

T H E M A N W H O D I D N ' T T A L K
A n d o t h e r t a l e s f r o m t h e n e w K e n n e d y
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By Jefferson Morley,

Editor's note: Jefferson Morley, a former editor and staff writer for *washingtonpost.com*, is the author of the forthcoming book, *Our Man in Mexico: Winston Scott and the Hidden History of the CIA*, published by the University Press of Kansas. He has written about the Kennedy assassination for *Reader's Digest*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, Salon, *Washington Monthly* and the *Miami New Times*. He is now national editorial director for the Center for Independent Media in Washington D.C. which sponsors a network of online news sites in four states. In this piece, written with support from the Fund for Investigative Journalism, he offers an update on new findings related to the most shocking political murder in American history.

Bob Woodward, my former colleague at the *Washington Post*, once warned me in a collegial way that the story of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy was a journalistic "black hole," and so it is. The JFK story is literally a dark core of cultural energy that can swallow your time and sanity. At the same time, the black hole of Kennedy's assassination exercises a gravitational pull on the American imagination that cannot be ignored.

In the 44 years since the assassination, there have been three critical milestones in the effort to explain this devastating crime. The first story was the report of the Warren Commission, the official government body assigned to investigate the shooting. In September 1964, the Commission concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald, described as a pro-Castro Marxist, fired three shots at the presidential motorcade and killed Kennedy for reasons known only to him. They held that Oswald acted alone and unaided, and did not pay attention to the protests raised upon his arrest that he was "a patsy." He was shot to death, while in police custody, two days after his arrest by Jack Ruby, a Dallas nightclub owner who had ties to organized crime that the Commission chose not to share with the American people.

Within a week, 62 percent of respondents to a University of Chicago poll rejected the notion that Oswald had acted alone. Contrary to mainstream media mythology JFK conspiratorial suspicions were not whipped up years after the fact by cranks and

fantasists. Those suspicions arose immediately, they spanned the political spectrum and they percolated in the Washington political elite. Both Robert Kennedy and Jackie Kennedy believed that JFK was the victim of a major domestic conspiracy. JFK's successor, Lyndon Johnson, suspected that the assassination resulted from the struggle for power in Cuba. Richard Nixon hounded the CIA for files on "the whole Bay of Pigs thing," which his aides understood to mean Kennedy's assassination.

The second official story came in 1979. After lengthy hearings, the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) concluded Kennedy had been killed by Oswald and co-conspirators who could not be identified. By then popular skepticism about the government's "lone nut" scenario was souring into cynicism. When the HSCA's final report declared that Kennedy had been killed in a conspiracy, TV talk show host Johnny Carson said he was shocked. "Next thing you know," Carson gibed, "they'll be telling us Hitler started World War II."

Then came Oliver Stone. His box office smash *JFK*, released in 1991, offered an all-too-persuasive depiction of the murder of America's liberal 35th president as a virtual coup d'etat orchestrated at the highest levels of the Pentagon and the CIA. Stone endured much abuse at the hands of the Washington press corps for taking liberties with the historical record in his well-researched screenplay. The director delivered an incisive retort: If the government had nothing to hide on JFK's assassination, why was it hiding so many millions of pages of documents on the subject?

Congress was shamed into approving the John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act. The 1992 law mandated the "immediate" release of all government documents related to Kennedy's murder. Between 1994 and 1998, a civilian review panel oversaw the declassification of millions of pages of classified JFK records. Stone's cinematic agitation shook loose a library of records that conventional journalism never would have captured. Many of the most important new documents can be seen on the best JFK website, www.maryferrell.org.

Neither individually nor together do these documents dramatically change our understanding of November 22, 1963. But they do enlighten the evidence, and pose important questions. First, the documents show that a handful of top CIA officials had far greater knowledge of Oswald in the weeks before Kennedy was killed than

they ever let on, and at least one of these operatives remained quiet about what he knew to perhaps a criminal extent. Second, the scientific evidence supporting the lone gunman theory has weakened.

I. An Intelligence Failure

After the ordeal of September 11, the American people became acquainted with the fine Washington phrase "intelligence failure." In a studiously neutral way, the term encompasses the failures of the Clinton and Bush White Houses and of the national security agencies to anticipate and/or prevent the catastrophic attacks. The concept of "intelligence failure" can be usefully applied to the overly polemicized JFK story. It captures a wider historical perspective on the Dallas ambush than the legal lens of "conspiracy." It reveals a more objective reality than the psychological lens of the "lone nut."

Perhaps the single most intriguing story to emerge from the JFK files concerns a career CIA officer named George Joannides. He died in 1990 at age 67, taking his JFK secrets to the grave in suburban Washington. His role in the events leading up to Kennedy's death and its confused investigatory aftermath goes utterly unmentioned in the vast literature of JFK's assassination. Vincent Bugliosi's otherwise impressive 1,600 page book debunking every JFK conspiracy theory known to man mentions him only in an inaccurate footnote. In 1998, the Agency declassified a handful of annual personnel evaluations that revealed Joannides was involved in the JFK assassination story, both before and after the event.

In November 1963, Joannides was serving as the chief of psychological warfare operations in the CIA's Miami station. The purpose of psychological warfare, as authorized by U.S. policymakers, was to confuse and confound the government of Fidel Castro, so to hasten its replacement by a government more congenial to Washington. The first revelation was that Joannides had agents in a leading Cuban student exile group, an operation code-named AMSPELL in CIA files. These agents had a series of close encounters with Oswald three months before JFK was killed.

