



# Facts and Fiction in the Kennedy Assassination

Investigating historical mysteries is, possibly, one the most fascinating and rewarding aspects of the work of a skeptical researcher. Mysteries that appear to have no possible solutions, that could certainly be termed “cold,” can, sometimes, become clearer thanks to a more careful investigation of the original sources and also to the advancements of science. Think only of the many historical enigmas and crimes that DNA-testing techniques have helped to solve, like the riddle of Anastasia Romanoff’s claimed survival (Gill 1994, 1995) or the real origins of Kaspar Hauser (Weichhold 1998).

However, cases are often made more difficult to solve when facts get confused with imagined realities and unfounded conclusions. Eyewitness testimonies and self-styled experts, even in good faith, can alter details and hide important clues that—if untouched—could lead to radically different conclusions. In order to give you some clear examples of what I mean, I will examine one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century.

## The Day JFK Died

Hundreds of books and thousands of articles have been written about the

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November 1963, John F. Kennedy and Jackie in the presidential motorcade. Credit: 1963 Art Rickerby/Black Star

tragic death of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and it would take a few complete issues of *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* just to deal with the more relevant matters involved in the case. I will outline several examples of bad research involved in popular investigations of this case.

Let’s get back to that fatal day, November 22, 1963. President Kennedy arrived in Dallas, Texas, during the election campaign. In 1964, there would have been new elections, and Kennedy, who wanted to be sure to be re-elected, had started a tour of the southern states, the most conservative ones, where he was less popular due to his progressive ideas.

It was decided that a motorcade would be conducted through the city. Kennedy and his wife would be in the backseat of the presidential limousine, and Governor Connally and his wife would sit in front of them.

Dealey Plaza, in downtown Dallas, is a large, basin-like square where three roads converge toward an underpass that leads to

a freeway. The Presidential limousine entered the plaza, moved slowly along Houston Street, then took a left turn right in front of the Texas School Book Depository building.

It was thirty minutes past noon. What happened next was documented by a movie buff, Abraham Zapruder, who was filming the motorcade with an 8 mm movie camera. The film is silent, for there was no audio on home-movie cameras back then.

During the shocking sequence, the President can be seen waving to the crowd, but then he is hit by something and brings his hands to his neck, right in front of him. Governor Connally starts to turn and shake, he is hit as well. Then, there is a fatal shot to Kennedy’s head. He died soon after at the hospital.

Who killed him? It was soon determined that the shots came from the sixth floor of the Book Depository. There, piles of boxes were found, stashed around a window, creating a “sniper’s nest” with a clear view of the site of the shooting. A rifle was also found that had just been fired along with three spent cartridge shells.

After about two hours, a suspect was stopped. He had had a confrontation with the police inside a movie theater, and it was later found out that he had just shot dead a policeman who had stopped him on a nearby street.

His name was Lee Harvey Oswald; he was a young man who worked at the depository and had been seen on the sixth floor of that building just minutes

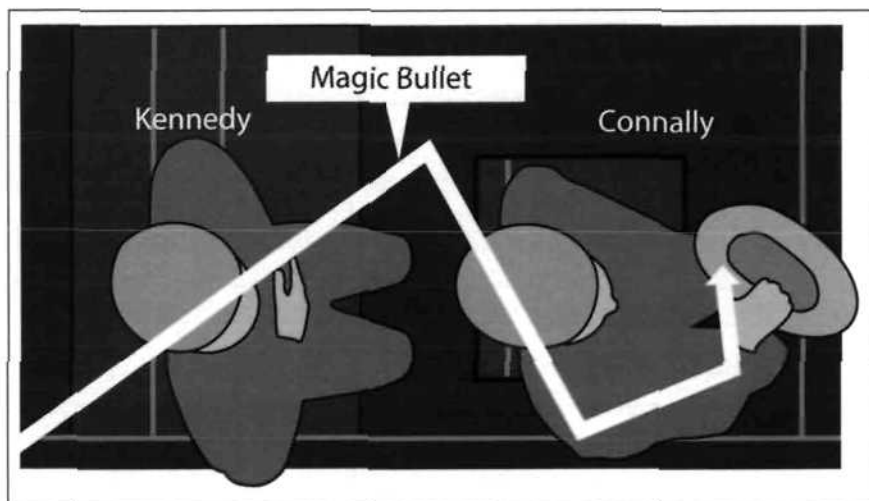


Figure 1. The hypothetical trajectory of the "magic bullet" as presented by various authors (Garrison 1988, Groden 1989).

