

Six 'Shots' in Dallas: 'Framing' the Perpetrator of the Kennedy Assassination through the Zapruder Film, 1963–2013

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Abstract: When three shots were fired at the John F. Kennedy motorcade in Dallas on 22 November 1963, three important photographic 'shots' were also taken of the scene. These images by amateur filmmaker Abraham Zapruder were seen by Americans as a kind of Rosetta stone for deciphering the otherwise discordant 'language' of the assassination and as a key to identifying the perpetrator(s). The Zapruder film was to yield two diametrically opposing interpretations – conspiracy or no conspiracy – depending largely on the agendas of the viewers and their willingness or unwillingness to contextualize their interpretations with other evidence. While the Zapruder frames have turned out to tell us nothing about the actual perpetrator(s) of this particular crime, the way they are remembered tells us much about the ideal political assassin of the American imagination. Tracing the different ways in which the Zapruder shots were interpreted since the 1960s and circulated across a variety of media, institutional settings, and contexts of display, this article discusses what these changes mean for the cultural memory of the Kennedy assassination in particular and, more generally, what these changes tell us about the evolving perception and definition of the political 'perpetrator' in American society. Furthermore, the article explores the relation between visual sources (and their changing status from documentary to evidentiary to iconic) and political and historical interpretations of the act of perpetration.

Keywords: John F. Kennedy assassination, perpetrator, memory, Zapruder film, conspiracy theories

Introduction

At approximately 12:30 pm, Central Standard Time, on Friday 22 November 1963, six important 'shots' were taken in Dallas, Texas's Dealey Plaza. Three were real: the bullets fired at President John F. Kennedy, at least one of which killed him. Within weeks, however, the public became aware of the three others: metaphorically speaking, the 'shots' taken at virtually the same time, the photographs of the assassination sequence by Dallas dressmaker

Abraham Zapruder, part of a 26-second strip of 35-millimeter film later considered 'the most famous and examined film footage in history'.¹

The three photos bracketed the seconds between the two shots that felled Kennedy. Frame Z224 (figure 1) was the first to show Kennedy and Governor John B. Connally, sitting forward of his position in a jump seat, after the car emerged from behind a highway sign. The image showed Kennedy twisting his arms unnaturally in reaction to a shot, while Connally seemed unhurt. Little more than half a second later, frame Z235 (figure 2) captured Connally's first reaction to a shot. Since a bolt action rifle required 2.3 seconds to operate between shots, either two separate gunmen fired different shots (virtually proof of conspiracy), or the two victims, seemingly inexplicably, reacted at different times to the same bullet. Finally, frame 313 (figure 3), unequivocally showing the second, fatal shot to the president's head, also arguably contained evidence of a gunman other than Oswald. These images were to yield two diametrically opposing interpretations in the aftermath of the event – conspiracy or no conspiracy – depending largely on the agendas of the viewers and their willingness or unwillingness to contextualize their interpretations with other evidence.²

Americans increasingly came to see the Zapruder film as a kind of Rosetta stone for deciphering the otherwise discordant 'language' of the assassination, as a key to identifying the perpetrator(s) and discovering whether a conspiracy could be confirmed. Ironically, though, the Zapruder frames have turned out to tell us nothing about the actual perpetrator(s) of this particular crime, but their remembering tells us much about the ideal political assassin of the American imagination. This ideal has been very much based on the history of previous presidential assassins. They were all either traitors (John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin), allegedly mentally ill (Garfield's assassin Charles Guiteau), or radical (the anarchist Leon Czolgosz, McKinley's assassin). Over time, as the Zapruder shots circulated across a variety of media, institutional settings, and contexts, the ways in which they interacted with this cultural memory changed dramatically. What do these changes say about the representation of Kennedy's assassin? More broadly, what do they tell us about the evolving perception and definition of the 'perpetrator' in American society in the past decades? Lastly, what does

1 Vincent Bugliosi, *Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), p. 450.

2 Gerald Posner, *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

their changing status (from documentary to evidentiary to iconic) say of the relation between visual sources on the one hand, and political and historical interpretations of the act of perpetration on the other hand?

The 1960s–1970s: The Time of Investigation and Scrutiny

The official Warren Commission investigation (1963–1964) and journalistic organizations such as *LIFE* magazine and CBS News were the first to assess the meaning of the Zapruder images. The Warren Commission did not regard the film as the most important piece of evidence in the case before it. Before January 1964, when *LIFE* shared the complete film and frames with the Commission, the Commissioners had already done much work establishing Oswald's presence in the sixth-floor window, his ownership of the rifle and lack of alibi. They contextualized the film with the evidence they were already sure of, thereby narrowing the range of questions they posed and their angle of vision. Because three shells were found at the window, and three shots were reported by most witnesses, the film was examined for evidence as to when these shots occurred and from where. The Zapruder film was thus viewed narrowly as a time clock of the assassination that could identify the relative timing of shots and perhaps the number of shooters, but little more. *LIFE* magazine, which purchased the film, had a vested interest in its importance, but it, too, was initially careful to highlight what it could *not* reveal as much as what it might disclose. Its early issues on the subject (1963–1966) at first reassured readers that the forensic evidence explained many illusory discrepancies raised by the images. By 1966, however, it was deferring judgment to John Connally, allowing him to draw categorical conclusions from the images, suggestive of conspiracy, based on a magnifying glass and his personal memory. In 1966, as contextualization began to fade, *LIFE* finally pronounced 'doubt' about the Commission's findings and called for a new official inquest. In 1967, CBS News broadcast four ninety-minute programs over four days and concluded from its investigation that the Commission was probably correct in its conclusions, but that the Zapruder film, which it had not been permitted to examine, had to be made available to all as a precondition for any possibility of certainty in the matter.³

