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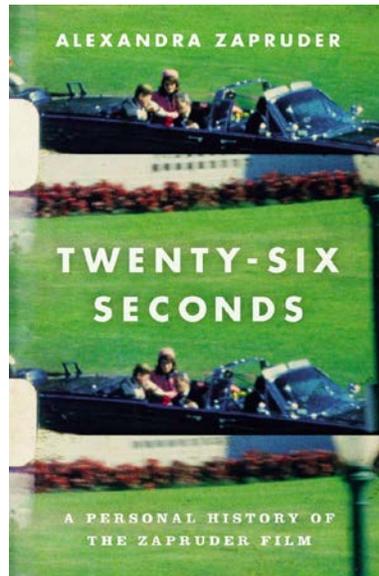
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Grassy Knoll Shots? Limousine Slowdown?

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



“It is difficult to understand why the [presidential limousine] came to a complete stop after the first shot. The natural inclination... would be to step on the gas and accelerate as quickly as possible. However, if the driver were under the impression that the shots were from the front, one could understand his hesitation in not wanting to drive closer to the sniper or snipers.”—Mark Lane

“The most productive mindset you can have is simply this: always, always, always have a belief system that doesn’t resist change. Go wherever the information leads you, without fear, because surely the truth is never something to dread.” —Darryl Sloan

The Zapruder Film

Only one person filmed from start to finish the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, which occurred in a matter of seconds at 12:30 p.m. on Nov. 22, 1963 on Elm Street in Dealey Plaza in

downtown Dallas, TX. That person was a 58-year old Dallas dress manufacturer, Abraham Zapruder, who died in 1970. His silent color 8 mm film of JFK being shot to death in broad daylight while riding in an open limousine as scores of people looked on is the most historically momentous home movie in history.

Incredibly, the Zapruder film was withheld from the American public for nearly 12 years. The first opportunity Americans had to see it was on Mar. 6, 1975, when a bootleg copy of the film was broadcast on nationwide TV on NBC's "Goodnight America" show, hosted by Geraldo Rivera.

There are dozens of books and articles about the Zapruder film. The latest is *Twenty-Six Seconds: A Personal History of the Zapruder Film* (Twelve, Hatchett Book Group 2016), by Alexandra Zapruder, a granddaughter of Abraham Zapruder.

A Flawed Book

Unfortunately, this book thoroughly disappoints. The problem is that Ms. Zapruder is a true believer in the discredited 1964 Warren Report who permits her zealous commitment to the Report to corrupt everything she says about the facts of the JFK assassination. She seems to regard the Report as holy writ, and she defends it at all costs. In order to shield the Report from criticism, she is even prepared to dispute the operation of basic laws of Newtonian physics. Thus, relying on pseudoscientific experiments carried out by other Warren Report apologists, she asserts that the Zapruder film—which shows a fatal headshot slamming JFK backwards and to the left—constitutes proof that the shot was fired from behind rather than the front!

Ms. Zapruder thinks that the diligent researchers who, after reassessing previously available evidence or uncovering new evidence have concluded (contrary to the Warren Report) that the assassination resulted from a conspiracy, are mental cases. On the

other hand, she lavishes praise on the dwindling band of diehard Warren Report defenders.

Despite all the additional information that has become available since 1964, Ms. Zapruder obstinately clings to the Report's single-assassin theory, believing that all the shots in Dealey Plaza were fired by Lee Harvey Oswald from a sixth floor window in the Texas School Book Depository located behind JFK's limousine. Despite the mass of new information about Oswald's background, activities and associates which the Warren Commission downplayed or ignored or was unaware of, she still thinks that Oswald was a loner, a leftist and a sociopath (as well as a crack shot). Despite all we have learned about the scandalous inadequacy of the investigations of the assassination conducted by the FBI and the CIA—particularly the FBI's rush to judgment that Oswald, acting alone, was the assassin, and the CIA's strange refusal to meaningfully cooperate with the Warren Commission—she retains full confidence in the conclusions reached by the Warren Commission, which relied heavily on both those defective investigations and on the Commission's own investigation (which itself was hurried, inadequate and biased in favor of the lone-assassin theory).