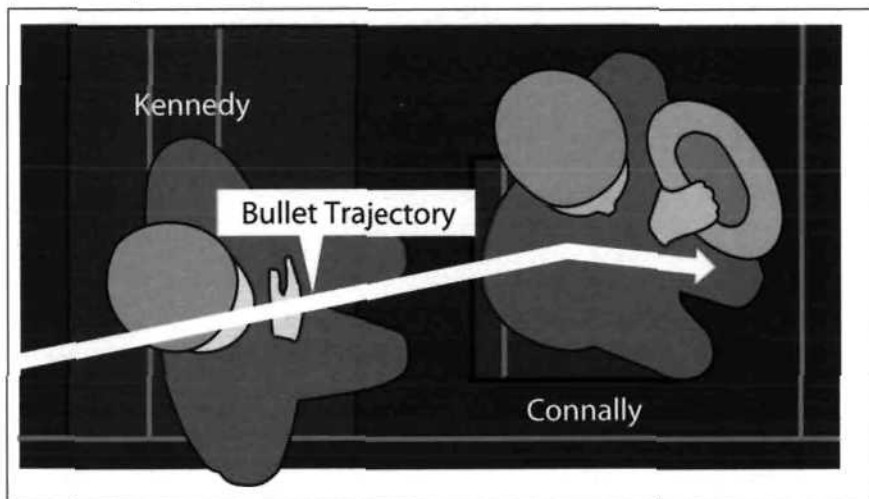


Figure 2. The real trajectory, plotted in accordance with the exact postures of Kennedy and Connally, was not significantly altered until the bullet was slightly deflected by Connally's rib. (Images adapted from Posner 1993)

before the shooting. After that, he disappeared, and he turned out to be the only employee absent from the depository for no legitimate reason.

Oswald was an ex-marine and communist sympathizer. The evidence against him quickly piled up, but only three days after his capture, during his transfer to a police van that would escort him to a more secure prison, nightclub owner Jack Ruby shot him dead.

Those of you who have seen the Oliver Stone movie *JFK*, where this story is told in great detail, will remember the many contradictions coming out of the official investigation of the assassination. I have seen that movie as well, and, like anyone else, I couldn't help but be convinced that Oswald could not be the only assassin. There had to be more

than one killer, and this meant that there had been a conspiracy plot to kill the president.

At least, I believed that until I started to research the story for my latest book (Polidoro 2004), and the strangest thing to me was that the deeper I went into it, the more the Oliver Stone version of the story looked weirder and weirder.

I can't go into the countless details here, as I have done in the book, but I'll give you just a couple of examples of the kind of pitfalls into which a historical investigator can easily fall.

### I Saw It; I Was There . . .

Most strange phenomena and conspiracy theories rely on eyewitness testimony. Psychologists are aware of the many limits of memory and percep-

tion—and the fallibility of eyewitness accounts (Loftus 1980, 1996).

One of the best-known witnesses to the assassination, and the only one who is also the author of a book from the point of view of an eyewitness, was a woman named Jean Hill (Sloan and Hill 1992). She can be seen in the Zapruder film, standing beside a friend.

In her testimony, told and retold over the last forty years, she claimed among other things that she was looking at the limousine where she saw Kennedy and his wife, Jackie; the couple was "looking at a little dog between them," a "white fluffy dog." Hill then jumped to the edge of the street to yell, "Hey, we want to take your picture!" JFK turned over to look at her. At that point, he was shot, and Jackie shouted, "My God, he has been shot!" Then, Mrs. Hill said that she saw "some men in plain clothes shooting back" and "a man with a hat running toward the monument" on the other side of the plaza on the so-called "grassy knoll." Immediately, she started running after him, thinking he was involved in the shooting. "When I ran across the street," she specified, "the first motorcycle that was right behind the President's car nearly hit me."

Thus, she was the first person to run up the grassy knoll, and many followed her. However, the man ran off and she missed him. She was convinced that this man was Jack Ruby, the club owner who, in three days, would kill Lee Harvey Oswald.

And there we have our proof for the existence of a conspiracy.

This, however, is one of those rare occasions in which dozens of reporters and photographers are present on the scene of an event and so there are countless statements on record from eyewitnesses and pictures from every angle. Thus, we can compare Jean Hill's memory with actual facts.