3 The articles that provided information on the Zapruder film in *LIFE* were: 'The Assassination of President Kennedy,' *LIFE*, 29 November 1963, p. 23; 'Kennedy's Last Journey,' *LIFE*, 6 December 1963, p. 38; 'President Johnson says Farewell to his Predecessor,' *LIFE*, 3 January

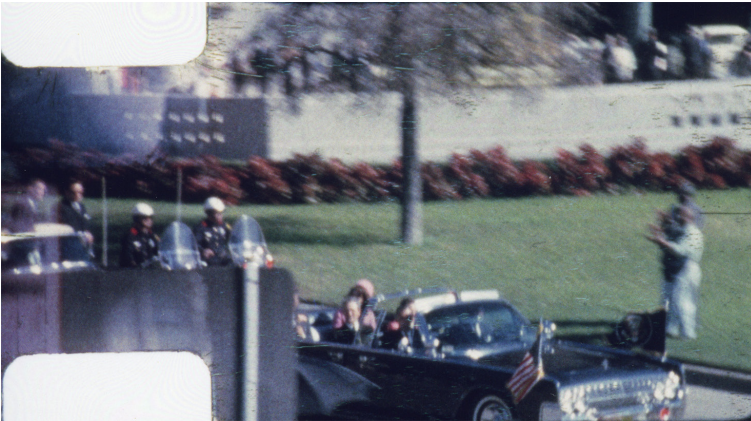


FIGURE 1. Zapruder Image 224 (Z224)

In this image, the president emerges from behind the sign with his right arm (which one to two seconds earlier was waving to the crowd on his right) crossed to his left side and his left arm crossed to his right. Apparently stricken by a shot that hit here or a frame earlier, Kennedy's Thorburn reaction was instantaneous, while Governor Connally, seemingly unhurt, was turning in apparent puzzlement. However, over time it was noticed that Connally's lapel was flipped up in this image, indicating that the shot had passed through both men virtually at the same time, as required if the single bullet theory were correct. Connally's pain had not yet registered. Neither had Kennedy's in all likelihood, but his nerve injury produced a reflex response.

Zapruder Film © 1967 (Renewed 1995), The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza.
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Whether refraining themselves from drawing firm conclusions about their meaning or denying others the chance to do so, the Commission, *LIFE* and CBS News opened the floodgates of scrutiny to a public with no such qualms. The impulse by an increasing number of Americans to examine the Zapruder frames arose from a sense that too many facts of the assassination appeared to contradict the Warren Commission's 'lone gunman' thesis. An enormous degree of cognitive dissonance issued from the assassination. The killing occurred at the heyday of popular faith in the omnipotence of American power and wisdom, and yet this all-powerful government could not protect the president from a lifelong 'nobody' armed with a \$21 rifle. Moreover, the suspect was a former marine and confessed communist who defected to the Soviet Union, the country's premier enemy, and who supported Castro's Cuba, the nation's second most notorious enemy. Oswald was a palimpsest in the flesh, incongruously embodying the protection of the state (as a former marine) and its betrayal (as a communist) in the same person. Clearly this man, even if a lone misfit, seemed suspiciously connected to the great issues of the day. In addition, Oswald was shot dead two days after the assassination while in police custody, a further mockery of the vaunted reputation of American justice and one seemingly explainable only through a narrative of conspiracy.⁴

The establishment had tried, but seemingly failed, to reassert their mastery over the tides of history by explaining the mysteries of the assassination. Many citizens, in turn, were committed to demonstrating the existence of a conspiracy, in part to put the establishment to shame. Only if one or the other group prevailed could an uncanny and unstable period of history be replaced by the restoration of confidence in America's command and control of events. But it turned out to be logically impossible for the establishment to fulfil its charge. There was no way to 'prove' the negative of 'no conspiracy', at least not in the eyes of the public. But since a conspiracy, if it had indeed taken place, *could* in theory be run to ground, it became the public's only path to achieving satisfactory answers and therefore historical reassurance. Americans expected conspiracies and had long girded to defeat them. What they had never experienced and could not tolerate was the evident alterna-

1964, p. 22; 'Oswald: Evolution of an Assassin,' *LIFE*, 21 February 1964, p. 68; 'Oswald's "Historic Diary",' *LIFE*, 10 July 1964; 'A Matter of Reasonable Doubt', *LIFE*, 25 November 1966, pp. 38-45; Howard Willens, *History Will Prove Us Right: Inside the Warren Commission Report on the Assassination of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Overlook Press, 2013), pp. 41-42.

⁴ Bugliosi, pp. 989-995.

tive that nobodies could change American history or the notion that the nation could not even 'crack' conspiracies, much less defeat them.⁵

This dynamic determined the identity of the 'perpetrator' that Americans would deliberately look for in their scrutiny of the Zapruder frames. They saw in these images what they wanted, and perhaps needed, to see in them: evidence that the perpetrator was a conspirator in league with others and not a lone 'nut'. The three Zapruder images were like screens onto which the viewers projected their own opinions concerning the identity and the motive of the perpetrator(s). They provided evidence of the timing (relative to one another) of the shots that hit JFK and Connally and raised the possibility that a second shooter could be revealed. In addition, they seemed to offer American critics and observers alike the opportunity to restore, through a supposedly proper investigation, a sense of 'canniness' and control over an era that had seemingly gone historically 'off track'.⁶

Historians of memory have observed that the past provokes anxiety when it seems inconsistent with the supposed trendlines of tradition in the present. The idea of the 'uncanny' past holds the sense of a disruption in the way different generations remember the past and the efforts to restore a connection with that past. The Kennedy assassination produced a sense of the 'historical uncanny'⁷ from 1963 to the end of the 1970s. A supposed nobody, possibly fronting for a sinister conspiracy, raised questions that the 'best and brightest' of American leadership seemed unable to answer. An American counterculture questioning the omnipotence of the American elite seemed an oxymoron, contradicting the ur-myth of American Manifest Destiny and introducing a conflict between memory and present reality. To render history canny again, the story of the Kennedy assassination had to be rewritten to make it historically consistent, that is, coherently explained by Americans and for Americans.⁸

The public criticism of the Warren Commission focused often on its particular interpretations of the Zapruder frames, especially those

5 Max Holland, *The Zapruder Film Reconsidered*, online video recording, YouTube, 11 December 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8Hp9ZqVxGA&t=1630s>> [accessed 15 January 2019].

