

THE CONTINUING SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH
ABOUT THE JFK ASSASSINATION

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President Kennedy Has Been Shot
Cathy Trost and Susan Bennett
Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003
299 pp., \$29.95

Blood, Money & Power: How LBJ Killed JFK
Barr McClellan
Hanover House, 2003
400 pp., \$24.95

The Kennedy Assassination Tapes
Max Holland
Alfred A. Knopf, 2004
453 pp., \$26.95

The Zapruder Film: Reframing JFK's Assassination
David R. Wrone
University Press of Kansas, 2003
368 pp., \$29.95

Forty-one years ago, in broad daylight, in front of scores of spectators gathered to watch the presidential motorcade, President John F. Kennedy was shot to death at 12:30 p.m. on Nov. 22, 1963 while seated in an open limousine being driven through Dealey Plaza in downtown Dallas, Texas. When the limousine came under hidden sniper fire, Kennedy was en route to a luncheon where he was scheduled to give a speech. Shortly after JFK was pronounced dead, the vice president, Lyndon B. Johnson (who had been in another open limousine a few cars back in the motorcade), was sworn in as president aboard Air Force One.

There must be more than 10,000 published books and articles on the JFK assassination and each year hundreds more appear in print. Some are written by individuals who are (in the words of JFK assassination expert David R. Wrone) "paranoid conspiracy theorists." Many of the publications, however, throw helpful light on the assassination, often by adducing new evidence or by resolving disputed factual issues. Overall, the growing body of JFK assassination literature has, especially over the past decade, dramatically expanded the public's awareness of the specifics of the assassination.

In this article I shall discuss four recent books on the assassination.

EYEWITNESSES

Using eyewitness accounts, and photographs taken and documents prepared either during or shortly after the assassination or over the course of the next several days, *President Kennedy Has Been Shot* relates the basic facts, sometimes minute by minute, of the assassination and of related events (e.g., the arrest of the suspected assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, less than 90 minutes after JFK was shot, and the murder of Oswald in a police station two days later), ending with Kennedy's state funeral.

I focus on the portions of *President Kennedy Has Been Shot* pertaining to the events in Dealey Plaza. The majority of the book's eyewitness accounts of the JFK murder are from news reporters and photographers who were in the motorcade in vehicles as much as 200 yards behind Kennedy's limousine. Those journalists, quoted in the book, heard three shots fired from above, and several of them saw a rifle being withdrawn into an upper window in the Texas Schoolbook Depository. Merriman Smith, White House correspondent for UPI, recounted: "Suddenly, we heard three loud, almost painfully loud cracks. The first sounded as though it might have been a large firecracker. But the second and third blasts were unmistakable. Gunfire." Pierce Allman, reporting for a Dallas TV station, recounted: "There were three shots. They were very distinct. [The shots were fired in] six and a half seconds. It was a very, very vivid memory. Mr. Kennedy didn't really slump. He sort of jerked up and his arms went up and his hands went toward his chin." Within four minutes of the president's shooting, UPI sent out a press bulletin by teletype: "Three shots were fired today at President Kennedy's motorcade in downtown Dallas." Two minutes later this bulletin was broadcast on ABC Radio.

These recollections of journalists in the motorcade, and the early news bulletins of the shooting, tend to confirm the Warren Commission which in its official Report on the assassination adopted the lone assassin theory, concluding that only three shots were fired and that they all were fired in less than eight seconds by one person, Lee Harvey Oswald, from a sixth floor window of the Depository. However, it must be recognized that, because of their distance from the presidential limousine, the members of the press in the motorcade might have been unaware of any shots fired from the far side of Dealey Plaza (e.g., the grassy knoll to the right of the presidential limousine). That these journalists heard three shots fired from above them and saw a rifle in the window does not, therefore, exclude the possibility that shots were also fired from places other than the Depository. And there is, I must emphasize, an impressive body of evidence that in fact one or more shots were fired from the vicinity of the grassy knoll. In 1979 the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations, which reinvestigated the assassination, concluded that "President John F. Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy" and that "there was a high probability that two gunmen were firing at the President;" and acoustical evidence accepted by the Select Committee indicated that one of the gunmen fired from the grassy knoll area.

President Kennedy Has Been Shot does contain information that tends to contradict the Warren Report and to support the view that shots were fired at the motorcade from the grassy knoll. Robert MacNeil, an NBC news correspondent in a bus near the rear of the motorcade, recounted that, shortly after the shooting, "I saw several people running up the grassy hill beside the road. I thought they were chasing whoever had done the shooting and ran after them." A photograph

of Dealey Plaza included in the book, taken approximately one minute after JFK had been shot, shows at least eight bystanders racing up the grassy knoll in search of someone or something.

