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Donald E. Wilkes Jr.

University of Georgia School of Law, wilkes@uga.edu

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Intriguing Mystery

The Secret Service and the JFK Assassination

The conclusion seems inescapable that the Secret Service bungled its responsibilities prior to and during the assassination of JFK.

By [Donald E. Wilkes, Jr.](#)

[Wednesday, September 5, 2012](#)

“Kennedy was killed by a breakdown in a protective system that should have made the assassination impossible.”—Robert Groden and Harrison Livingston, *High Treason* (2d ed. 1989).

“The extremely poor performance of the president’s bodyguards has led some people to suspect the Secret Service was somehow involved in a conspiracy to kill Kennedy, although there has never been any proof that this was so.”—James P. Duffy and Vincent L. Ricci, *The Assassination of John F. Kennedy* (1992).

“The reason for their [the Secret Service’s] neglect remains one of the intriguing mysteries of the [Kennedy] assassination.”—Michael L. Kurtz, *Crime of the Century* (1982).

A Major Malfunction

On Friday, Nov. 22, 1963, in broad daylight, at half past noon, and despite his Secret Service protection, President John F. Kennedy was fatally shot in the head while sitting in his midnight-blue 1961 Lincoln Continental open limousine as it slowly motorcaded through Dealey Plaza in downtown Dallas, TX. (President Kennedy also received several nonfatal bullet wounds. Texas Gov. John Connally, seated on a jump seat in front of JFK, suffered multiple nonfatal bullet wounds.)

Based on the information now available nearly 50 years after the assassination, there is a consensus among those who have investigated President Kennedy’s Secret Service protection. The consensus: JFK’s protection was inadequate. Indeed, the protection was so defective that it dangerously increased the likelihood that an assassination plan involving one or more concealed snipers firing into the presidential limousine would succeed. By making the murder of JFK easier and the undetected escape of the assassins more likely, this Secret Service bungling contributed to the assassination.

Typically, the Warren Commission whitewashed the Secret Service, finding that on the whole there had been no fundamental lapse in Kennedy’s protective security, although it did fault the Secret Service for not conducting a prior inspection of the buildings along the motorcade route.

The master rule of physical protection of heads of state by security officials is that meticulous preparation of protective measures will preclude any successful assassination attempt. But there

was no meticulous protection on Nov. 22, 1963. The Secret Service made the killing of a president, which could have been prevented, possible. The awful truth, kept from the public for years, is that but for the Secret Service's blunders President Kennedy would not have been slain. This is not to deny that most Secret Service agents in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963 did their best. Nor is it a criticism of the Secret Service of today.

The consensus that JFK's protection was seriously flawed began emerging in 1979 when, after a two-year reinvestigation of the assassination, the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations issued a Final Report, which concluded devastatingly that "the Secret Service was deficient in the performance of its duties."

Specifically, the Assassinations Committee found that:

- "The Secret Service possessed information that was not properly analyzed, investigated, or used by the Secret Service in connection with the President's trip to Dallas."
- "Secret Service agents in the motorcade were inadequately prepared to protect the President from a sniper."
- "[In] the physical protection of the President... [there was a] failure to arrange for prior inspection of buildings along the motorcade route... and a lack of discipline and bad judgment by some members of the Secret Service protective detail in Dallas, who were drinking on the night before the assassination."
- Due to Secret Service directives, escort security for the presidential limousine during the Dallas motorcade "may have been uniquely insecure." The day before the Dallas visit, at a meeting with local police officials to finalize the arrangements for the motorcade, the Secret Service oddly ordered "a reduction of security of protection in terms of [the] number and placement of [Dallas police] officers" who would escort the limousine during the motorcade through the city. For example, the number of police motorcycles accompanying the limousine itself was reduced from eight to four, and unusually these four motorcyclists were directed not to flank the limousine but instead to stay behind the limousine's rear fender. By contrast, when the president motorcaded through Houston on Nov. 21, his limousine was flanked by six motorcycles.
- "Besides limiting the motorcycle protection, [the Secret Service] prevented the Dallas Police Department from inserting into the motorcade, behind the Vice-Presidential car, a Dallas Police Department squad car containing homicide detectives."