6 Bugliosi, pp. 481–482.

7 The American effort to make sense of the assassination represents something loosely akin to what Susanne Knittel has called, in her study of German memories, the 'historical uncanny'. My argument here is not, strictly-speaking, identical to that of Knittel, but rather that an understanding of the purposes of American remembering of the assassination benefits in some ways from an understanding of this concept. Susanne Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny Disability: Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

8 Larry J. Sabato, *The Kennedy Half-Century: The Presidency, Assassination and Lasting Legacy of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 208–231.

that were said to support its 'single bullet theory'. In many ways a brilliant discovery, the single bullet conclusion (as it perhaps deserves to be called) was a lynchpin of the 'no-conspiracy' verdict. Unless it could be refuted, the lone gunman theory would remain viable. But, without it, a finding of conspiracy was almost unavoidable. It was telling, in view of these realities, that critics of the Commission focused on reinterpreting Z224 and Z235. The critics' *bête noire* was Arlen Specter, the staff member who pioneered the single-bullet theory. Months of analysis aligning the caliber of the rifle, the facts of shell casing positioning, the seating positions of JFK and John Connally in the presidential limousine, and the timing of their movements as revealed by the Zapruder film left Specter no other possible conclusion than that both men had been initially struck by the same bullet. This, in turn, solved a problem noted earlier: in Zapruder's frames Kennedy's first reaction to the shot seemed to precede Connally's reaction by more than one half-second. Since the bolt action of the rifle, manually operated, took no less than 2.3 seconds between shots, this meant that if both men had not been hit by the same bullet, then there had to be two gunmen, the very definition of a conspiracy.⁹

None of the other evidence, compiled between December 1963 and April 1964, when Specter finalized his theory, confirmed a conspiracy. Logic would therefore suggest that there was an explanation for the differing timings of the two men's reactions to purportedly the same shot. To put it another way, the problem was either to explain why the enormous volume of evidence against the idea of conspiracy theory was wrong, or why the single-bullet theory was correct.

Specter had not relied on the Zapruder film alone for his conclusion. Frames 224 and 235 merely lined up consistently with the forensic evidence of bullet trajectories, car and sixth floor window locations, and body positions in the vehicle. Once again, the placement of the Zapruder images in the context of other evidence went far to explaining any seeming contradictions. Only time would reveal was that that the Commission had arrived at the correct conclusion. A stable consensus that the single bullet theory was correct was finally achieved in the 1980s. To this day, the theory of a conspiracy – one involving two or more gunmen – has failed to produce a 'smoking gun'. But what the Commission got right would take years to emerge, while its mistakes (primarily in evidence gathering) were more immediately apparent. Seen in the context of its times, what the Commission found and what

9 Willens, pp. 85–87; pp. 270–272.



FIGURE 2. Zapruder image 235 (Z235)

In this image, little more than half a second after Z224, Connally displays his first reaction to the shot, with his eyes tightly closed, his torso twisted and his gaze facing forward (no longer trying to see if the president was unhurt). In the next two frames, his mouth would open, revealing the moment when one lung collapsed due to the bullet trajectory. The problem for those disputing the single bullet theory is that the alignment of the two men in the car from the vantage point of the sixth-floor window left nowhere else for the bullet to go after passing through the president but into Connally's back.

Zapruder Film © 1967 (Renewed 1995), The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza.
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it ignored only seemed to confirm the trope of elite investigators, who considered themselves above the need to defend their conclusions.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the public became increasingly cynical about the findings of the commission. Many of its members thus turned into scrutinizing sleuths, ferreting out the possibilities that the perpetrator(s)'s identity and purpose could be revealed in the light and shadows of assassination images. In 1967, Josiah Thompson, a philosophy professor, wrote *Six Seconds in Dallas: A Micro-study of the Kennedy Assassination*, which was really an analysis of the Zapruder film. Thompson had worked for *LIFE* magazine and had viewed all the individual frames before leaving the magazine and writing his book. Prohibited from publishing *LIFE*'s Zapruder images, he published sketches of them from memory to illustrate his conclusions that Kennedy and Connally could not have been shot by the same gun, thus offering proof of a conspiracy. *LIFE* sued him for copyright infringement and lost, making itself a model of intimidating corporate power with something to hide. Thompson analyzed frames 224 and 235 and pushed Connally's reaction to the supposed 'single bullet' back even further, to frame 237 or 238, too late, he claimed, to be hit by that earlier shot. When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, and his killer James Earl Ray later arrested, Ray denied culpability, claimed that a mysterious 'Raoul' had fruitlessly urged him to kill King, and that Raoul would know the identity of King's real assassin. Ray was shown a photograph of three tramps arrested near the grassy knoll in Dallas on 22 November 1963, which JFK conspiracy critics had unearthed. Ray claimed that Raoul bore a striking likeness to one of the tramps. Thus, assassinations throughout the 1960s, including the assassination of JFK's brother Robert in 1968, became linked in the public imagination. Seven years later, critics argued that one of the tramps bore a striking likeness to E. Howard Hunt, one of the burglars of the Watergate scandal then roiling Washington. Images alone seemed to be capable of making sense of the senseless, if only because they were presumed to be neutral and pregnant with possibilities.¹¹

The limitations in the quality of the Zapruder photographs (which were substantial) ultimately created a Rorschach-like ambiguity open to all possible conclusions, thus obliquely contributing to belief in con-