LBJ MURDERER?

Barr McClellan, author of *Blood, Money & Power*, is an attorney and former junior partner of an Austin, Texas law firm headed by Edward A. Clark, who (McClellan tells us) was for many years LBJ's close friend, right-hand man, and personal attorney. McClellan himself dubs his nonfiction book a "journalistic novel" which makes use at times of what he acknowledges to be "fiction." The thesis of his book is simple: "the circumstantial evidence is overwhelming" that LBJ, conspiring with Edward Clark and a few others, plotted and arranged for the assassination of JFK. "Simply stated, LBJ killed JFK." (LBJ did not, however, according to McClellan, "know of the details" of the plan to kill Kennedy.) *Blood, Money & Power* is based on information McClellan acquired while practicing law with Clark, particularly conversations he had with Clark and other members of their firm, and on secret documents belonging to the firm which McClellan says he has seen.

McClellan understates it when he admits that "this book is not a balanced retelling of the life of Lyndon Johnson." McClellan thinks that LBJ was a colossus of depravity and criminality. "Johnson was a mean, often bitter man," McClellan says. "He would do anything to gain power and to retain power. He was willing to kill. And he did." LBJ, McClellan adds, "was clearly psychopathic ... dedicated to an awful objective based on primal emotions of greed for absolute power ... [and] determin[ed] to do anything to become the most powerful man in the world." McClellan devotes a large part of his book to chronicling numerous pre-1963 corrupt acts and crimes, including murder, allegedly committed on the orders of LBJ and Edward Clark to protect or advance LBJ's political career.

McClellan says there were four persons, three of them shooters, who actually carried out the assassination. Two of the shooters were on the sixth floor of the Depository—Mac Wallace, a professional hitman who had previously committed political murders for LBJ and Clark, and Lee Harvey Oswald, who had been recruited by Wallace and who (unknowingly) was also the patsy. Wallace fired one shot, which hit JFK in the back, inflicting a nonfatal injury. Oswald fired two shots: the first entirely missed the motorcade; the second struck Texas Gov. John Connally (who was seated in the limousine in front of Kennedy) in the back, inflicting a nonfatal injury. The other two assassins carried phony Secret Service credentials. One of them, whom McClellan calls "Bill Yates" and describes as a "conspirator not yet wholly identified," was stationed at the getaway door at the back of the ground floor of the Depository; his job was to keep people away from the door prior to the assassination and after the assassination to assist Wallace to escape the building. The fourth assassin—McClellan calls him "Junior" and cryptically says of him that "we await additional disclosures"—was behind a wooden fence at the rear of the grassy knoll, with a rifle equipped with a scope. It was Junior who fired the fatal shot that struck Kennedy in the head. Thus, a total of four shots were fired—three nonfatal ones from the Depository, and the fatal one from the grassy knoll.

McClellan professes to be astonished that anyone could truly believe that the conspirators who brought about Kennedy's death would have done so "without compensation [being] required."

Clark and the other surviving conspirators shared “a substantial sum”—\$8 million—for their deed, McClellan says.

Even accepting McClellan’s premise that LBJ was an amoral, bloodthirsty gangster masquerading as a politician and capable of murdering his own president, and putting to one side the disturbing but understandable lack of evidence supporting McClellan’s conspiracy claims, McClellan’s story is wildly improbable. If LBJ plotted JFK’s murder, is it credible that he would arrange for, or permit, the crime to be committed in his home state of Texas? Is it believable that LBJ would give the other conspirators “the Secret Service policy manual for protection of the president”? Is it plausible that Lee Harvey Oswald would come to the attention of and be sought out by superlawyer Edward Clark? Is it likely that Lee Harvey Oswald could be induced by an offer of money to assassinate a president, or that he would pair up with Mac Wallace the professional murderer? On the day of the assassination, could Wallace actually have entered the Depository and gone to the sixth floor and remained there for some time without any of the building’s employees (except for Oswald) knowing about it? Would Wallace, the professional murderer, really have been so blundering and inept as to leave a fingerprint inside the sixth floor room from which shots are believed to have been fired?

The piece de resistance of McClellan’s case is his claim that Nathan Darby, a fingerprint expert engaged by McClellan, recently identified a latent fingerprint found in the sixth floor room of the Depository shortly after the assassination as matching an inked fingerprint of hitman Wallace. Careful examination of *Blood, Money & Power*, however, makes plain that other experts dispute Darby’s claim and that in overview the alleged fingerprint evidence is very weak.