The second revelation was that the CIA's Miami assets helped shape the public's understanding of Kennedy's assassination by identifying the suspected assassin as a Castro supporter right from the start.

The third revelation, the one that is most shocking, is that when Congress reopened the JFK probe in 1978, Joannides served as the CIA's liaison to the investigators. His job was to provide files and information to the House Select Committee on Assassinations. But far from being a helpful source and conduit, Joannides stonewalled. He did not disclose his role in the events of 1963, even when asked direct questions about the AMSPELL operation he handled.

When the story of the Joannides file emerged, former HSCA chief counsel G. Robert Blakey was stunned by the audacity of Joannides's deception. Blakey, a former federal prosecutor, thought the Agency had cooperated with Congress's effort to look into JFK's murder. Twenty-three years later he learned that the CIA bureaucrat ostensibly assisting his staff was actually a material witness in the investigation. "The Agency set me up," reported the *Washington Post*.

Blakey, now a law professor at Notre Dame, says Joannides's actions were "little short of outrageous. You could make a prima facie case that it amounted to obstruction of Congress, which is a felony."

Blakey has long argued that organized crime figures orchestrated Kennedy's assassination. The revelation of Joannides's unknown role has given him second thoughts about the CIA's credibility.

"You can't really infer from the Joannides story that they [the CIA] did it," he says. "Maybe he was hiding something that is not complicitous in a plot but merely embarrassing. It certainly undermines everything that they have said about JFK's assassination."

"We are going to kill Castro"

In July 1963, George Efythron Joannides turned 41 years old. He was a 10-year veteran of the clandestine service who presented himself as a lawyer for the Defense Department. He dressed well, spoke several languages and enjoyed the confidence of

CIA Deputy Director Richard Helms. In his cables, he was identified as "Walter Newby." To his Cuban friends in Miami he was "Howard" or "Mr. Howard."

Joannides's chief job responsibility in 1963 was handling AMSPELL, a program of CIA support for the *Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil*, also known as the Cuban Student Directorate. By 1962, the DRE was perhaps the single biggest and most active organization opposing Fidel Castro's regime. In Miami, Joannides was giving the leaders of the group up to \$25,000 a month in cash for what he described as "intelligence collection" and "propaganda."

In August 1963, the DRE's New Orleans chapter had taken a vocal and very public interest in an itinerant ex-Marine named Lee Harvey Oswald because of his blatantly pro-Castro politicking. Oswald was 23 years old, an erratic but street-smart schemer who knew how to make his way in the world. He lived in the Soviet Union for a couple of years and was married to a Russian woman, the former Marina Prusakova. He wrote letters to left-wing political organizations and drifted from job to job. And then in early August 1963 he attempted to infiltrate the DRE.

Oswald approached Carlos Bringuier, a 29-year-old lawyer who served as the group's spokesman in the Crescent City. Oswald offered to help train DRE commandos to fight the communist government in Cuba. A few days later, when the DRE boys saw him on a street corner passing out pamphlets for the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC), a notoriously pro-Castro group, they picked a fight with him.

Bringuier took an interest in Oswald. He directed a DRE member to go to Oswald's house and pose as a Castro supporter to learn more about his background. Bringuier also debated Oswald on a local radio program, and sent a tape of the debate to DRE's Miami headquarters. He also sent one of Oswald's FPCC pamphlets. Bringuier went so far as to issue a press release on Oswald, calling for a congressional investigation of the then-obscure ex-Marine. "Write to your congressman for a full investigation on Mr. Lee H. Oswald, a confessed 'Marxist,'" the DRE spokesman wrote on August 21, 1963.

Did George Joannides of the CIA ignore Bringuier's prescient and potentially life-saving call for investigating Oswald? Bringuier, now retired and living in Texas, refused to be interviewed for this article. He said he never received money from the CIA and said he did not know Joannides or "Howard." But other DRE members were more forthcoming.

"He definitely knew about what we we're doing with Oswald," says Isidro Borja, a Miami businessman who was active in the DRE in 1963. "That was what he was giving us the money for -- for information we had."

To get a flavor of the dangerous psychological warfare that George Joannides was waging at that time take a look at the cover of *See*, a men's magazine from the fall of 1963. "The CIA Needs Men -- Can You Qualify?" asked one headline. Next to this recruitment pitch was a poster, "Wanted Dead or Alive: Fidel Castro for Crimes Against Humanity." The article inside, bearing a byline of a DRE member, was headlined "We are going to kill Castro." In the article, the group announced it was offering a \$10 million reward "for the death of the Cuban tyrant."

The numbers were hyperbolic but the story was no joke. The article presented an extensive and flattering portrait of the DRE's underground network in Cuba. It offered convincing details about how the group tracked Castro's movements through the streets of Havana. It closed with a pitch for men with military training able "to kill on order."

Whether Oswald ever read this recruiting pitch is unknown. What is certain is that the CIA's campaign of assassination had gotten inside Castro's head. The same week that See hit the newsstands in Miami, the canny Cuban leader pulled aside an Associated Press reporter at a diplomatic reception in Havana. He said that he knew the CIA was plotting to kill him or his brother. "We are prepared to...answer in kind," the Cuban leader said. If American plots continued, he added, "United States leaders would be in danger...they themselves will not be safe."