The current consensus that the Secret Service was derelict in its duties is supported by an abundance of information that necessarily also confirms the verdict reached by the House Assassinations Committee 30 years ago. That information includes:

- In the months preceding the assassination the Secret Service became aware of several reported plots to shoot JFK, although this startling fact was unknown to the public until years after the Warren Commission's official investigation.

- In March 1963, more than six months before the assassination, the Secret Service received a postcard warning that JFK would be assassinated while riding in a motorcade. This warning resulted in additional protection being furnished the president when he visited Chicago that month.
- In October 1963 the Secret Service received reports of one or more plots to shoot JFK with high-power rifles when he motorcaded through Chicago on a visit scheduled for Nov. 2. The visit was cancelled at the last minute.
- In the words of the House Assassinations Committee, in planning for the Dallas trip “the Secret Service failed to make appropriate use of the information supplied it by the Chicago threat in early November 1963.”
- On Nov. 9, 1963, a violence-prone racist agitator from Quitman, GA named Joseph Adams Milteer had a lengthy conversation in a Miami, FL hotel room with a man named Willie Somersett, in the course of which Milteer told Somersett about a plot that was afoot to assassinate JFK. Unknown to Milteer, Somersett was a police informer surreptitiously tape-recording the conversation. The transcript of that taped conversation reveals that Milteer told Somersett that the killing of Kennedy “was in the working,” that the president could be killed “[f]rom an office building with a high-powered rifle,” that the rifle could be “disassembled” to get it into the building, and that “[t]hey will pick up somebody within hours afterward, if anything like that would happen just to throw the public off.” (Scholars have duly noted the resemblance of the facts that Milteer related about this plot against JFK and the facts forming the basis of the Warren Commission’s official account of the assassination.) Somersett promptly gave the tape recording to local Miami police, who immediately forwarded it to both the Secret Service and the FBI. After a hurried investigation that apparently did not include interviewing Milteer, the Miami field office of the Secret Service prepared a file on Milteer titled “Alleged Possible Threat Against the President.” (A photograph of the first page of the file is in F. Peter Model and Robert J. Groden’s book *JFK: The Case for Conspiracy* (1977).) Beginning late on the afternoon of Monday, Nov. 18, 1963, the Monday before the Friday Dallas visit, President Kennedy traveled to Miami, Florida. Extra precautions were taken there to protect the president. JFK did most of his traveling through the Miami area in a helicopter instead of in a motorcade, and during the motorcading that did occur his open limousine drove the entire route at speeds of 40 to 50 mph. [In the early evening of that Monday, at the age of 19, I myself stood on the western side of Collins Avenue in Miami Beach and watched a vibrant JFK smiling and waving at the spectators who lined both sides of the street as his open limousine sped by at a brisk pace from my left to my right. It was the only time I ever saw JFK in the flesh. Four days later he was a corpse.]
- Information about the plot revealed by Milteer apparently was not passed on to the Secret Service officials responsible for the trip to Dallas.
- On Monday, Nov. 18, 1963, before his visit later that same day to Miami, President Kennedy motorcaded through Tampa, FL. Prior to the Tampa visit, the Secret Service became concerned that an attempt might be made to assassinate JFK during that visit. The Secret Service’s concerns arose because from unknown sources it became aware of a threat that an unidentified rifleman shooting from a window in a tall building with a high power rifle fitted with a scope might assassinate JFK while the president was being driven through Tampa. (A short news article mentioning the reported plot, “Threats on Kennedy Made Here,” appeared in the *The Tampa Tribune* newspaper the day after the

Dallas assassination. There is a photograph of the article in Lamar Waldron and Thom Hartmann's book *Ultimate Sacrifice* (2005).) The Tampa assassination attempt was thwarted by beefing up escort security for the presidential motorcade; over 600 law enforcement officers protected JFK. It is unclear whether the alleged Tampa plot was separate from or related to the assassination plot Joseph Milteer spoke of.