SINGLE BULLET?

Max Holland, author of *The Kennedy Assassination Tapes*, is a respected and distinguished investigative journalist. His book consists of edited and annotated transcripts of recorded telephone calls, placed or received by LBJ, which concerned the Kennedy assassination, the Warren Commission (which LBJ created one week after the assassination to investigate and report on the assassination), and related matters. The first of the recorded telephone conversations included in the book occurred on Nov. 22, 1963; the last was on Mar. 2, 1967. The conversations were with senators and congressmen, intelligence and law enforcement officials, the members of the Warren Commission (including Georgia’s Sen. Richard B. Russell), and various other persons.

Because I have written three magazine articles about Richard Russell and the Warren Commission, I am especially interested in the portions of *The Kennedy Assassination Tapes* relating to the conversations between LBJ and Russell. (My articles are available online and may be accessed from my home page on the UGA law school’s web page.)

For decades Russell has had an enviable reputation for being the Lone Dissenter and the Great Dissenter on the Warren Commission, a body now widely discredited, even scorned. While serving on the Commission Russell expressed unhappiness about the inadequacies he perceived in the FBI and CIA investigations of the assassination and in the Warren Commission’s own investigation; he rejected the single bullet theory, a linchpin of the Commission’s lone assassin

theory; and he seriously doubted the Commission's finding that no conspiracy was behind the assassination. Russell even wrote a draft of a dissenting statement, never incorporated into the Warren Report, in which he rejected the single bullet theory and stated that "a number of suspicious circumstances," together with the insufficiency of the evidence, "precludes the conclusive determination that Oswald and Oswald alone, acting without the knowledge, encouragement or assistance of any person, planned and perpetrated the assassination."

After the Warren Report appeared, Russell repeatedly announced what he called his "lingering dissatisfaction" with the Report. Only two days after publication of the Report, Russell told an Atlanta newspaper that it was still not known whether Oswald had "acted with the encouragement or knowledge of anyone else;" in an interview with the same newspaper in 1966, Russell attacked both the single bullet and the lone assassin theories; and in a 1970 television interview, Russell stated that he "was not satisfied with several aspects of [the Warren Report]," and that "I have never believed that Oswald planned that altogether by himself.... I think someone else worked with him."

In 1997 historian Michael R. Beschloss published *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, which included transcripts he had prepared of three important recorded telephone conversations between LBJ and Russell. (The recordings, made by LBJ, had been released to the public by the LBJ presidential library in 1994.) Two of the conversations occurred on Nov. 29, 1963, the day LBJ appointed Russell to the Warren Commission; the third was on Sept. 18, 1964, shortly after the Warren Commission's final meeting and only nine days before the Warren Report was published.

The transcripts of these three conversations, prepared by Holland and included in his book, are more reliable than the transcripts of these conversations found in the Beschloss book. Notably, Beschloss inaccurately transcribed a sentence in the Sept. 18 conversation, with the result that Russell appears to tell LBJ that at the final Warren Commission meeting Russell had been threatened by other Commission members when he expressed his disagreement with portions of the proposed Report ("I tried my best to get in a dissent, but they'd come 'round and trade me out of it by giving me a little old threat"). Holland corrects Beschloss' major error, transcribing Russell's words as follows: "I tried my best to get in a dissent, but they'd come 'round and trade me out of it by givin' me a little old thread of it." Thanks to Holland, we now know that Russell never claimed to have been threatened.

The Kennedy Assassination Tapes is an impressive, thoroughly researched book and an important resource for persons writing about the assassination or the Warren Report. However, the book is seriously flawed because its author, Max Holland, is a true believer in the Warren Report and its lone assassin and single bullet theories who allows his supreme confidence in the Report to compromise the objectivity of his commentaries on the telephone conversations he has transcribed.

The lone assassin theory is the theory that one person, Lee Harvey Oswald, planned and carried out the JFK assassination entirely on his own, including firing all the shots. Arising out of the indisputable fact that both JFK and Gov. Connally suffered nonfatal bullet wounds in their backs, the single bullet theory is the theory that one bullet caused both JFK's and Connally's

back wounds—specifically, that a nonfatal bullet fired from behind the limousine struck JFK in the back, transected his body, and then pierced Gov. Connally’s back. Examination of the Zapruder film of the assassination proves that less than two seconds elapsed between the earliest time JFK could have been hit in the back and the latest time that Connally could have received his back wound. On the other hand, it is also a proven fact that the carbine Oswald supposedly used could not be fired twice in less than 2.3 seconds. In order to uphold its lone assassin theory the Warren Report embraced the single bullet theory; otherwise, it would have been necessary to admit that at least two weapons had been fired and that therefore there had been two shooters.