As the newly released CIA files show, Joannides asked the DRE leaders for an explanation of the provocative offer issued in *See*. Lamely, they said they couldn't have published the ad because they didn't have \$10 million. Joannides put this explanation into the AMSPELL file and let the matter drop. He did not discipline the DRE for flaunting its CIA connections. Nor did he reduce their funding despite the obvious insecure behavior. In practical terms, Joannides sanctioned the DRE's appeal for political gunmen. It was his job to get inside Castro's head. And he was good at it.

"The effect was electric"

It is possible that Joannides was not presented with Oswald's name prior to the assassination, but the latest declassified records confirm that a half dozen other top CIA

officials were aware of the itinerant ex-Marine and interested in his movements. In September 1963, a month after confronting Joannides's assets in New Orleans, Oswald went to Mexico City and visited the Cuban consulate, seeking a visa. He passed through a CIA surveillance program code-named LIERODE. He then visited the Soviet Embassy where his voice was picked up by a telephonic wiretapping program known as LIENVOY. (These recordings of Oswald, seized from the home office safe of Mexico City station chief Win Scott, were hidden from investigators and later destroyed.) Then, in November, after he returned to Dallas, Oswald wrote a letter to the Soviet Embassy in Washington about his contacts with the Cubans and Soviets in Mexico. The letter was opened by the FBI who shared it with the CIA's counterintelligence staff which had responsibility for tracking Soviet defectors.

John Newman, an Army intelligence analyst turned historian, was the first to parse the new records in his 1995 book *Oswald and the CIA*. "What we've learned since Stone's movie is that the CIA's interest in Oswald was a lot deeper than they have ever acknowledged," Newman wrote. "As Oswald made his way toward Dallas, the reporting about him was channeled into a file controlled by an office in the counterintelligence staff called the Special Investigations Group."

The SIG, as it was known, was the operational office of James Angleton, the first chief of counterintelligence for the CIA, a legendary controversial figure whose exploits inspired the movie *The Good Shepherd*. Some thought him a charming and brilliant theorist; others thought him a bully and a paranoid menace. "When Oswald shows up in Mexico City," Newman explains, "his file goes over to the Western Hemisphere division which reviews it and sends out a cable to the State Department and other agencies that is -- how can I put it? -- very selective."

This cable, dated October 10, 1963, is no smoking gun. But is one of the key new documents in the JFK paper trail whose significance is not appreciated by the mainstream media or the furious partisans of the JFK chat groups. The cable, not fully declassified until 2002, was sent after a CIA surveillance microphone picked up Oswald's name during his conversations with the Cubans and Russians in Mexico City. "Who was Oswald?" station chief Scott asked headquarters. "We don't know," replied Langley in the cable. The "latest HDQS info," dated May 1962, was that Oswald was returning from the Soviet Union and had matured politically. In fact, that was not the CIA's latest information, as one of Angleton's aides admitted to the *Washington Post* in

1995. Acknowledging that she helped draft this cable, this aide said in a tape-recorded interview: "I'm signing off on something I know isn't true." What the cable's authors deliberately omitted, among other things, was mention of a September 1963 FBI report on Oswald's encounters with the DRE in New Orleans.

The most senior official to sign off on the inaccurate cable was Tom Karamessines, trusted assistant to CIA Deputy Director Helms. If Helms was a master spy, the man who kept the secrets, Karamessines was the dependable sidekick who helped him do it. Karamessines was also the patron of his fellow Greek American, Miami field man George Joannides.

The interest of these senior officials does not necessarily imply anything more sinister than a bureaucracy's natural tendency to cover its ass. The CIA had ample reason to be monitoring Oswald in late 1963. He publicly supported the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, a pro-Castro group, formally classified as a "subversive" organization by U.S. national security agencies. He attempted to travel to Cuba via Mexico, a signal of intent to violate U.S. law. Naturally, the Agency was paying attention. But for all this interest, no one thought to discuss Oswald with the Secret Service or the Dallas police. Little wonder that when the name of the suspect in the assassination was first heard at CIA headquarters in Langley, "the effect was electric," as one agency official put it, employing a phrase that was censored from public view for more than three decades.

What is clear is that Oswald was the person in whom the agency had taken considerable interest -- and whose interest it took considerable pains to cover up.

II. CSI Dallas

There have also been interesting developments from the crime scene, perhaps the most important of which may seem like a no-brainer: The famous 26-second Zapruder home movie of JFK's murder contains original undoctored photographic imagery of the assassination. This authentication was deemed necessary by the Assassination Records Review Board, created by Congress to oversee the release of JFK records, because a vocal faction of JFK conspiracy theorists in the 1990s started claiming that the film had been surreptitiously altered to hide evidence of a conspiracy. (Their theory refuted, these conspiracy theorists abandoned the JFK field for greener pastures of 9/11 speculation.) However, this isn't to say that there aren't some legitimate and uncomfortable questions about assassination-related photographs.

"The only caution I have in the photographic record concerns the JFK autopsy material," says Richard Trask, a photo archivist in Danvers, Massachusetts who has the world's biggest collection of JFK assassination imagery, and has written two books on the subject. "That is an area that always makes me pause. What was happening during the autopsy if there was a cover-up or just incompetence, I don't know. It is the only area of the JFK story that I have some doubts about."