- The Dallas assassination can never again be viewed in isolation. It must be viewed in the context of the various Chicago, Miami, and Tampa plots against the president reported in the months before the assassination. We now know that the Dallas assassination occurred against a background of several recent plots to shoot JFK, plots the Secret Service was fully aware of. The ghastly truth appears to be that, as David Talbot writes in his book *Brothers: The Hidden History of the Kennedy Years* (2007), "Kennedy was, in fact, being methodically stalked in the final weeks of his life... In the final month of his life, John Kennedy seemed a marked man, encircled by a tightening knot of treachery." Because the Secret Service must have realized that JFK was in a dangerous situation, the inadequate protection furnished him on Nov. 22, 1963 is, scholars agree, baffling. Why, for example, did the Secret Service authorize two highly unusual sharp turns for the motorcade in Dealey Plaza, and why was the limousine proceeding along at the extraordinarily low speed of only 11.2 mph when it came under fire?
- In 1963 Secret Service practices required that buildings along a presidential motorcade route be inspected in advance if either the motorcade route was a standard one that had been used in the past or there was a specific reason to suspect the occupants or activities in a certain building. President Kennedy's Dallas motorcade route had been the standard route for motorcades for years; President Franklin D. Roosevelt, for example, had visited Dallas in 1936 and traversed the same route in a motorcade (although in the opposite direction). For this reason alone, the buildings along the motorcade should have been subjected to inspection before the motorcade traveled past them. Furthermore, as we now know, the Secret Service for months had been aware of possible plots in several cities to shoot the president from a building, and JFK was definitely in danger of being murdered in Dallas. A month before the assassination the U. S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, had been assaulted and spat upon by right-wing demonstrators in Dallas simply because he was a liberal Democrat. Dallas was a city with a deserved reputation for right-wing anti-Kennedy extremism, and there were many tall buildings along the motorcade route. Even though there was no reason to suspect any particular building, inspecting those buildings should, under the circumstances, have been deemed mandatory. However, as previously noted, when President Kennedy visited Dallas no prior inspection of the buildings along the motorcade route was made.
- With a few exceptions, Secret Service agents in the motorcade performed poorly when the shots rang out. The 54-year old agent driving the presidential limousine failed to accelerate the moment the shooting began. Instead he hesitated, applying the limousine's brakes and slowing it down to such a degree that many Dealey Plaza eyewitnesses thought the vehicle had actually stopped; he twice swivelled his head backwards to look at Kennedy; and he did not put his foot on the gas and speed away until after JFK suffered the fatal headshot captured in blood red on frame number Z313 of the most memorable color home movie in history, the Zapruder film. At the time Secret Service guidelines provided: "The Driver of the President's car should be alert for dangers and be able to take instant action when instructed or otherwise made aware of an

emergency.” In violation of other Secret Service procedures, the 48-year old agent in the right front seat made no attempt to move to the president and shield him. This, it is true, would have been difficult, because a special handlebar for the president to hold on to while standing in the limousine made it very hard for someone in the right front seat to get into the rear compartment. Nonetheless, the agent should at least have made an effort to get to the president. He should not have sat there. The agents standing on the running board of the followup car that trailed the limousine by five feet also seemed drugged with an elixir of sluggishness. After the sound of gunfire had been heard, and while JFK was visibly reacting to bullet wounds, they stood there dully, some looking at him, and some turning to look to behind them in the direction of the initial shot (which most likely was a diversionary shot to deflect attention away from shooters in other locations). Only one of the agents, the courageous and alert Clint Hill (whose book is reviewed below), possessed the initiative, the quickness, and the physical bravery to jump from the followup car and race to and climb on the limousine before it sped off; but by the time Hill actually got to President Kennedy the gunfire was over and JFK mortally wounded.

U. S. Senator Ralph Yarborough, who witnessed the assassination, told the Warren Commission: “All of the Secret Service agents seemed to me to respond very slowly, with no more than a puzzled look... I am amazed at the lack of instantaneous response by the Secret Service when the rifle fire began.” “Somewhere along the line,” famously writes James Hepburn (pen name of a French intelligence service official) in his book *Farewell America* (1968), “[the agents guarding JFK] had neglected the first rule of security: They had lost their reflexes.”

The slow response of the agents may have been attributable to a combination of alcohol consumption, sleep deprivation, and fatigue. In blatant violation of Secret Service regulations, the night before the assassination nine agents, including four in the followup car, had been out late drinking. Secret Service regulations strictly prohibited the agents on the White House Detail from any use of intoxicating liquor of any kind (including beer and wine) while traveling with the president. “Violation or slight disregard” of this rule was cause for removal from the Secret Service. Furthermore, six of the nine agents stayed out until around 3 a.m., while the seventh did not return to his room until 5 a.m. It is nearly unbelievable that despite multiple recent reports of sinister plans to shoot the president in his limousine, agents were drinking and partying late on the night before a visit to a dangerous place like Dallas.

