of Lamar Waldron and Thom Hartmann's authoritative and thoroughly documented *Ultimate Sacrifice* (2005), which devotes two entire chapters to the Chicago conspiracy. Abraham Bolden stands vindicated by history.

### **Boozing Bodyguards**

*The Echo From Dealey Plaza* also throws new light on the drinking problems of agents protecting JFK at the time of the assassination. It is well established that, in flagrant violation of Secret Service regulations, nine of the agents guarding JFK in Dallas, including four in the escort car behind the presidential limousine, had been out drinking until the early hours on the morning of Nov. 22. The 1964 Warren Report acknowledged but minimized this startling fact, as did the Final Report

of the House Assassinations Committee. Both Reports focused on the drinking that occurred the night before the assassination. Neither Report concerned itself with whether the consumption of alcohol by the presidential protectors while traveling with the president—such consumption being strictly prohibited under all circumstances—was a recurring problem. It was. Bolden's book permits us to see that the irresponsible behavior of the nine agents the night before the assassination was part of a disturbing pattern of similar misbehavior by the White House detail—a pattern that must have materially increased the possibility of an assassination attempt succeeding.