As well he should. The JFK medical evidence is worse than a mess -- it is a documented national scandal that awaits decent news coverage. The new evidence shows beyond a reasonable doubt that the photographic record of Kennedy's autopsy has been tampered with by persons unknown. The sworn testimony and records developed by the Assassination Records Review Board in the late 1990s allow no other conclusion.

Among the key post-Stone revelations in the JFK medical evidence:

- Autopsy photographs of Kennedy's body are missing from government archives, according to sworn testimony from doctors and medical technicians involved in the autopsy. The origins of other autopsy photos in the collection cannot be determined.
- Two FBI agents who took notes during the autopsy gave detailed sworn testimonies rejecting the so-called single bullet theory which girds the official story that Oswald alone killed Kennedy.
- Dr. James Humes, the chief pathologist at JFK's autopsy, admitted under oath that he destroyed a first draft of his autopsy report. Humes had previously only admitted to destroying his original notes.

Dr. Gary Aguilar, a San Francisco ophthalmologist who has written about the autopsy, is emphatic. "The medical evidence is really stark evidence of a cover-up in my view," he says. "The story is so extraordinary that it is hard for some people, especially in mainstream media organizations, to come to grips with it. There's just no doubt that there were very strange things going on around the president's body that weekend."

Sounds like a paranoid fantasy? More than a few of the people who participated in the JFK autopsy have sworn to it.

Sandra Kay Spencer was a technician at the Navy's photographic laboratory in Washington. She developed the JFK autopsy photos on the weekend after Kennedy's

death. She kept her oath of secrecy for 34 years. When she spoke to the ARRB in 1997, Spencer displayed the efficiency of a career military woman. She was well prepared with a sharp memory for the details of her involvement in the amazing events of November 22-24, 1963. Her testimony, after reviewing all the JFK autopsy photographs in the National Archives, was unequivocal. "The views [of JFK's body] we produced at the [Naval] Photographic Center are not included [in the current autopsy collection]," she said. "Between those photographs and the ones we did, there had to be some massive cosmetic things done to the President's body."

FBI agent Francis O'Neill was present during the autopsy and took notes. In 1997, he also viewed the photographs. Referring to an autopsy photograph showing the wound in the back of Kennedy's head, O'Neill said, "This looks like it's been doctored in some way. I specifically do not recall those -- I mean, being that clean or that fixed up. To me, it looks like these pictures have been. . . . It would appear to me that there was a -- more of a massive wound. . ." O'Neill emphasized he was not saying the autopsy photographs themselves had been doctored but that the wounds themselves had been cleaned up before the photograph was taken.

James Sibert, another FBI agent present at the autopsy, had a similar reaction to the photos. "I don't recall anything like this at all during the autopsy," he said under oath. "There was much -- well, the wound was more pronounced. And it looks like it could have been reconstructed or something, as compared with what my recollection was."

What both men were objecting to was the lack of a big hole in the back of JFK's head which would be somewhat indicative of a so-called blowout wound caused by a shot from the front.

The retired FBI agents were especially scathing about the single bullet theory positing that one bullet caused seven non-fatal wounds in Kennedy and [Texas] Governor Connally and emerged largely undamaged on a hospital stretcher.

They took notes on the autopsy as Dr. Humes examined Kennedy's body. Both said the autopsies concluded the bullet that hit Kennedy in his back had not transited his body. But chief pathologist Humes took another view in his autopsy report, writing that the bullet had emerged from Kennedy's throat and gone on to strike Governor Connally. But Humes's credibility is undermined by the ARRB's discovery that he destroyed not only

his notes, but also his first draft of the autopsy report without ever revealing its contents or even existence.

Sibert later told a JFK researcher of the single bullet theory: "It's magic, not medicine."

The Single Bullet Theory Revisited

The single bullet theory, of course, was the scenario developed in 1964 by Arlen Specter, a young lawyer on the Warren Commission and now a Republican senator from Pennsylvania. Originally, the FBI said that three shots had been fired at Kennedy's motorcade. The first supposedly hit President Kennedy in the back but did not penetrate too deeply. The second, which hit Governor John Connally in the back, exited his chest, punctured his wrist and wound up in his thigh. The third shot hit Kennedy in the head. The Warren Commission staff accepted this three-shot scenario until a staff lawyer, Arlen Specter, began looking frame by frame at the home movie from the crime scene made by Dallas dressmaker Abraham Zapruder. Selected frames from the film were published by *Life* magazine but the movie was not broadcast, not the least because it showed the wounding of President Kennedy by a first shot in the back followed by the wounding of Governor Connally about 1.1 seconds later. It was impossible for Oswald to have fired his Mannlicher-Carcano bolt action rifle twice in 1.1 seconds. The photography from the crime scene indicated a second gunman -- a finding that the entire weight of the federal government from the president to the director of the FBI had already rejected.

Specter solved the problem by arguing that one bullet had caused all the non-fatal wounds to both JFK and Connally. This scenario has been much mocked over the years, though Specter has said, "the single bullet theory has become the single bullet fact."

Specter's theory remains the keystone on which the edifice of Oswald's sole guilt rests. For if one bullet did not cause all of Kennedy's and Connally's wounds, the only explanation of their injuries is that they were caused by two gunmen and some kind of conspiracy.