10 Ibid, pp. 232-263.

11 Josiah Thompson, *Six Seconds in Dallas: A Micro-study of the Kennedy Assassination* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1967), p. 71; 'Playboy Interview: James Earl Ray', *Playboy*, September 1977, p. 79, cited in Gerald Posner, *Killing the Dream: James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Random House, 1998), pp. 292-301; Bugliosi, p. 931.

spiracy.¹² In fact, these images were at least as supportive of the lone gunman thesis as its opposite. It is precisely because the images revealed things that could support either theory that the public's conclusion of conspiracy based on such profound ambiguity was so telling. Were one to focus only on the content of the images, they could just as well have dispelled conspiracy thinking. In fact, as will be seen, this is precisely what would happen much later: with the help of technological enhancements, the images would ultimately disprove the possibility of conspiracy. The fact that these inherently ambiguous images were considered the Rosetta Stone of the case, bearing the inscriptions which demonstrated a conspiracy, supports the notion that the public read into them the wishes and needs that they brought to the task of interpretation.

This, at the same time, meant that people failed to see details they could not integrate with their pre-formed version of the event. This failure – and its meaning – is revealed by the fact that important details in the film remained ignored until the 1980s. Two stand out: from frames 133 to 143, 12-year old Rosemary Willis, running beside the limousine at least five seconds before the shot that struck the two occupants of the vehicle, suddenly stopped running, *while Kennedy was still waving*. She instantly turned sharply around to peer up at the Depository building behind her. This was one of several cues that a first shot had been fired but missed the car, and that the single bullet theory had to refer to a later, second shot. Following the second shot, Kennedy's arms fly up and lock in place in front of, not upon, his throat. At no time before the third shot does he touch his throat or release (or for that matter alter in any way) the locked positioning of his arms.¹³

During the uncanny period of assassination analysis, writers of all political persuasions, even *LIFE* magazine itself, were blind to these insights, which would have sustained the single bullet theory then under fevered attack. For example, in 1966, *LIFE* asked Connally to examine the Zapruder frames and shed light from memory on the meaning of frames 224 and 235. Connally insisted incorrectly that he had to have been shot by a bullet other than the one that first hit Kennedy because he remembered (correctly) hearing the first shot (shooting victims generally do not remember hearing the shots that hit them). But Connally reached this judgment assuming – incorrectly, as did many others – that

¹² Bugliosi, pp. 473–482.

¹³ See Posner, *Case Closed*, pp. 320–336; Kenneth Searce, 'The Girl in the Red Skirt: A Micro-Study of the Zapruder Film', 11 December 2013, <<https://www.washingtondecoded.com/site/2013/12/redskirt.html#more>> [accessed May 15, 2019].



FIGURE 3. Zapruder image 313 (Z313)

This frame shows the shot that hit JFK in the head, eliminating any possibility that he could survive the attack. But the three subsequent frames showed Kennedy's body snapping violently backward. Laymen interpreted this as proof that Kennedy was struck from his right-front, that is, from the so-called 'grassy knoll', proof of two gunmen and a conspiracy, if true. The problem with this interpretation was that Kennedy's wound travelled across the right side of his head, not right to left, as it would have had to if a shot had been fired from the 'grassy knoll'.

Zapruder Film © 1967 (Renewed 1995), The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza. Used with Permission.

the first shot had to have struck the president¹⁴ Neither observation of his, based on memory, depended or benefitted from the Zapruder frames that Connally was supposedly scrutinizing. Willis's reaction to that first shot, seen at a moment when Kennedy is waving happily to the crowd, showed that Connally's memory of hearing the first shot did not exclude the possibility that both men were hit by the second.

Moreover, Kennedy's strange sudden shift from a wave to an almost crossed arm position in frame 224 also supports the single bullet theory, but this could only be understood if one were open to draw this confirmation from the Zapruder frames, which many, in the 1960s, were not. Knowing that the second bullet struck JFK in the upper back, but exited his throat, it was possible that structures near to his spinal column were injured by shock waves from the bullet that barely missed his spine. This common occurrence in neck injuries caused by gunshots could trigger a 'Thorburn position' or response, an involuntary and automatic raising and locking of the arms. This was significant because it meant that JFK's reaction would likely be unmediated and instantaneous, whereas Connally's injuries, which were in the torso, wrist and leg, away from vital organs and mediated by pain, required a half-second to register, something clearly visible in frame 235, a mere half-second after Kennedy reacts.¹⁵

Of course, a spinal injury cannot be captured by a camera. But a Thorburn position can be because it looks nothing like the actions of a man clutching his throat. The Thorburn position is clearly visible in the Zapruder film. JFK never grabs his throat, but people looking at the image thought that they saw him do so because they brought their expectations and experiences, their memories, in other words, to their interpretation of the images.

Such discoveries from the 1980s brought something fresh to the inquiries of the assassination based on the Zapruder film: certainties. They also restored something missing since the Warren Commission, namely the context of a body of evidence from outside the film. *It was certain* that Connally was seated to the forward left of JFK, in line with the trajectory from the sixth-floor window. *It was certain* that Rosemary Willis reacted to a shot that hit neither Kennedy nor Connally (she reported in the 1980s that she was reacting to a shot while JFK was still waving). In the 1960s and 1970s, the Zapruder film, often examined in isolation, seemed to offer only possibilities and questions without answers. Why

14 'A Matter of Reasonable Doubt', pp. 38-46.