- She said that she was looking at the limousine.

In the film, you can see that when Kennedy is shot the first time, she is looking away from him.

- She said that the couple was "looking at a little dog between them," a "white fluffy dog."

There was no dog between them, just a bunch of red flowers.

- She said that she “jumped to the edge of the street” to yell, “Hey, we want to take your picture!” and JFK turned over to look at her.

The Zapruder film shows that Hill never moved or said a word—and the President did not turn to look over. In fact, he had just been shot when he passed in front of her.

- She said that Jackie shouted, “My God, he has been shot!”

Jackie and the car’s four other witnesses deny that Jackie said anything.

- She said that she saw “some men in plain clothes shooting back.”

But in an interview recorded just forty minutes after the assassination by a Dallas television station, she was asked: “Did you see the person who fired the—” And she answered: “No . . . I didn’t see any person fire the weapon . . . I only heard it.”

- She said that she immediately started running after the “man with a hat,” thinking he was involved in the shooting. “When I ran across the street,” she specified, “the first motorcycle that was right behind the President’s car nearly hit me.”

But as can be seen in the many pictures taken during those fatal moments, she stands still at her place as the limousine and the motorbikes pass by. She even sits on the grass while all of the cars of the motorcade proceed behind the President’s limousine.

- She also specified that after jumping into the middle of the road, she was the first person to run up the grassy knoll, and many followed her.

In photographs, you can see a lot of people running around the area and up to the grassy knoll, but Hill always stays in the same spot, probably shocked by the whole thing, like most of the people present.

- She was convinced that the man she had followed was Jack Ruby.

At that precise moment, Ruby was witnessed by many to be at the offices of the *Dallas Morning News*.

Now, as we can see, facts contradict many details of Jean Hill’s dramatic testimony. Aside from excusable mistakes and errors made in good faith, we have here a story that, over the years, has changed and grown out of proportion, to the point that Mrs. Hill became a sort of celebrity, invited to every meet-

ing of JFK buffs, and was even depicted in Oliver Stone’s movie. She is the proud holder of a card bragging that she was the “closest witness” to the President at the time of the fatal shot to the head. It is quite clear what happens to some people when they find themselves right in the middle of history and have absolutely no role in it. They imagine one.

### This Must Be So; I Know. . .

Imagined testimonies are just one of the many problems that an investigator of historical mysteries has to deal with. Another one is “imagined experts,” that is, self-styled experts with no real expertise in the chosen field except what they think is “common sense.” The Kennedy assassination presents dozens of such cases, but one of the most popular involves the so-called “magic bullet.”

The Warren Commission that investigated the Kennedy assassination concluded that the reactions of Kennedy and Connally occurred too close together for two separate shots, even from the same gun, to have been responsible for their wounds. They almost seem to react at the same instant, in the enhanced version of the film seen by the commission. They concluded that one, single bullet caused the injuries to both the President and the Governor.

This is where the “imagined experts” step in and say: “It must have been a really magical bullet in order to enter Kennedy from the back, exit from his throat, then make a turn and enter Connally’s back, exit from his chest, hit his right wrist, make another bend, and, finally, land in his left thigh!” How could a single bullet follow this zigzag route, seen in figure 1?

Their conclusion is obvious: those injuries could not have been produced by just one bullet, so there had to be more than one shooter—further proof of a conspiracy.

This conclusion, however, as logical as it may sound at first, does not take real facts into account. And it only works until you don’t look at Kennedy’s and Connally’s actual positions in the car. They were not one in front of the other; Kennedy was in a higher position

in the back seat, and Connally was sitting lower, in the middle of the front seat of the car. So, in order to produce those injuries, the path shown in figure 2 is the real trajectory that a bullet had to follow, and, from the analysis performed by real experts, it turns out that there was only one position from which this bullet could be shot: the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository.

What can we conclude from these examples? Certainly, that investigators must guard against preconceived ideas before starting an investigation. Before you know it, you start twisting facts and discarding evidence that contradict those ideas, making you draw unfounded solutions. What we should do instead is to try to do our best to dig up facts and let them speak for themselves. They may have things to say that often turn out to be quite surprising.

*This article has been adapted from Massimo Polidoro’s presentation at the fifth World Skeptics Congress (Abano Terme, Italy, October 8–10, 2004).*

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