The latest study of JFK ballistic evidence was conducted by Patrick Grant and Erik Randich and published in 2006 in the *Journal of Forensic Sciences*. Grant, the deputy director of the Forensic Science Center at Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, is fond of saying, "Forensic science is the application of technological displays that can narrow the

limits of plausible conjecture." Grant and Randich's article raises the very real question of whether the single bullet theory is still within the limits of plausible conjecture.

The new article is an outgrowth of a scientific paper Randich published with William Tobin in 2002 which casts doubt on the FBI's technique known as bullet-lead analysis. This technique is based on the assumption that each batch of lead used to make the core of bullets has a unique chemical "fingerprint" that can be used to match it with other bullets. Thus bullet lead found at the scene of a shooting could be matched to bullets found in a suspect's gun and prove complicity in gun violence. But Randich's study of bullet manufacturing found that batches of lead are not chemically unique, and bullets from the same box could have very different chemical signatures. His work helped persuade the FBI in 2005 to stop using bullet-lead analysis in criminal prosecution.

Says Grant: "We applied the same thinking to the JFK bullet fragments that had been analyzed by a man named Vincent Guinn [on behalf of the HSCA] back in the 1970s. I knew Guinn because I took his forensic science course when I was in graduate school and it helped inspire my interest in the subject."

Guinn, now dead, had concluded that the level of a trace element called antimony in five bullet fragments taken from the JFK crime scene fell into two distinct groups chemically. Given their chemical similarity, the handful of fragments taken from Kennedy's head, Connally's body and the front seat of the limousine could have come from two -- and only two -- bullets. From 1978 to 2006, Guinn's findings heartened defenders of the Warren Commission which found that Kennedy and Connally had been hit by only two bullets.

Randich and Grant's paper found that Guinn's analysis was fatally flawed. He had assumed the chemical composition of bullet lead is consistent throughout a given bullet, a finding that Randich's metallurgical analysis refuted. Guinn also underestimated the margin of error in his measurement of antimony and wrongly discounted contradictory evidence, they said. Grant and Randich concluded that their findings "considerably weaken support for the single bullet theory."

Acoustic Hell

"Can some scattered noises in a crowded outdoor setting on a day in 1963 be recovered from an old damaged Dictaphone belt, its grooves 75 microns wide, five microns deep?"

asks novelist Don DeLillo in a new introduction to *Libra*, his classic JFK novel. "We want to believe they can.... We want to believe we are dealing with science, not metaphysics."

DeLillo is talking about Dictabelt #10, a homely loop of blue plastic that now resides in the basement of the National Archives building in College Park, Maryland. It is a sound recording made by a dictation machine that was located in the radio room of the Dallas Police Department on November 22, 1963.

This souvenir of tragedy would take a two-hour season finale episode of a *CSI* show to sort out. It is the heart of one of the trickiest issues in JFK forensic science.

In the 1970s, some of America's top acoustic scientists studied the recording and the Dallas crime scene and asserted as fact that it contains sound impulses created by the series of gunshots fired at the presidential motorcade. In other words, this acoustic artifact is a kind of soundtrack for Abraham Zapruder's silent home movie. As the film in Zapruder's eight-millimeter camera captured the sight of gunfire hitting the presidential motorcade, this Dictabelt supposedly captured the sounds of the gunshots.

"If it's true that the sound of gunfire is captured on the recording, then it is conclusive evidence," says Paul Hoch, one of the most respected JFK researchers. "There was a conspiracy."

The tape does *not* contain the sound of gunfire, said five eminent scientists, in the British forensic journal, *Science & Justice*, in 2005. In 21 pages of closely argued scientific reasoning, physicist Richard Garwin and four colleagues said a careful analysis of the alleged gun shot sounds on Dictabelt #10 shows that they occurred approximately one minute after Kennedy was killed. They were not gunshots at all. Garwin and his colleagues could not say what created the sound impulses heard on Dictabelt #10.

Their article was a response to a 2001 article in *Science & Justice* which asserted the reverse: that the Dictabelt certainly captured the sounds of gunshots -- and that one of the shots came from the grassy knoll. That article, written by Don Thomas, an insect specialist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, reviewed the findings of acoustic scientists retained by the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1978. They concluded that the tape captured sound impulses created by four gunshots, three from the book depository behind Kennedy's limousine and one from the so-called grassy knoll

in front of the motorcade. With some important caveats, Thomas says the HSCA got it right.

So who's right? If you don't care to choose your science on the basis of whether it confirms your pre-existing views on Kennedy's murder, you have to consider the two slightly different arguments going on here.

To oversimplify slightly, Garwin and co. focus on the timing of the supposed shots observed on Dictabelt #10, while Thomas focuses on the nature of the sound impulses found on the recording. On these issues, the dueling scientists reach different conclusions that are logical -- and open to legitimate question.

In my subjective view, Garwin and co. have posed a big problem for Thomas but not so big as to exclude a gun shot from the grassy knoll beyond the limits of plausible conjecture.

After all, we already have the photographic evidence from the Zapruder film showing Kennedy hit by a bullet that snapped his head backwards and drove him sideways into the arms of his wife. To say that a bullet fired from the knoll would have pushed Kennedy backward is well within the limits of plausible conjecture, regardless of what you think about the acoustic evidence. If FBI agents Sibert and O'Neill saw a more massive head wound than what's shown in the autopsy photographs, that too might be more evidence of a shot from the front.