In short, Alexandra Zapruder's book is profoundly flawed because it is premised on a view of the facts of the JFK assassination which might have been arguable 50 years ago, but now is so antiquated as to be downright embarrassing.

Shots Fired From the Grassy Knoll?

Alexandra Zapruder's follies in defending the Warren Report are evident in her insistence that the Report was correct in concluding that all the shots were fired from behind JFK and that no shots were fired from Dealey Plaza's grassy knoll, which was located to the front and right of JFK when he was shot.

For years there has been [ample evidence](#) that there were grassy knoll shots. A minimum of two dozen—and perhaps as many as 50—witnesses reported that shots were fired from the knoll, and immediately after the firing ceased 21 Dallas police officers raced up the knoll and began searching the area. (Typically, the Warren Commission rejected the significance of this evidence.)

Numerous witnesses reported hearing one or more gunshots being fired from the knoll, including Paul Landis, Jr., a Secret Service agent in the followup car trailing closely behind JFK's limousine. In a report filed 10 days after the assassination, Landis wrote: "[M]y reaction at the time was that the [second] shot came from somewhere towards the front, right-hand side of the road.. "

Another Secret Service agent, Forrest Sorrels, who was in the motorcade lead car, ahead of the limousine, testified before the Warren Commission that after hearing shots he "turned around to look up on this terrace part there [i.e., the knoll area], because the sound sounded like it came from the back and up in that direction."

Kenneth P. O'Donnell and David F. Powers, special assistants to President Kennedy who were in the followup car with agent Landis and other Secret Service agents, both told FBI investigators that they had heard two shots from behind the fence at the back of the grassy knoll. However, those investigators told the two men the assassination couldn't have happened that way and they must be imagining things. As a result, both O'Donnell and Powers testified the way the FBI wanted them to, and in their testimony they said nothing about shots being fired from the knoll area. They did so because they didn't want to stir up any more pain and trouble for the Kennedy family. (This behavior by the FBI—inducing witnesses to alter their story before they testified so as to bolster the sole-assassin theory and suppress evidence of conspiracy—typified the inferior quality of the FBI investigation of JFK's murder.)

Some witnesses saw a rifle protruding from or being withdrawn into a Depository window around the time of the assassination, but none reported seeing gun smoke there. On the other hand, numerous witnesses saw puffs of smoke rising from the knoll.

Immediately after the assassination, numerous persons (including the 21 Dallas police officers) raced up the knoll, searching for the assassin.

Although Alexandra Zapruder omits mentioning it, her grandfather Abraham Zapruder was among the assassination witnesses who thought shots were fired from the knoll. Less than two hours after the assassination, Zapruder, who had been standing on a concrete abutment on the knoll while filming the assassination, appeared on a local TV station broadcast in the course of which he twice told the interviewer that "I must have been in the line of fire." Later that day he told a Secret Service agent the same thing. In a handwritten memo to Secret Service headquarters penned that very evening, the agent who had interviewed Zapruder noted: "According to Mr. Zapruder the position of the assassin was behind Mr. Zapruder." Nine months later, when he appeared before the Warren Commission, Zapruder testified that as soon as the shooting ended, he observed police running up the knoll. "I guess they thought it [the gunfire] came from right behind me." When then asked about where the shots came, he stated three times the shots came from behind him. The questioner then, however, persuaded Zapruder to say instead that he could not be sure about the direction from which the shots came. (Like the FBI, the Warren Commission was biased in favor of the Oswald-did-it-alone theory and unreceptive to evidence of a conspiracy.)

Alteration of the Zapruder Film?

Until a few years ago, the authenticity and reliability of the Zapruder film was accepted by almost all JFK assassination researchers, even the severest critics of the Warren Report. The

provenance of the Zapruder film was firmly established, and the film was regarded as the single most reliable piece of assassination evidence. In the words of Douglas P. Horne, the film was believed to be the "'ground truth' for the actual events in Dealey Plaza, [and] a virtual 'time clock' of the assassination."

Today, however, things are different. There are serious doubts about whether the film is an accurate depiction of the assassination. There are two reasons for this.