- Subsequent to the assassination, the Secret Service acted as though it had something to hide by engaging in a suspicious pattern of secretly suppressing or destroying records relating to the assassination, even when forbidden to do so by law.

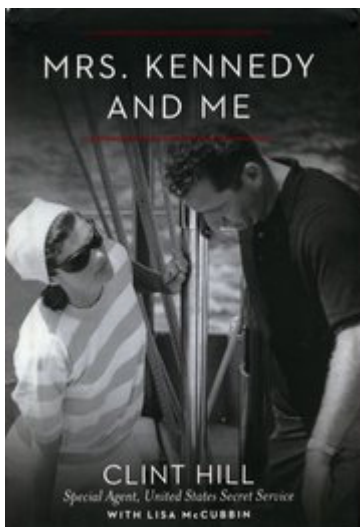
- The Secret Service withheld from the public the information it possessed relating to Joseph Milteer’s taped conversation with Willie Sommersett. Milteer is never mentioned in the Warren Report or the 26 volumes of documents published by the Warren Commission. The public found out about Milteer’s statements concerning plans to kill JFK only because local Miami city police, recognizing the amazing similarity between what Milteer said was going to happen and what (according to the Warren Commission) did happen, gave a transcript of the conversation to a Miami newspaper reporter in 1967. The reporter, Bill Barry, published an article about Milteer (without mentioning his name), which included excerpts from the transcript, in *The Miami News* on Feb. 2, 1967.

Barry's newspaper article was quoted at length (again without mentioning Milteer's name) in Harold Weisberg's book *Oswald in New Orleans* (1967). Four years later, in his book *Frame-Up* (1971) Weisberg published the entire transcript of the taped conversation, together with various FBI documents relating to Milteer. This time Milteer's name was given. As a result the story of the Milteer plot became known to the general public in the early 1970s. If it had been up to the Secret Service, however, the public might still not know of the assassination plot Milteer talked about.

- When the Secret Service's Protective Research Section files for 1963 were computerized, the original files were destroyed instead of being preserved.
- As Douglas P. Horne explains in the fifth volume of his book *Inside the Assassination Records Board* (2009), "in January 1995, the Secret Service destroyed Presidential protection survey reports for some of President Kennedy's trips in the fall of 1963." Among the records destroyed were those for the cancelled Chicago trip in early November 1963. At the same time the Secret Service destroyed a folder of vital records for the period July-November 1963. This destruction of crucial documents of historical importance occurred notwithstanding the John F. Kennedy Assassination Materials Disclosure Act of 1992, which provides that "all records in the possession of the Government relevant to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy should be released to the public at the earliest opportunity," and even though the Secret Service had been advised by the National Archives not to unilaterally destroy assassination records.

New Books

There are two new books by former Secret Service agents who were on the White House Detail when the assassination occurred. The first is *Mrs. Kennedy and Me*, by Clint Hill (Gallery Books, 2012). The second is *The Kennedy Detail*, by Gerald Blaine (Gallery Books, 2010). These two books—the first written by members of JFK's 1963 security team—provide hugely interesting inside accounts of the tragic events in Dallas. To a limited extent they also throw additional light on the performance of the Secret Service on Nov. 22, 1963. Clint Hill retired from the Secret Service in 1975, Gerald Blaine in 1964.



A Brave Man

I turn first to Clint Hill's *Mrs. Kennedy and Me*. Clint Hill, who was born in 1932 and grew up in a small town in North Dakota, was the Secret Service agent in charge of protecting Jacqueline Kennedy for four years—from November 1960 until December 1964. He and another agent usually accompanied her whenever she traveled or appeared in public. His book gives a fascinating account of his trips with Mrs. Kennedy to exotic locations in Europe and Asia, and it includes wonderful photos of those trips, including one of Mrs. Kennedy standing in front of the Taj Mahal. The book's most astonishing photo (on p. 107) is, however, a photo taken in Virginia of Mrs. Kennedy, an accomplished equestrienne, being thrown from her

horse, which, while rapidly approaching a rail fence to jump over it, suddenly halted after it was frightened by the paparazzo who took the picture. Mrs. Kennedy is flying headfirst through the air over the fence with the startled horse behind the fence. As she falls face down, she is looking at the ground while her straight left leg is pointing skyward at an angle, and her arms are reaching down to cushion herself from the impending impact. (The First Lady was not seriously injured and remounted her horse and continued her ride. The photo first appeared in Life magazine.)