"Hold Everything Secure"

"Don has got to confront a basic problem," says Michael O'Dell, one of the leading experts on the JFK acoustics evidence. "How can a 'shot' be fired from the grassy knoll at the same moment that police are responding to the call 'hold everything secure'? It can't."

O'Dell is an unobtrusively brilliant man who lives with his wife in Fresno, California. By day, he runs the technology department of an insurance company. O'Dell is not one of those people drawn to the assassination by interest in the Kennedys or true crime stories or political conspiracies or the

Mafia or anything like that -- and that is a great strength of his work. He does not embody the paranoid style in American politics. He embodies the empirical style sorely lacking in most JFK coverage. His methods are detached, analytical, polite and methodical. His e-mail exchanges with Thomas are civil.

He plays the tape of the shots on his desktop computer. You cannot actually hear the shots amidst the drone of engines and snippets of conversation between various Dallas cops. The screen displays the wave forms of the shots that killed Kennedy. Or not. The scratchy sound of the tape, the spiky green lines, made me think of how narrowly scientific methods captured the reality of a president blasted in the head by a bullet and dying in his wife's arms.

O'Dell focuses on the phenomenon known as "cross talk." First, he explains how the Dallas Police Department (DPD) communications system worked. The DPD operated two radio channels. Channel I was for normal police radio traffic and Channel II was assigned for the use of the presidential motorcade. Each channel was recorded by a different device in the DPD radio room. Channel I was recorded on a Dictabelt and Channel II on a Gray Audograph machine. Both machines worked by engraving a track into a plastic medium. The Dictabelt used a rotating cylinder and the Audograph used a flat disk, similar to a phonograph record. The sounds on the two channels are not synchronized because Channel I was recorded constantly while Channel II was voice-activated.

"Crosstalk occurred when sounds from one channel were picked up by a microphone tuned to the other channel," he explained.

An accident of history created the whole controversy. A DPD motorcyclist somewhere in Dallas "had a defective microphone button that caused it to continuously transmit over a five-minute period during which the assassination took place." This accidental transmission began at 12:28 that day, about two minutes before the assassination.

"If this motorcycle had been part of the motorcade," as one dispatcher thought, "it might" -- emphasize might -- "have picked up sounds of the

gunshots" and transmitted them to headquarters where they would have been recorded on Channel I. "If true, those sounds could be used to determine how many shots were fired, their timing, and using echo location methods, where the shots came from."

When Congress reopened the JFK case in 1976, congressional investigators asked the best-known acoustic scientist in the country, James E. Barger, to analyze them. He arranged a series of test shots in Dealey Plaza and used recordings of these shots to compare with signals on the DPD recordings. He found a series of sound impulses that he thought might be gunfire. The sequence was 10 seconds long and it occurred almost exactly two minutes into the motorcycle segment, at about 12:30. The sequence contained five or six impulse patterns which he thought might be gunshots.

Applying his techniques of echo correlation, Barger concluded that Channel I contained five impulses probably caused by the gunshots, with a 50 percent probability that one shot came from the grassy knoll in front of the president. The HSCA asked two other nationally known acoustic scientists, Mark Weiss and Ernest Aschkenasy, to examine Barger's data, focusing on the alleged from the grassy knoll. They found that the pattern of impulses closely matched the pattern from the Dictabelt. They concluded there was a 95 percent probability of a shot from the grassy knoll.

This finding confirmed what a substantial minority of the people at the crime scene thought. The book reviewers don't seem to know it but at the very least a significant minority of eyewitnesses thought at least one gun shot came from in front of JFK's motorcade. One of the more judicious surveys of statements given by people in the crowd in the vicinity of the motorcade found that 40 out of 103 bystanders said that at least some of the gunfire came from behind a stockade fence atop the knoll. The tally was done by John McAdams, a Marquette University professor who runs a reliable website that debunks JFK conspiracy theories.

One of the people who thought a shot might have come from the knoll was Dallas County Sheriff Bill Decker, who was riding in the presidential motorcade. His voice can be heard on Dallas Police Department recordings,

shouting, "Get your men up there" -- meaning the area around the stockade fence -- "and hold everything secure." This certainly corresponds to what Bill Newman said. In 1963, he was a 22-year-old apprentice electrician standing with his wife and two children waving at the Kennedys. He was about 20 feet away from Kennedy when the fatal bullet hit. Today, Bill Newman is a 65-year-old retired electrician and grandfather and he's still saying the same thing. "I think the shot came from behind me," he told me, "because of the way Kennedy was thrown backward."

The timing of the alleged shots on Dictabelt #10 was first questioned by an alert JFK assassination researcher named Steve Barber. When the Dallas Police Department recordings first surfaced in the late 1970s, *Gallery* magazine recorded them onto acetate disks inserted into every copy of the July 1979 issue. Barber slapped his on a turntable and listened to the passage when the gunshots supposedly occurred. He heard faint traces of a voice that was identified as that of Dallas County Sheriff Bill Decker who was traveling with the motorcade in front of the presidential limousine. Decker could be heard ordering his men to go to the railroad yard behind the stockade fence on the knoll. "Hold everything secure until we can get homicide investigators up there," he shouted.

As O'Dell puts it: "The impulses Don says are shots cannot possibly be from the sound of gunfire because they occurred at a point on the tape that is simultaneous to police officers already reacting to the gunfire."