First, we now know that for years we were deceived about the chain of custody of the Zapruder film. What we now know but didn't know previously is that for at least half a day during the weekend following the assassination the film was at a top secret CIA photo lab in Rochester, NY, where it may have been altered in various ways (or possibly even replaced in its entirety with a first-rate forgery). This lab was so secret that even its code name ("Hawkeyeworks") was highly classified. We also know that the CIA destroyed its records of the film's stay at that lab. For the best account of this matter, take a look at either the 180-page-long 14th chapter ("The Zapruder Film Mystery") of the fourth volume of Douglas P. Horne's landmark book, *Inside the Assassination Records Review Board* (2009), or Horne's videos on YouTube. Horne was the Chief Analyst for Military Records on the staff of the Assassination Records Review Board.

Second, a number of recent books and scholarly articles have raised significant questions about whether some Zapruder film frames have been excised, replaced or altered in image content. The books include Noel Twyman, *Bloody Treason* (1997); *Assassination Science* (James H. Fetzer ed. 1998); and *Murder in Dealey Plaza* (2002), also edited by Fetzer. The first scholarly book to plausibly suggest that the film might have been tampered with was David Lifton's best-selling *Best Evidence: Disguise and Deception* (1980). (For a spirited defense of the genuineness and

trustworthiness of the film, see David R. Wrone, *The Zapruder Film* (2003).)

Needless to say, Alexandra Zapruder fervently denies that there has been any film alteration.

At first glance, the notion that the Zapruder film might have been meddled with seems far-fetched. But as critics have (among other things) pointed out, the film's provenance is suspect; the film's images are chock-full of unexplained anomalies; there are inconsistencies between the Zapruder film and other films of the assassination as well as between the Zapruder film and Dealey Plaza eyewitness testimony; and the motion picture film experts who have had access to the Zapruder film and pronounced it to be unaltered all have or had connections to the CIA.

Furthermore, it is indisputable that various official documents (including X-rays and photographs relating to JFK's autopsy), as well as other key assassination-related materials, have been falsified or replaced or destroyed. Why should we doubt that government officials might also have fiddled with the Zapruder film?

Limousine Slowdown?

Critics have proffered a large number of credible reasons for concluding that the version of the Zapruder film now preserved in the National Archives is not the untouched camera original. I will discuss only one of them—the fact that in the film (contrary to eyewitness testimony) JFK's limousine does not stop or reduce speed during the assassination.

Alexandra Zapruder, of course, vehemently denies the limousine stopped or slowed.

At the time of the assassination, in the Zapruder film, JFK's limousine glides forward at a steady (and unusually low) speed of

about 11 mph; the car definitely does not stop or slow down. However, numerous Dealey Plaza witnesses [reported](#) that during the time the limousine was under fire it decelerated before speeding away. Some of these witnesses said the limousine came to a complete but brief halt; some said it reduced speed or hesitated; and others reported that it either stopped or slowed down. The witnesses included Secret Service agents, Dallas police officers, news media personnel and civilian spectators. In chapter 8 of his outstanding book *Survivor's Guilt: The Secret Service and the Failure to Protect President Kennedy* (2013), Vincent Michael Palamera calculates that around 60 witnesses reported a stop or deceleration.

The first researcher to call attention to the possibility of a limousine stop was Mark Lane, who in his book *A Citizen's Dissent* (1968) wrote: "A considerable body of testimony before the [Warren] Commission indicated that the limousine slowed abruptly and then accelerated rapidly when the shots were fired."

I will now point to some of the evidence that the limousine did indeed stop or slow down. I pass over similar reports made by civilian spectators and news media people, and limit myself to reports made by police officers in or near Dealey Plaza.

Using binoculars, Harry D. Holmes, a federal postal inspector, watched the presidential limousine as it turned from Houston Street and then proceeded down Elm Street from his fifth floor office window in a building two blocks from Dealey Plaza. He testified to the Warren Commission that he heard what sounded like three firecrackers. He saw what he thought was dust coming out of JFK's head. Then: "The car almost came to a stop."