The text of *Mrs. Kennedy and Me* takes up 340 pages divided into 26 chapters. The first 21 chapters (265 pages) cover the period late 1960 until shortly before November 1963. What a spectacular story they tell of Mrs. Kennedy's exciting travels to such places as France, Italy, Greece, India and Pakistan, and her memorable encounters with such exotic personages as Ayub Khan, Gianni Agnelli, and Andre Malraux. The next four chapters (60 pages) cover the trip to Dallas, the assassination, subsequent events in Dallas that day, the flight of Air Force One back to Washington, D.C., the preparations for the state funeral, and the funeral itself. The new president, Lyndon B. Johnson, ordered the Secret Service to continue protecting Mrs. Kennedy until the end of 1964, and the book's short final chapter (13 pages) covers that 12-month period of gloom and mourning in Mrs. Kennedy's life, during which (at her request) Clint Hill continued as her primary bodyguard.

Clint Hill is a man's man. On Nov. 22, 1963, he risked his life to help JFK and the First Lady. He had the unspeakable physical courage to run to and leap on a vehicle into which he knew bullets were being fired, a vehicle in which two persons had just been shot. He boarded the back of the limousine, pushed Mrs. Kennedy (who had climbed onto the trunk) back into her seat, and then shielded her and the dying president with his arched body as the limousine sped to the hospital.

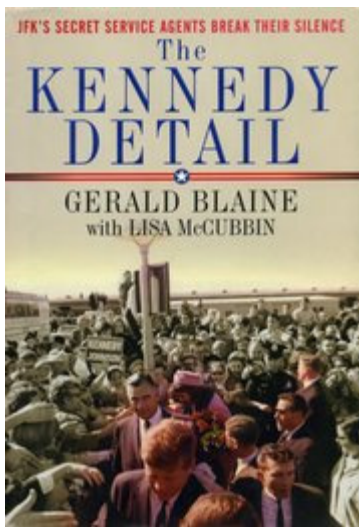
Examining the individual frames of the Zapruder film permits a fuller appreciation of Clint Hill's quick-witted bravery. (Since the frames moved through the camera at a rate of 18.3 per second, each frame captures approximately one-eighteenth of a second.) At Z332 we have our first (albeit blurry) image of Hill, who is running toward and is just behind the limousine, and at Z333 we clearly recognize him. At Z382 Hill has boarded the limousine: both of his feet are off the pavement and he is standing on a step specially installed in the left rear bumper area, while his hands grip a handle specially installed on the left rear of the trunk. This was barely 10 seconds after the first shot. Hill's reaction time was astonishingly prompt. Meanwhile at Z371 Mrs. Kennedy has risen out of her seat in the passenger compartment and is crawling on the trunk towards Hill. At Z386 Hill begins reaching for Mrs. Kennedy, and at Z390 he touches or begins pushing her in an effort to get her back into her seat. It worked. By Z393 the lower half of her body is now back in the seat. Getting Mrs. Kennedy back into the passenger compartment was important for her safety. Not only would she be less exposed to gunfire, but it prevented her from being hurled from the limousine when it rapidly accelerated.

Z371 is the frame which perfectly captures for all time the essence of Clint Hill's courageous conduct. It is one of the iconic images not just of the Kennedy assassination but of the entire 20th century. In the background four stunned spectators standing on green grass and looking at the limousine can hardly believe what they are seeing. To the right of the frame the dying,

unconscious president, his face obscured by a white blob, is leaning or falling limply to his left in his seat. In the center of the frame, Mrs. Kennedy, in her pink suit and pink pillbox hat, is on the trunk clambering toward the rear of the limousine. On the left, Clint Hill is struggling to climb aboard the limousine. His right foot is still on the pavement, his left foot is touching the step on the bumper, and both his hands are grasping the trunk handlebar. We are viewing the image of a brave man heedless of his own personal safety who is rushing headlong into grave bodily danger in order to help a president and a first lady. Bravo, Clint Hill!

Clint Hill's account of the assassination conflicts in several respects from the facts found by the Warren Commission. For example, after mounting the limousine he "could see inside the back of [JFK's] head. I could see inside the back of the president's head." He told the Warren Commission the same thing in 1964: "The right rear portion of [JFK's] head was missing." The Warren Commission concluded that the president had only a small hole in the rear of his head.