15 Posner, *Case Closed*, pp. 325-336; Holland.

didn't JFK and Connally react at the same time? Did half a second really make a difference? Why did Kennedy fall backward after frame Z313, unless he was shot from the front? Unless the film supplied the answer, speculation, it seemed, was the only answer. *LIFE*'s 1966 criticism of the Warren Commission was leveled in an article entitled, in words telling of the period, 'A Matter of Reasonable Doubt.' In *Six Seconds in Dallas*, Thompson spotted an onlooker in frame 235: just adjacent to the stricken president, opening and closing an umbrella on a sunny day, a signal perhaps, or a weapon? Mesmerized by the power of the image to mystify, no one thought to track down and interview its owner for another ten years and learn the perfectly innocent explanation.¹⁶

Thompson saw frame 313 and believed that it showed Kennedy struck from the front, since his body was thrown violently backward in frames 314 and after. But, casting doubt on his own claim, he conceded later that he had misinterpreted the frames leading up to it, marring his evaluation.¹⁷ So image-dependent was his book and theory, that he could only seem to search for evidence against his initial interpretation from within the film itself. In 1967, CBS pronounced the Zapruder film important, but argued that since it was unavailable to the network, it could only plead for its release. The film's simultaneous non-availability and indispensability to CBS seemed to release all the oxygen from CBS's 'conclusions', which even the network itself described as mere hypotheses requiring still more study.¹⁸ The establishment's failure to resolve the debate had, as we have seen, only fueled the surge in countercultural skepticism.

While some Americans were able to view grainy, bootleg copies of the film, the public as a whole could not view the entire footage (including frame 313) until 1975, when *ABC* aired it on a late-night program.¹⁹ The frame was shocking both for its gore and because of the head snap backward, a fact of intense interest but also of debate. It was another

16 Louis Witt opened his umbrella on that sunny day as a protest over the support for the appeasement of Hitler in 1938 by 'the man with the umbrella', Neville Chamberlain, who had been backed by JFK's father, Joseph P. Kennedy. Interview of Josiah Thompson by Errol Morris, 'The Umbrella Man', *The New York Times*, 11 November 2011, <<https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000001183275/the-umbrella-man.html>> [accessed 1 May 2019].

17 Josiah Thompson, 'Warren Report: The Lone Assassin Theory', online video recording, YouTube, 18 November 2004, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuDWP3HICCY>> [accessed 30 April 2019].

18 CBS News, 'JFK Assassination: A CBS News Inquiry: The Warren Report, 1967', online video recording, YouTube, 25–28 June 1967, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qp00a6gRce0>> [accessed 10 May 2019].

19 Ron Rosenbaum 'What Does the Zapruder Film Really Tell Us?', *Smithsonian Magazine*, 13 October 2013, <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-does-the-zapruder-film-really-tell-us-14194/>> [accessed 20 May 2019]

instance of one of the three frames raising rather than resolving doubt. To a fascinated minority, however, frame 313 could only be interpreted as 'proving' a shot from the 'grassy knoll' and thus a dark conspiracy. The continued questioning of 22 November joined other questionings about the probity of the US government in the wake of Vietnam, Watergate and other abuses of power. Demands for answers produced an investigation by the House of Representatives' Select Committee on Assassinations (1976–1979), as the 1968 killing of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were added to its remit. All assassinations were by then yoked together in the public imagination, and cultural references from songs to images ('Abraham, Martin and John', the three tramps, images of witnesses and funerals) linked them just as the House did in its charge to its investigators.²⁰

In some ways the House Select Committee's verdict, when released in 1979, signaled the end of the 'uncanny' period of anguished debate about the assassination. Nearly all of its findings confirmed the vast majority of the findings of the Warren Commission, even with added access to much testimony and evidence withheld from that earlier investigation. Only very late in its inquiry did the Committee decide that it had found acoustic evidence of more than three shots in Dealey plaza. It then released, on the basis of that lone 'discovery', a conclusion, at odds with all the rest, that Kennedy had probably been killed by conspirators whose identities (other than Oswald) and motives remained unknown and possibly unknowable. On that ambiguous note, the Committee disbanded.²¹

The muted public reaction to this (subsequently discredited) 'bomb-shell' showed that other factors were at work by 1979 in making the historical relevance of the assassination suddenly seem to be a dead letter. The country was working hard to forget more recent catastrophes such as Vietnam, and the majority of the population was by then tired of the paroxysms of the sixties. If the JFK assassination and its regrettable era no longer mattered to present events in the memory of Americans post-Vietnam, then neither did the possible existence of a conspiracy behind it. By 1979, the public was so accustomed to believing the worst about the government that one more finding confirming this hardly seemed newsworthy. Meanwhile, new technologies were going to produce breakthroughs of discoveries in relation to the Zapruder film and

20 Sabato, pp. 208–231.

21 Posner, *Case Closed*, pp. 451–470; Sabato, pp. 208–231.

other evidence, offering the kind of certainty and mastery over the past unavailable to the generation that had had to experience it in 'real time.'

From the 1980s Onwards: Becoming Cultural Memory

History, by the 1980s, had become once again cannily familiar. That is, it was once again reassuringly divided into a distinct past and present with few claims on one another. This was partly because academia, the media and the establishment more generally had come to an agreement during this period that technological enhancements of the Zapruder frames and the intervention of scientific organizations scrutinizing the audio finding of the House Select Committee had largely solved the mysteries for good. Moreover, memory had returned to public favour just as Americans had come to believe that the nation had put its past behind it. But it was also true that such expressions as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Holocaust Memorial Museum on the Washington mall, and the Sixth Floor Museum in the old Texas School Book Depository building, all established or projected during this period with increasing public support, suggested that memories could be both parochial and unifying in their nature. In other words, memories could both mark a group identity as well as support, in all its manifestations, a national destiny. A nation that was both one and many ('e pluribus unum') could somehow, through an array of mini-memories reinforcing the identities of different groups, also further the 'canny' master narrative of national destiny that had always linked the American past and present.²²

During the 1980s, then, questions about the JFK assassination were again left to professionals and technicians. The Zapruder film was technically enhanced, revealing facts that represented certainties, not conjectures. These included Rosemary Willis' testimony, confirming that the first shot had missed, the confirmation of the Thorburn reaction, which revealed JFK's reflex reaction; and something not previously noticed in frame 224: the fact that Connally's lapel flap flies up at the same place on his body he was shot. This established that the shot that hit Connally was visible in the same Zapruder image (224) that shows the first sign of an injured Kennedy. If this was true, in the eleven subsequent frames (just over a half-second) Connally's body was preparing to register the pain of an injury that had already occurred. Kennedy's