Earle V. Brown was a Dallas policeman standing on the overpass of the Stemmons Freeway, about 100 yards from Elm Street. Here is an excerpt from his Warren Commission testimony:

MR. BROWN: “[T]he first I noticed the car was when it stopped.”

MR. BALL (Warren Commission counsel): “Where?”

MR. BROWN: After it made the turn [from Houston Street to Elm Street] and when the shots were fired, it stopped.”

MR. BALL: “Did it come to a complete stop?”

MR. BROWN: “That I couldn’t swear to.”

MR. BALL: “It appeared to be slowed down some?”

MR. BROWN: “Yes; slowed down.”

MR. BALL: “Did you hear the shots?”

MR. BROWN: “Yes, sir.”

J.W. Foster was a Dallas policeman stationed on the railroad overpass at the corner of Elm, Main and Commerce Streets. In a statement to the FBI made on Mar. 26, 1964, he said: “Immediately after President Kennedy was struck with a second bullet, the car in which he was riding pulled to the curb ...”

D.V. Harkness was a Dallas policeman standing in Dealey Plaza south of Elm Street. Here is part of his Warren Commission testimony:

MR. BELIN (Warren Commission counsel): “What did you do [when you heard the gunshots]?”

MR. HARKNESS: “When I saw the first shot and the President’s car slow down to almost a stop—”

MR. BELIN: "When you saw the first shot. What do you mean by that?"

MR. HARKNESS: "When I heard the first shot and saw the President's car almost come to a stop and some of the agents piling off the car, I went back to the intersection to get my motorcycle."

The vagaries of eyewitness testimony are well known, and it might be argued that these police witnesses (as well as the other witnesses who also reported the limousine deceleration) were simply mistaken about what they observed. This seems extremely unlikely, however, because all four of the Dallas police motorcyclists flanking the rear of JFK's limousine also reported the limousine stopped or slowed.

Officer Bobby Hargis was the inside rider at the left rear of the limousine. In his testimony to the Warren Commission he said: "[W]hen President Kennedy straightened back up in the car the bullet hit him in the head, the one that killed him and it seemed like his head exploded, and I was splattered with blood and brain, and kind of bloody water. It wasn't really blood. And at that time the Presidential car slowed down... I felt blood hit me in the face, and the Presidential car stopped immediately after that and stayed stopped for about half a second, then took off at a high rate of speed." According to an undated, unpublished transcript of an interview he had with the Dallas Times-Herald, Hargis told the newspaper: "I felt blood hit me in the face, and the presidential car stopped immediately after that and stayed stopped about half a second, then took off at a high rate of speed." (In a [video](#) of a 1995 interview, now on YouTube, you can watch Hargis tell the interviewer: "That guy [the Secret Service agent driving JFK's limousine] slowed down... [He] slowed down almost to a stop.") Hargis died in 2014.

Officer B.J. Martin was the outside rider at the left rear of the limousine. He told the Warren Commission: "It [the motorcade]

slowed down just before we made the turn on Elm Street [from Houston Street]." Officer Martin was later interviewed by researchers Fred Newcomb and Perry Adams and told them, as reported in their unpublished 1974 manuscript *Murder from Within*, that he observed the limousine stop for "just a moment."

Officer James M. Chaney was the inside rider at the right rear of the limousine. He did not testify before the Warren Commission, but two days after the assassination he was quoted in the *Houston Chronicle* as stating that the limousine stopped immediately after the first shot. Furthermore, Dallas police officer Marrion L. Baker, a Dallas police motorcyclist who was on Houston Street when the first shot was fired, testified to the Warren Commission that shortly after the assassination he had talked with officer Chaney and that Chaney told him that "from the time the shot rang out, the [limousine] stopped completely, pulled to the left, and stopped." Officer Baker added: "Several officers said it stopped completely." When then asked whether he had heard from other Dallas police officers that the limousine had stopped, he testified: "Yes, sir; that it had completely stopped, and then for a moment there, and then they rushed on out to Parkland [Hospital]."