Richard Russell did not believe in the single bullet theory. He had several reasons for his rejection of the theory; perhaps the most important was the Warren Commission testimony of Gov. Connally and his wife (who was seated next to her husband in the limousine). Both swore under oath that they were absolutely and unequivocally positive that JFK and Connally were struck in the back by separate bullets, with JFK being shot first.

Holland, who seems oblivious of the fact that the majority of responsible scholars of the assassination now reject many of the major findings of the Warren Report, is of course free to join what one wag calls “the shrinking enclave” of Warren Report true believers. The problem is that Holland’s slavish adherence to the Warren Report vitiates his discussion of the Sept. 18, 1964, conversation between LBJ and Russell. Early in the conversation, Russell signals that he doesn’t believe that JFK and Connally were struck by the same bullet, after first acknowledging that “I hadn’t ... couldn’t ... didn’t hear all the evidence, and cross-examine all of ’em. But I did read the record.” At the end of the next to last sentence in the above-quoted transcript excerpt, Holland inserts a superscript footnote numeral, and then in the text of the footnote writes: “Russell is frankly admitting that he is not completely familiar with the evidentiary record on this very point. His main interest throughout has been whether Oswald was part of a foreign (Communist) conspiracy.” Holland is wrong. Taking into account the last sentence of the excerpt, Russell is simply telling LBJ the truth: he has not attended many Warren Commission hearings where witnesses testified, but he has read the transcripts of those hearings. (Holland does not mention it, but it is well established that, with the assistance of a staff member, Russell spent many hours poring over the transcripts of those hearings.) Russell is, in short, telling LBJ that Russell is familiar with the evidentiary record.

When Russell sensibly tells LBJ that the deadly accuracy of the shooting, with Kennedy being struck by two shots, makes it implausible that (as the lone assassin theory requires) a third shot completely missed the limousine (and even the street), Holland annotates Russell’s statements with an unresponsive footnote whose text begins: “Oswald’s marksmanship is not the issue.”

In the preface to *The Kennedy Assassination Tapes*, Holland several times makes assessments that are tainted by his loyalty to the Warren Report.

Regarding the Sept. 18 conversation, for example, in which LBJ expresses agreement with Russell’s doubts about the single bullet theory, Holland says that LBJ was “simply speaking for effect” and didn’t “know enough to register a meaningful opinion one way or another.” These remarks, I believe, reflect a serious misunderstanding and underestimation of LBJ, a savvy politician who didn’t hesitate to express his views on things and who took a keen interest in, and

kept abreast of, current events (including the investigation of the murder of his predecessor).

When forced to deal with the testimony of Gov. Connally and his wife which contradicted the single bullet theory (and hence the lone assassin theory also), Holland oddly describes the couple as having “rigidly stuck to their story.”

The Kennedy Assassination Tapes is an excellent book; it would have been even better if the author had not allowed his pro-Warren Report views to color his commentary.

CAUGHT ON FILM

The author of *The Zapruder Film* is David R. Wrone, a retired history professor at the University of Wisconsin who for 30 years taught a college course on the Kennedy assassination. Wrone is also the co-author, with DeLloyd J. Guth, of *The Assassination of John F. Kennedy: A Comprehensive Historical and Legal Bibliography* (1980), which lists over 5,130 books and articles about the assassination published between 1963 and 1979.

The Zapruder Film tells us almost everything we have always wanted know about the most famous silent home movie of all time—the six-foot long strip of 8 mm color film which records the assassination of President Kennedy. The movie was filmed using a Bell and Howell movie camera by 58-year old Abraham Zapruder, a Dallas manufacturer of women’s clothes who had stationed himself on a small concrete abutment on the grassy knoll in Dealey Plaza, to the right of the motorcade.

Abraham Zapruder's film is the single most important item among the huge body of evidence of the JFK assassination.