22 Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), pp. 231–238.

spinal reaction, by contrast, was immediate and consequently registered on film instantly.²³

Throughout 1992, two prominent investigations, one by the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and the other by Failure Analysis associates in 1992, used computer modeling to line up the shots and the sixth-floor window with the body positions of the two victims in frame 224. These tests were widely (though of course, not universally) respected and regarded as lending digital (i.e., mathematical) certainty to the single bullet theory.²⁴

For the purpose of this article, which examines memory and climates of opinion, the issue is not whether the lone gunman thesis was or was not in fact scientifically 'proven' during the 1980s but whether key groups in the nation perceived that it was. The new deference given to experts and technicians furthered this trend. For example, the House Select Committee's determination that a conspiracy killed Kennedy was embarrassingly debunked by authorities in science and the government. The FBI, which disputed the House finding, hired the National Academy of Sciences to study the evidence about a police motorcycle 'Dictabelt' recording that supposedly revealed a fourth shot fired from the 'grassy knoll'. This was the sole piece of evidence behind the Select Committee's finding of conspiracy. Aided by an amateur sleuth who listened to the recordings and heard noises the experts missed, the National Academy concluded in 1982 that the motorcycle recording was actually made one to two minutes after the assassination and captured no shots at all. The scholarly and media consensus has since sided with the Academy, another sign of closure on the question.²⁵

In 1993, Gerald Posner's *Case Closed* was published, highlighting the revelations in the three Zapruder film brought to the fore by scientists and technology in the 1980s. The book was widely regarded as having achieved the end of its eponymous title. Kennedy historians such as Robert Dallek, who had long steered clear of the conspiracy controversy, broke their silence and pronounced the book both the best and last word on the controversy.²⁶

23 'John Kennedy Assassination Film Analysis', *Itek Corporation*, 2 May 1976, 36–39; Posner, *Case Closed*, pp. 320–326.

24 Posner, *Case Closed*, pp. 320–324.

25 Bugliosi, pp. xxii.

26 Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 2003), p. 699.

Even as investigations were serving as one node of a story of mastery over the evidence and closure of the controversy, commemorations were performing the same role. The Sixth Floor Museum was opened in 1989, a remarkable occurrence to Dallasites who had spent the bulk of the period since 1963 trying to forget the assassination and to conceal its brick and mortar reminders. Until the 1980s, there had been steady public support for the demolition of the Book Depository building, and the city of Dallas had supported only those tributes to Kennedy (scholarships, charitable donations, support for the Kennedy Library in Boston) which situated all acts of memorialization out of view of Dealey plaza. But in the 1980s, a group of well-connected Dallas citizens argued that a Dealey Plaza museum, curated by Dallas's own leaders, could finally purge the city's shame, ironically closing the story and turning the page by telling it in the place it happened – but on Dallas's own terms.²⁷

The result, which opened in 1989 as the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, was a remarkable tableau, a heavily didactic exhibit, that has little changed from its original design and has been visited by six million people since its opening. The museum from the beginning managed to honor Kennedy by sweeping much of the assassination and its historical relevance under the rug. The curators made clear that they would take no position at all on the question of conspiracy, consigning it to a marginal position in the exhibition. Instead, they would provide visitors multiple opportunities to forget all aspects of shame and hand-wringing involving the city of Dallas.

The first part of the exhibit shone light on the *national* popular culture of the 1960s and the *nation's* public image of JFK. Then, a series of images of the motorcade and *black and white* versions of the Zapruder frames seemed to mark the event as one from the distant history books. When the exhibit arrived at the topic of the assassination, audio recordings of journalists reporting of the shots were played. At this point, the exhibit path seemingly ended, presenting visitors with no guide as to where to proceed next. The goal, according to the curators, was to replicate the confusion that flooded Americans in 1963 at the moment of the assassination. But it also allowed visitors to wander quickly past the subsequent (arguably more important) exhibits, including the sixth-floor window itself, with which they might be uncomfortable. This goal was deliberate. Organizers insisted, for example, that they wanted to fully grant the wish of those visitors who refused to hear or see anything about

27 Stephen Fagin, *Assassination and Commemoration: JFK, Dallas and the Sixth Floor Museum* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), pp. 89–122.

Lee Harvey Oswald. Following the point in which the exhibit opened up into 'confusion', one had to be deliberate to find the room where the conspiracy theories were laid out, together with the type of rifle used by the perpetrator and the model of movie camera used by Zapruder.²⁸

None of the three critical Zapruder frames were (or are) displayed individually, nor is their significance discussed other than fleetingly in a side room off the main path of the exhibit. A tour that was comprehensively guided with reams of explanatory text up to the moment of the assassination seemed only to dissolve into randomness at the moment the shots were fired. The resident historian of the museum, Stephen Fagin, seemed puzzled by the question of why the museum was agnostic on the question of conspiracy, and whether the museum was academic in nature. He answered the latter question in the negative. He pronounced the museum to have been created by and for the city of Dallas and its needs, not, evidently, for the purpose of providing unflinching coverage of the broader meaning of the assassination.²⁹ The museum as a site of memory has, since the 1980s, communicated the trendy message that respect for all opinions shows that the assassination pointed in all directions and therefore to none in particular. The museum seemed dedicated to making the visitor (and perhaps especially the Dallas visitor) feel better off in learning about a faraway time with few connections to her own.