Officer Douglas Jackson was the outside rider at the right rear of the limousine. He did not testify before the Warren Commission, but he did tell researchers Newcomb and Adams that "the [limousine] just all but stopped... just a moment."

Deleting Frames Instead of Altering Them

When we contemplate the possibility the Zapruder film was altered, we tend to think first of the type of alteration accomplished by replacing authentic frames with forged or composite frames. But a film can also be altered by excision—by simply deleting frames which are not replaced. Some of the alterations in the Zapruder film, therefore, may have consisted of simply deleting certain frames whose deletion would be impossible to prove—by, for

example, removing from the beginning of the assassination portions of the film any frames depicting the limousine making the sharp turn from Houston Street to Elm Street.

The Zapruder film does not show the turn. Why? Witnesses reported that the limousine driver made that turn at a crawl and in doing so swerved so widely that the limousine almost struck the curb. Douglas Horne sensibly suggests that the assassination conspirators "did not want any undue attention directed to the Secret Service's personnel or its procedures," and therefore the frames of the turn "had to go" and were cut out. As a result, he says, we now have a Zapruder film in which the first we see of the limousine is when it is already on Elm Street and there is no scientific way of detecting whether frames depicting the turn were deleted. (Abraham Zapruder was never asked by government officials why the film begins with the limousine already on Elm. However, early statements by Zapruder and the woman who assisted him while he operated his camera suggest that he did film the turn onto Elm Street.)

An Altered Film Shows Conspiracy?

If the Zapruder film was altered, why does it still contain images indicating conspiracy? Why, for example, does it still show a headshot throwing JFK backward, indicating the shot came from the front? These legitimate questions are complicated and cannot be adequately addressed within space limitations here. I will note that the researchers who assert the film has been altered do address these questions at length.

I will simply respond as follows, first noting the obvious: I am not a film chemist, or an expert in cinematography or an experienced CIA technician specializing in forging or altering motion picture films or in creating special effects.

Technical and time limitations may have prevented those who altered the film from removing each and every indication of conspiracy. Consequently they may have been forced to make some difficult choices. They may, for example, have had to choose between leaving in either the headshot or the limousine deceleration. They may have reasoned that retaining the headshot would still leave room for arguing that the bullet was fired from behind (as indeed Ms. Zapruder does). On the other hand, images of the limousine stopping or slowing during the assassination would have been infinitely more devastating. What would Americans say or think about the Secret Service or conspiracy theories if they were to watch a film showing the President's car suddenly halting or slowing as bullets were whizzing into JFK's body? How could that be argued away? Therefore, the conspirators may have decided to retain the headshot frames and excise the deceleration frames, perhaps (as David W. Mantik suggests) by excising unaltered frames at regular intervals.

Zaprudered?

It is not a proven fact that shots were fired at JFK from the grassy knoll, but fair-minded persons will concede there is plentiful evidence that indeed this did possibly happen. It has not been proven beyond a reasonable doubt that the Zapruder film has been altered, but, based on the evidence, open-minded persons will acknowledge that this possibility cannot be categorically ruled out.

Alexandra Zapruder has closed her mind to the possibility that a conspirator (or conspirators) fired at JFK from the knoll. She is not open-minded enough to consider it possible that the Zapruder film—or at least portions of it—cannot be trusted. As a consequence her book about the Zapruder film—a film justly described as “undoubtedly the most important film ever made of an historic event”—does not, as it should have, advance the search for the truth about the assassination of the 35th President. Instead, it repeatedly recycles repudiated views of the assassination and

summarily dismisses factual allegations that warrant careful consideration.

The word "Zapruder" was coined by William Gibson in his 2003 novel *Pattern Recognition*. The word has varying definitions, all involving being deceived. The Urban Dictionary, for example, defines it as "deception by total informational environmental control."

Anyone who after reading Alexandra Zapruder's book thinks it is grounded on a solid understanding of the facts of JFK's murder or that it impartially addresses recognized defects in the Warren Report has been Zaprudered.

Donald E. Wilkes, Jr. is a Professor of Law Emeritus at the University of Georgia School of Law, where he taught for 40 years. He has published nearly 50 articles in *Flagpole* magazine on the JFK assassination.