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JFK KILLER NOT ALONE, UGA PROFESSOR SAYS

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A recording released earlier this year by the Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library has brought to light some important new facts concerning the Warren Commission's investigation of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. As a result of disclosure of the recording it is now evident, more than three decades after the assassination, that President Lyndon B. Johnson and three members of the Warren Commission (Sen. Richard B. Russell, Sen. John Sherman Cooper, and Rep. Hale Boggs) rejected the so-called single bullet theory, an essential part of the Commission's single-assassin thesis.

Thirty years ago, on Friday, Sept. 18, 1964, at 7:54 p.m. Sen. Richard B. Russell placed a long distance telephone call from his Georgia home to President Lyndon B. Johnson at the White House. Russell's purpose was to tell Johnson about what had happened earlier that day at the final official meeting of what Russell called "that dang Warren Commission," of which he was a reluctant member.

The recording of that conversation was not released to the public until Apr. 15, 1994. The recording confirms a well-established fact: Sen. Russell vehemently disagreed with the so-called single bullet theory, a key aspect of the Warren Commission's 1964 Report on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The recording also discloses an amazing fact previously unknown: LBJ agreed with Russell that the single bullet theory was unworthy of belief.

The single bullet theory is the theory that a nonfatal bullet fired from behind the presidential limousine pierced JFK's back, exited his throat without hitting any bones, struck Texas Gov. Connally in the back, exited his chest after shattering ribs and puncturing a lung, smashed through his right wrist, and then came to rest, virtually intact, in Connally's left thigh.

The proposed final draft of the Warren Report unconditionally accepted the single bullet theory as conclusively proved by the evidence. However, due to objections by

Russell and other Commission members at that final meeting on Sept. 18, 1964, the official version of the report endorsed the single bullet theory but refused to rule out other possibilities. Denying that the single bullet theory was essential to its overall conclusion that Oswald was the lone gunman in the sixth floor window, the report found "there is very persuasive evidence" to support the single bullet theory and that the theory is "most probably" correct, yet also (in deference to Russell's objections) acknowledged that certain "factors have given rise to some difference of opinion as to this probability."

In his Sept. 18 telephone call to President Johnson, Russell, after an opening exchange of pleasantries, immediately complained "that dang Warren Commission business has whupped me down ... I was just worn down fighting over that damn report."

A cause of the difficulties at the Warren Commission's final session, Russell made plain, was the single bullet theory. "[T]hey was trying to prove that the same bullet that hit Kennedy first, was the one that hit Connally and went through him and went through his hand and his bone and into his leg and everything else ..." When LBJ asked, "Well, what difference does it make which bullet got Connally?," Russell answered: "Well, it don't make much difference!" Then he added: "But they said that ... the Commission believe[s] that the same bullet that hit Kennedy hit Connally. Well, I don't believe it!"

LBJ quickly responded: "Well, I don't either!"

Russell then gave LBJ two reasons for rejecting the theory: It contradicted Connally's testimony that he was hit by a different bullet, and it required the further finding-a finding accepted by the Warren Report-that one of Oswald's three shots missed the limousine entirely, which seems highly unlikely given the assassin's deadly shooting abilities.

On Sept. 16, 1964, two days before the call to LBJ, Russell had dictated a dissenting statement detailing his many doubts about the single bullet theory and about the Warren Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, had murdered President Kennedy. This dissenting statement was not included in the Warren Report but is in the senator's papers at the UGA's Russell Library. Shortly after the Warren Report was released, Russell first made public his doubts about the Report when he told The Atlanta Constitution for Sept. 29, 1964 that it was still not known whether Oswald had acted "with the encouragement or knowledge of anyone else." Russell attacked both the single bullet theory and the lone assassin notion in an interview published in The Atlanta Constitution, Nov. 20, 1966. In an interview with WSB-TV in February 1970, less than a year before his death, Sen. Russell again voiced doubts about parts of the Warren Report.

Sen. Russell's objections to important findings of the Warren Report received further publicity when the senator's views were mentioned in various JFK assassination books, including notably Edward Epstein's Inquest (1966), Harold Weisberg's Whitewash IV (1974), Bernard Fensterwald's Coincidence or Conspiracy? (1977), and Henry Hurt's Reasonable Doubt (1985).

(For more information on the rejection of various findings of the Warren Report, including the single bullet theory, by Russell and other members of the Warren Commission, see Wilkes, Russell Disagreed with JFK Death Report, in The Athens Observer, Nov. 9, 1989, p. 1.)

While Russell's disbelief in the single bullet theory has been well known for decades, LBJ's disagreement with the theory is a surprising new discovery.

It has been known for years that LBJ believed, notwithstanding the Warren Report, that President Kennedy was assassinated by a conspiracy. As a U. S. Senate report published in 1976 reveals, a close aide to LBJ told a high-ranking FBI official in 1967 that Johnson "is convinced there was a plot in connection with Kennedy's assassination." In a 1971 interview with another former aide--an interview published in Atlantic magazine seven months after his January 1973 death--LBJ reiterated his belief that the JFK assassination had been part of a conspiracy. In the interview Johnson said that when he became president he had learned that America was "operating a Murder, Inc. in the Caribbean." It appears LBJ thought the JFK assassination a retaliation for CIA-Mafia plots in the early 1960's aimed at killing Cuba's Fidel Castro.

When the Warren Commission, with knowledge of the distances and locations in Dealey Plaza, examined the famous Zapruder film, it concluded that less than 2 seconds elapsed between the earliest point in time at which JFK could have been shot in the back, and the latest point in time when Connally could have been shot in the back.

However, it had also been established that it took at least 2.3 seconds to fire the "Oswald rifle" twice (without aiming). If, therefore, there was only one assassin then both JFK and Connally must have been struck in the back by the same rifle bullet--the single bullet. As Burt Griffin, a member of the Warren Commission staff, bluntly phrased it: "To say that [JFK and Connally] were hit by separate bullets is synonymous with saying that there were two assassins."

The Warren Commission was totally committed to the single assassin thesis--that Oswald, acting alone, fired all the shots with a Mannlicher-Carcano 6.5 mm bolt-action rifle, that a total of three shots were fired, and that the shots came from a

window on the sixth floor of the school book depository. The Commission's slavish devotion to the single assassin notion, no matter what facts or leads the investigation turned up, is widely recognized as one of the reasons the Warren Report is deficient.

Although the Warren Commission denied it, the truth is that without the single bullet theory the Commission would have been forced to abandon its fundamental premise that Oswald was the sole assassin. It was not the inconclusive firearms tests, but the Commission's fixation with proving that Oswald had acted alone, that induced the Commission to favor the single bullet theory.

Three decades after publication of the Warren Report, Americans are finally in a position to understand the terrible truth: in 1964, when the Warren Commission announced its findings, the American people were being asked to believe a lone assassin scenario underpinned by a ballistics theory which, unknown to them, the President of the United States and nearly half of the members of the Warren Commission deemed not worthy of belief.