The second (1980–1994) and third (1995–2013) periods of the half-century of assassination remembering were in agreement that historical facts had value not least as markers of identity, but that people with different identities tended to remember the same facts differently. The difference between the periods lay largely in their answer to the question of whether a fact that was true for everybody, but disbelieved by many, mattered or not. In the 1980s and early 1990s, there was no question that partisans on both sides believed in one truth and the importance of its acceptance. Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) floridly attributed the assassination to multiple conspiracies involving everyone ever suspected in the crime, from the CIA, to the mob, to the Cubans and beyond. Acknowledging the film was mostly fiction, he called his many distortions of the facts in the film his 'counter-myth' to the 'myth' of the Warren Commission. For Stone it was as if there were no actual truths but only lesser or greater fabrications from which we must choose to form our beliefs. But in fact, Stone *did* believe that there were truths to be revealed through his

28 Fagin, pp. 123–164.

29 Richard Reiman, Interview of Stephen Fagin, 23 January 2014, Dallas, Texas.

film, just as did the journalists, independent critics and the scientists. It was just that Stone's truths were postmodernist in nature.³⁰

In the film, Stone addressed the Zapruder film prominently in the scene where prosecutor Jim Garrison shows it to the jury as background for his explanation of how the assassination unfolded with no less than six shots. In effect, he serially analyzes all three critical Zapruder frames, assessing each while giving virtually no reasons for his assessments. Frame 224 receives no comment at all (although it is shown), but he describes frame 235 as showing an unhurt Connally, simply ignoring investigators' consistent conclusions to the contrary since 1980. That Connally still held on to his Stetson in frame 235 was Stone's only proof, but he ignored the possibility that Connally was still awaiting the registration of pain.³¹

Stone lingered longest on the head shot (frame 313), showing it (via Garrison) three times to the jury and to his film audience. Kennedy's body snaps 'back and to the left', we hear Garrison say each time the frame is shown. Once again, Stone pretends that the findings of the 1980s either did not occur or were beneath his dignity to address. He never notes that bodies tend to fall backward when shot from behind because of the propulsive effects from exit wounds in the front. Also ignored was the fact that Kennedy's wife was holding his arm at the time of the shot and that she could have reflexively pushed back against him in shock. Furthermore, Stone blithely has Garrison claim, with no evidence whatever, that the shot captured in frame 313 came from the grassy knoll. Yet the laws of physics mandate that such a shot from Kennedy's right would have traversed Kennedy's head from right to left, striking Mrs. Kennedy, whereas the autopsy photos show the bullet traversing the right side of the head only, from back to front.³²

Like the Sixth Floor Museum, Stone simply ignored evidence inconvenient to his interest, which, for him, was evidence of a pattern of governmental perfidy in the age of Vietnam. His argument that he was merely trading in one set of myths to counter another set reinforced the spirit of the times. That spirit held that one's beliefs about the truth represented the best possible expression of history at a time when history was a battleground and the battle mattered.

30 Robert Scheer, 'Oliver Stone Builds His Own Myths', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 December 1991, <<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-12-15-ca-926-story.html>> [accessed 1 June 2019].

31 Oliver Stone, 'The Zapruder Film: JFK (1991)', online video recording, YouTube, 6 October 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nmGS8rVuIM>> [accessed 10 May 2019].

32 Ibid.

The one agreement both sides shared by the 1990s was that government documents on the assassination should be released to the fullest extent possible. In 1992, Congress passed the JFK Act, creating the Assassination Records Review Board, authorizing the declassification of as many documents connected with the assassination as feasible, and virtually all of them within twenty-five years. What followed the law's passage was a sign of a new kind of remembering, namely a period of forgetting. After 1995, there were no controversies as documents slowly were released, no return of such battles as the historians against Hollywood. By this period, most Americans were too young to remember 22 November 1963. Most felt as detached from that event as from any other in history. Particularly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Americans too young to remember 22 November now had a more relatable and memorable day of shared trauma to recall. Scholars agreed that this generation of young people, across cultures, was unique in having lost a sense of shared connection with the past.³³ If a lack of familiarity with the past was one cause of a sense of historical 'uncanniness', such a sense could not gain much ground if older Americans shared the same historical detachments. The conviction that one must respect all identities and the historical myths that underlay each assumed greater priority for many Americans than educating the citizenry in the 'truths' or 'lessons of history'. As long as history seemed antiquarian and irrelevant, it was possible to believe, as many evidently did, that one could hold fast to their beliefs about the assassination without a concern that a universal truth need be either sought or secured.³⁴

In 2013, two events, the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination and an exhibit in Philadelphia on the single bullet theory, showed how plasticized memory had become. A solemn ceremony was arranged in Dealey plaza in Dallas, at which Kennedy was eulogized for this spirit and his meaning to the nation in life, not for the details of his death. Conspiracy theorists were explicitly barred from the event (although they demonstrated noisily nearby), a sign that history was regarded as a channel that could be changed, something that could be programmed rather than accommodated. The ceremony's nationalization of the assassination, untethering Dallas from the event, joined

³³ See Knittel, p. 2.

³⁴ Bugliosi, pp. xxv-xxvi.

with the focus on 'the New Frontier' to turn the spectators' minds and memory away from the assassination in the very place it had occurred.³⁵

The same year, the Arlen Specter Center for Public Policy at Philadelphia University unveiled 'Single Bullet', its first exhibit combining the efforts of students and faculty in architecture, law and graphic design to tell the story of Specter's contribution to the Commission. One of its designers, Evan Laine, produced a video in conjunction with the exhibit, richly detailing the interlocking evidence that permitted no doubt that Specter's 'theory' had to be a 'fact'. Given the provenance of the exhibit, it was clear that honoring Specter by demonstrating his 'success' was a part of its purpose. The students designed a model of the presidential limousine with seats that visitors could occupy to imagine themselves as Kennedy and Connally at the moment of the assassination.³⁶