The film consists of 486 frames designated Z1 through Z486. The frames moved through the camera at the rate of 18.3 per second; therefore, each frame represents the passage of approximately one eighteenth of a second. Thus the film provides what Wrone calls “an extraordinarily precise time line for examining what happened second by second from just before until just after the attack [on JFK].” Here a few of the interesting facts about Zapruder and his film which may be found in Wrone’s book:

- While filming the assassination, Zapruder was about 65 feet from the center of Elm Street, the street along which JFK’s limousine was moving.
- When the Zapruder film was being developed, frame Z207 was damaged and frames Z208 through Z212 were destroyed.
- Z225 is the first frame in which it is clear that JFK has been shot (this was a nonfatal shot which struck him in the back). Z238, less than one second later, is the first frame in which it is clear that Gov. Connally has been shot. Z313, the best known of the frames, which occurs about four seconds later, graphically depicts Kennedy’s fatal headshot. Thus, the total time elapsed between the moment when it is plain that JFK has first been shot and the moment when he is fatally wounded is incredibly short—about five seconds.
- In his proposed statement dissenting from the Warren Report’s single bullet theory, Sen. Richard Russell relied in part on the Zapruder film, writing: “Reviewing the Zapruder film several times adds to my conviction that the bullet that passed through Governor Connally’s

body was not the same bullet as that which passed through the President's back and neck."

- Shortly after the assassination a shaken Zapruder told a reporter that it had "looked like [JFK's] head opened up & everything c[a]me out ... blood spatter[ed] everywhere ... side of face ... looked like blobs coming out of his temple..." A few hours later Zapruder told a Secret Service agent, "My God, I saw the whole thing. I saw the man's brains come out of his head."

- Watching President Kennedy shot dead in front of his own eyes so shocked Zapruder "that for the rest of his life he suffered recurring nightmares and never got over the horrible sight."

- Zapruder testified under oath about the assassination only twice. The first time was in Dallas on July 22, 1964 when he gave a deposition to a member of the staff of the Warren Commission. The second time was on Feb. 13, 1969 when he testified as a prosecution witness at the New Orleans trial of Clay Shaw who had been charged by district attorney Jim Garrison with conspiring to murder JFK. (Shaw was later acquitted by the jury.)

- Zapruder believed that the fatal head shot had been fired from a spot on the grassy knoll behind him and that the bullet that killed JFK had entered the right temple. Soon after the assassination, Zapruder told a reporter that he had seen "blobs coming out of [JFK's] temple." Later that very day, Zapruder took part in a televised interview for a Dallas TV station. During the interview, while explaining the headshot he had witnessed, Zapruder placed his cupped right hand, fingers spread, over his right temple. (There is actually a photograph of this incident in *The Zapruder Film*.) Furthermore, when giving his July 22, 1964 deposition, Zapruder answered, "Well, yes," when asked whether "you saw the President hit on the right side of the head and you thought perhaps the shots had come from behind you?" (It would, of course, have been physically impossible for a shot fired from the Depository—which was behind JFK—to have originated from behind Zapruder or to have hit the right side of Kennedy's head.)

- Zapruder died in Dallas on Aug. 30, 1970.

- In 1999 the U. S. government purchased the Zapruder film from Zapruder's family for \$16 million.

- The Zapruder film is now kept "in a protective case inside a locked cabinet behind the secure doors of the cold storage freezer of the Special Media Archives Services Division of the National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, Maryland, maintained at twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit and 30 percent relative humidity."

Based on a frame by frame analysis of Abraham Zapruder's filmstrip, *The Zapruder Film* argues that it "provides compelling evidence for the existence of a conspiracy to murder the president." Readers of the book will have to make their own judgment whether Wrone's reasoning on this point is persuasive. In my opinion, it is.

Wrone commits an entire chapter of book to endeavoring to refute the students of the assassination who claim that the Zapruder film has been tampered with and altered.

The Zapruder Film is broader in scope than its title would indicate. A substantial part of the book is devoted to attacks—in my opinion, successful attacks—on the Warren Commission's lone assassin and single bullet theories. The book features an excellent discussion of Sen. Richard Russell's disagreements with the Warren Report. "Russell," *The Zapruder Film* correctly points out, "believed (1) that there had been a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy, (2) that [Lee Harvey] Oswald had not done all the shooting, and (3) that the [Warren] Commission had not been told the truth about Oswald's background."

In reexamining the Kennedy assassination and the coverup that has hindered the search for the identity of the crime's perpetrators, we must never lose sight of the incalculable damage that the murder and the coverup inflicted on the collective American psyche. I therefore conclude this article with a quotation from Wrono's book that rings terribly true: "[T]he events of November 22, 1963, stole from America both optimism and innocence, losses that succeeding events only deepened, forever framing JFK's death as the doorway to these terrible times."