The Order of the Data

Don Thomas is not shaken. He still believes in his 2001 article and its politically loaded conclusion: that Dictabelt #10 captures the sound of a muzzle blast of a gun fired at Kennedy's limousine from the grassy knoll.

"We don't know exactly how the 'hold everything secure' transmission was deposited on the Channel I," he explains. "But we do know there are a lot of skips and jumps caused by the stylus of the dictagraph bouncing out of the groove. You also have to remember the two channels are not synchronized: Channel I is recording constantly from the open microphone on the

motorcycle while Channel II is voice activated." This makes determining the timing of all sounds on the recording difficult, if not impossible.

Thomas thinks his critics are straining. "Think about the reality of what they're saying," he says. "They say the grassy knoll shot identified on the recordings is found at the exact moment that Assistant Chief Decker is saying, 'Hold everything secure until we can get homicide investigators up there.' So that must not be the sound of a gunshot. Decker is telling his men, get your ass up on the knoll and see what happened. And these guys are citing that as proof there was no shot from the knoll."

Thomas admits he cannot say exactly how the "hold everything secure" came to be recorded almost simultaneously with the alleged gunshots, but he says Garwin's paper does not change his mind. James Barger, still one of the nation's top acoustic scientists, stands by his original findings. "They're talking about corroborative evidence," he says of his critics. "I'm talking about core evidence. I'm trying to explain the five impulses that are on the Dictabelt. We've spent a lot of time debating the timing issues and we'll probably spend a lot more. What they're not talking about is the diabolical coincidence that those impulses matched Barger's recreation both in time and space."

Because the sound matches that Barger found in his Dealey Plaza sound experiment followed a certain pattern, there is an "order of the data" argument that Thomas believes is his trump card. Here's how he puts it in a recent online essay for www.maryferrell.org. (Overview and History of the Acoustical Evidence in the Kennedy Assassination Case) http://www.maryferrell.org/wiki/index.php/Essay_-_Acoustics_Overview_and_History

"The first suspect sound on the DPD recording matched to a test shot that was recorded on a test microphone on Houston Street near the intersection with Elm Street," Thomas writes. "The very next suspect sound on the Dictabelt matched to a test shot recorded at the very next microphone, eighteen feet to the north on Houston Street. The third suspect sound matched to a test shot recorded on a microphone in the intersection of Houston and Elm Street. The fourth sound matched to a test shot recorded

on a microphone on Elm Street, and the fifth suspect sound matched to a test shot recorded on the next microphone to the west."

In other words, he says, "the chronological order of the suspect sounds had matched to the topological order of the microphones that produced matches to the test shots. To a scientist this sort of orderliness is very significant because there are 125 ways to sequence five events, only one of which is 1-2-3-4-5."

Not only are the matches precisely in the order that would be expected of a motorcycle traveling with the motorcade, Thomas notes, "the spacing on the sounds on the Dictabelt matched the spacing of the test microphones in Dealey Plaza. The first three suspect sounds are each separated by a little more than a second. The first and second are 1.6 seconds apart, while the second and third are 1.1 seconds apart. Then there is a 4.8 second gap before the fourth putative shot which is only a fraction of a second (7/10ths of a second) before the final suspect sound."

Compare those time differences with evidence of gunshots on the Zapruder film, Thomas says. "The fatal shot... is gruesomely obvious at frame 313" of the film. "The only other" visible "wounding... occurs between frames 234 to 250 during which Governor Connally" is clearly in pain. A frame-by-frame analysis of the film, by Failure Analysis Associates, a firm contracted by the American Bar Association in 1992, "discovered that the lapel of the governor's jacket flapped outwards at frame 224. Because the governor did sustain a chest wound caused by a bullet which exited through the front of the jacket," the "lapel flap" supports the idea that a bullet wounded Connally at that moment.

The time between the two wounds is easily calculated. The shot at frame 224 was followed by the shot 89 frames later at frame 313, Thomas reports. "Because Zapruder's camera had a film speed of 18.3 frames per second, the separation between two impacts was 89 divided by 18.3 which equals 4.8 seconds."

"This," writes Thomas, "exactly matches the separation on the police tape between the acoustically identified grassy knoll shot and the immediately previous acoustically identified shot from the Book Depository: 4.8 seconds."

In other words, the sound impulses left by the gunshots correspond in their timing to the sight of the shots striking Kennedy and then Connally in the Zapruder film. Therefore, Thomas says, Dictabelt #10 is the virtual soundtrack to the Zapruder film.

Hogwash, says Richard Garwin in a telephone interview. He says that the impulses that Barger and Thomas say are gunshots were recorded simultaneously with Decker's command, recorded on DPD channel I, to "hold everything secure." As for what caused the sound impulses attributed to gunshots, Garwin says he likes a theory now being tested by Michael O'Dell: that the very words "hold everything secure" created those impulses. In a follow-up interview, O'Dell said that he had not been able to confirm this hypothesis, but said such proof is not really necessary to prove his point. "To claim the impulse pattern is unrelated to the speech sound, you would have to claim that the speech is audible without having its own effect on the pattern," he said. "That is impossible."

III. "The perfect man for the job"

Now let us put the crime scene in a larger context, the context of CIA intelligence gathering and psychological warfare operations in late 1963. Let us return now to the man who didn't talk.

What was George Joannides's reaction to Oswald's appearance at the Dallas scene?