Mrs. Kennedy and Me carefully omits mention of the subnormal performance of Hill's fellow agents, while at the same time avoiding factual inaccuracies about the JFK assassination.



Pay No Attention

The Kennedy Detail, the other book I want to discuss, whitewashes the Secret Service. It attempts to continue the earlier coverup of the major errors the Secret Service committed. It is defensive in tone and pretends that the Secret Service did not let down President Kennedy. It omits or misstates key facts in order to make the performance of the Secret Service agents look better than it was. Nastily, the book even suggests that JFK was partially responsible for his own assassination because allegedly he forbade agents from standing on the back of the limousine where they might have shielded him from shooters. (The claim that JFK barred agents from riding on the back of the limousine is almost certainly false.) *The Kennedy Detail* could appropriately have been subtitled Pay No Attention to the Secret Service's Major Malfunction.

Perhaps unintentionally, however, *The Kennedy Detail* sets forth facts which are confirmatory of the consensus critical of the Secret Service.

- Jerry Behn, the Special Agent in Charge of the White House Detail (and the most senior agent on the Detail) was on vacation and did not accompany JFK on the trips to Florida or Texas. "He took his first vacation in four years the week JFK was assassinated." Oddly, however, Jerry Behn was in his office in Washington, D.C. when the assassination occurred. "He was supposed to be on vacation, but he'd come into the office for just a couple of hours." As the most senior Secret Service agent on the Detail, Behn usually was at the president's side whenever Kennedy was away from the White House, and on trips he occupied the right front seat of the presidential limousine. (This means, of course, that despite the known threats to JFK's safety posed by

gunmen, and despite the fact that he was traveling to a dangerous place, JFK was, on his visit to Dallas, not accompanied by the experienced, supervisory agent who ordinarily was in close personal attendance when the president appeared in public or traveled. With President Kennedy in such apparent danger on his trip, Jerry Behn had chosen a most inopportune time to take a vacation.)

- When the Special Agent in Charge was unavailable, an Assistant Special Agent in Charge would closely accompany the president on trips and sit in the right front seat of the limousine. Contrary to usual practice, however, Jerry Behn's deputy, Floyd Boring, an Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the White House Detail, was at home on an unusual day off on Nov. 22, 1963. "Agent Floyd Boring was relaxing at home on a rare day off when he got the call [telling him of the assassination]." (This means that Boring had picked a peculiar time to take the day off, since he knew about the dangers of the Dallas visit and also knew that Jerry Behn was not traveling to Dallas. It also means that while on his hazardous visit to Dallas JFK unusually was not accompanied by either of the experienced agents who usually were in close proximity to him while traveling.)

- Because of the absence of Behn and Boring, another Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the White House Detail, Roy H. Kellerman, sat in the right front seat of the limousine as it motorcaded through Dallas. Kellerman was an experienced agent. (The Dallas visit appears to have been Kellerman's first major trip as the supervisory agent.) It was Kellerman who scandalously remained in his seat and made no effort to get to or shield the president when the shooting began.

- At the time of the assassination, the White House Detail was in a weakened condition due to recent resignations and transfers. Nearly one-third of the 34 agents on the White House Detail assigned to protect JFK, including a number of experienced agents, had recently resigned or been transferred. "In the past two months alone, eleven of the most experienced agents on the Kennedy Detail had been replaced. It had been a purely personal choice by the agents—they'd requested, and had been granted, transfers to field offices... [N]early a third of the agents had decided they just couldn't do it any more. Too many missed birthdays and anniversaries, too many holidays away from home." (This means that despite several known plots to assassinate the president, the Secret Service nonetheless was permitting numbers of its experienced agents to leave the Detail. Shouldn't it have been obvious under the circumstances that allowing so many experienced agents to depart was unwise?)

- Perhaps because of the recent departures from the Detail, some of the agents in Dallas were working their first motorcade.

Ironically, therefore, despite *The Kennedy Detail's* efforts to divert blame away from the security men who dismally failed to prevent the assassination, some of the information in the book tends to support the consensus that the Secret Service did not do its job on Nov. 22, 1963.

Donald E. Wilkes, Jr., is Professor of Law Emeritus in the UGA School of Law.