"We called him right away," says Tony Lanuza, a Miami businessman who was active in Cuban politics in 1963. He served as the coordinator for the far-flung delegations of the Cuban Student Directorate. When he and his friends heard that a man named Oswald had been arrested for killing Kennedy, Lanuza immediately recalled the confrontations between Carlos Bringuier and the obnoxious interloper from the Fair Play for Cuba Committee the previous August. They rushed to the Directorate's headquarters in South Miami, where

someone called their CIA contact to inform him the group had evidence about the communistic ways of Kennedy's killer.

Joannides's first impulse was to consult with his superiors, two months before the DRE was recruiting assassins to kill Castro. What did they know about Oswald was one question that an intelligence officer might want answered.

"He told us to wait an hour," Lanuza recalls. "He had to consult with Washington."

The DRE started calling reporters anyway with the scoop on Kennedy's killer. He was a communist and a Castro supporter. A headline in the DRE's newspaper the next day described Oswald and Castro as "the presumed assassins." When Joannides called back, he told them to take their evidence to the FBI.

The CIA man apparently did not investigate Oswald's Cuban contacts. No former DRE leader can recall any conversations with Joannides about the accused assassin. Joannides did not account for the contacts between the AMSPELL network and the accused assassin, at least not according to the available CIA records. His role as sponsor of Oswald's Cuban antagonists was not disclosed to the Warren Commission. He preserved the U.S. government's ability to "plausibly deny" any connection to the Cuban students who publicized Oswald's pro-Castro ways.

All the while, the DRE leaders continued to feed JFK information to Joannides. The group's records from early 1964 include several memos to CIA contact "Howard" about Jack Ruby's Cuban connections. From New Orleans, Carlos Bringuier sent a report about the ongoing Warren Commission investigation there. That too was passed to Joannides.

On April 1, 1964, the Warren Commission sent Carlos Bringuier a letter informing him that a commission staff would be contacting him soon about taking his testimony about the DRE and Oswald. According to a CIA travel form made public in 2004, Joannides, the DRE's case officer and an attorney, traveled from Miami to New Orleans that same day for unknown reasons.

For the rest of his career, Joannides would be commended for his actions around events related to the Kennedy assassination.

In May 1964, his bosses praised him as a "hard-working, dedicated and effective officer" with a flair for political action operations. His annual job evaluation made no mention of the fact that his AMSPELL assets had tried and failed to call attention to the man who apparently killed Kennedy or that his young friends in the DRE were using agency funds to allege that Oswald acted at Castro's behest. Joannides received the highest possible marks for his service in 1963.

He went on to serve in Athens, Saigon and CIA headquarters. In 1979, after Joannides stonewalled congressional investigators about his knowledge of Oswald he received praise from CIA director Stansfield Turner and other top agency officials. "He was the perfect man for the job," said one.

Two years ago, the CIA acknowledged in a court filing that Joannides had received an even greater honor upon retirement. In March 1981, he received the Career Intelligence Medal, bestowed for "career contributions" to the Agency.

Why Joannides was honored after his Oswald cover-up remains a secret -- for reasons of "national security." In September 2006 federal judge Richard Leon upheld the CIA's arguments in a Freedom of Information lawsuit that it did not have to release the JFK material in Joannides's file. The National Archives then requested the Joannides files from the Agency earlier this year. As of late October 2007, the CIA was still resisting disclosure.

Narrowing the Limits

So what can one safely and reliably conclude about the JFK story today?

On the crime scene evidence, reasonable people will differ. To me, the single bullet theory, the forensic linchpin of all arguments for Oswald's sole guilt, has lost scientific validity in the past decade via both Pat Grant and Erik Randich's ballistics analysis and via the sworn testimony of FBI agents Sibert and O'Neill.

The JFK medical evidence is much less trustworthy than was known a decade ago. Photographs have been culled from the collection. Multiple new witnesses say independently and under oath that Kennedy's body and wounds were cleaned up before being photographed for the record. Any indictment of Oswald based on the medical evidence of Kennedy's wounds has been undermined.

The acoustic evidence remains in dispute. In my view, it has not been disqualified until an alternative explanation for the order in the data is confirmed.

The new JFK forensic science, in short, has narrowed the limits of plausible conjecture by eliminating the single bullet theory as an explanation of Kennedy and Connally's wounds and by *not* eliminating the possibility that the fatal shot was fired from the grassy knoll.

The best minds in forensic science might be able to clarify things, Pat Grant told me in an e-mail following our interview. Grant admitted that he and probably most other experts in the most advanced forensic techniques are not up to date on the acoustic evidence and other JFK evidentiary specimens.

"The evidence should be viewed and examined by a select group of forensic scientists, by invitation only, that best represents the most advanced forensic methods possible today," Grant wrote, adding, "These cannot be encompassed solely by the practices of today's criminalistics labs." He proposed these scientists prepare "a summary report detailing prioritized recommendations for ensuing analyses, their estimations for success of each recommended analysis and the anticipated information to be gained from each."

As for the new JFK evidence from CIA archives, that too awaits clarification. Some of the most basic questions about George Joannides -- what did he know about Oswald and when did he know it? -- cannot be answered as long as the Agency withholds his files from public view. The CIA's insistence, 44 years later, that it cannot declassify those files for reasons of "national security," not only encourages the notion the Agency is still hiding something significant, it also reminds us of the infuriating truth. When it comes to the

JFK story we know a lot more than we did a decade ago: We know we still don't have the full story.

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