But the exhibit's designers and students did not measure its success by the number of converts to its point of view on the single bullet theory. 'We invite you to review the evidence and form your own conclusion', began the words of the exhibit text. The void in student memory about the past in general, widely noticed at the time, was clearly on the designers' mind, but the goal was to guide students to form an emotional connection to this particular past and not an understanding of what had really happened. An architect for the Center, Jennifer Barr, explained that the exhibit was designed to convey a *feeling* of reality: 'For the people who lived through that time it might give them a sense of nostalgia, but for the students who didn't live through that time it makes it seem more tangible. It helps make it feel real.' A professor of architecture, David Kratzer, agreed that instilling an emotional connection between students and a distant past was key. 'The idea was to put the visitor in the place of Arlen Specter and in the place of JFK', he said. Dylan Herman, an architecture student who worked on the exhibit, explained that it 'brought about the importance of the time period'. Speaking about his fellow students, he said 'we were alive for 9/11 and have an emotional connection to it'. But now, he said of the assassination, 'I feel much more connected to it, and the emotion of it.'³⁷

35 'JFK Commemoration: Conspiracy Theorists Left Out of Dallas Commemoration', *The Guardian*, 21 November 2013, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/21/dallas-jfk-commemoration-conspiracy-theorists-left-out>> [accessed 5 May 2019].

36 Evan Laine, 'Single Bullet: An Exhibition in Brief', online video recording, YouTube, 10 December 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nGkgdgh1SE>> [accessed 15 May 2019]; 'Single Bullet Immerses Audience in JFK Assassination', 18 October 2013, <<https://wordpress2.philau.edu/today/2013/10/18/single-bullet-exhibit-immerses-audience-in-jfk-assassination-investigation/>> [accessed 15 May 2019].

37 Ibid.

The strict, self-imposed limits on what the exhibit needed to teach about the assassination reflected the post-1995 notion that the importance of identity justifies the treatment of history as a buffet – the things one chooses to believe in constituting a mere matter of personal preference. Laine was passionate in calling the single bullet theory a fact *in his view* and asserting in an interview that he believed that the only possible conspiracy was one in which Oswald was the sole shooter.³⁸ Why then was the question of conspiracy not seen as important enough to the purpose of the exhibit to weigh in on? Since Specter had regarded the theory to be critical precisely because it destroyed the value of the Zapruder film as a corroborator of the idea of more than one gunman, this seemed an important omission in an academically sponsored University exhibition.³⁹

The designers of the Sixth Floor Museum, working in an era of assassination remembrance that viewed certain actual or potential truths as toxic, assiduously worked to avoid the history of such matters – among them conspiracy theories. The designers of the ‘Single Bullet’ exhibit of 2013, on the other hand, seemed to regard such memories as personal and therefore neither toxic nor publicly pertinent. Their purpose was to connect visitors (especially students) emotionally to the past (arguably in order to offer them a wider buffet from which to choose their historical beliefs in the process of assembling their identities) and to honor the individual (Specter) that the Center was attempting to memorialize. The Dallas memorial event on 22 November 2013, too, had been an event staged unapologetically to present a meaning that was most convenient for its organizers. In so far as past controversies were concerned, however, history had seemed to become a matter of ‘different strokes for different folks’, a highly plastic thing best left to personal tastes alone.

The ‘life history’ of the interpretation of the Zapruder frames demonstrate that images, whether concerning perpetrators or other controversial subjects, do not speak for themselves. They are screens onto which viewers overlay (and obscure) the original images with scenes no photographer could imagine, let alone capture. This examination also reveals that images have greater power to communicate imagined conclusions in the hands of some groups as opposed to others. Lawyers and historians are by no means immune from the temptation to privilege evidence most closely at hand, or to view it out of context. But their professional standards, at least in the case of the Zapruder

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Richard Reiman, Telephone conversation with Evan Laine, 17 May 2019.

film, have largely ensured that they have viewed the images within the context of other evidence, which has served as a guardrail against speculation. Even though the Warren Commission, *LIFE* and CBS News, representatives of the establishment all, had vested interests in supporting the lone gunman theory, they contextualized the images within a vast body of evidence that limited the importance of the images and claims made about them. While it is true that they perhaps wanted the lone gunman theory to be true, the verdict of subsequent investigations suggests that their effort to weigh an abundance of evidence would have guided them in the direction of the same conclusion in any case.

In the hands of activists, citizens and critics of the government, however, images seem to have a unique mesmerizing power to encourage a focus on the preferred outcome and a greater propensity to crowd out other evidence in the search for answers. Ironically, the public had nearly as much access to the forensic and eyewitness evidence as the Warren Commission, once the latter published its more than twenty-six volumes of testimony and research. Yet, for many, the Zapruder images were the first, last, and (for some) the only word on the subject that they would credit as reliable. In fact, some came to give up on the Zapruder film itself, not because it failed to reveal anything conclusive about the perpetrator, but because of the fantasy that the images were doctored and 'fake'. Tellingly, this conclusion came about after years in which the Zapruder images were publicly available and no longer possessed of the aura of mystery that had once added to their perceived value. For the rest, the Zapruder images revealed that everything that one could actually see in the film, especially everything that aligned with contextual evidence outside the film, had to be wrong. On the other hand, everything that could be said to raise questions, however remotely, 'proved' conspiracy. A finding of conspiracy would disgrace the establishment many Americans could not trust and restore a sense of control and canniness to a public and memory in crisis.

Because the conspiracy thesis proved wrong, or at least unprovable, this strategy of overcoming the 'historical uncanny' of the JFK assassination did not achieve its goal. Instead, the era would have to run its course before the most destabilizing period of conspiracy theorizing would lose its force and credibility with the general public. One reason it had been destabilizing was that the audience for their appeals was, like the critics, prone to examine evidence piecemeal and out of context; another was because the most spectacular scenes in those images lent themselves to decontextualization. Who could think of anything

else when seeing Kennedy's head disappear in a spray of red in frame 313, and snap back in the frames that followed? Who could not fail to question the 'single bullet' theory when seeing a stricken Kennedy and a passive Connally in the same frame? Finally, what made it destabilizing, ironically, was not the opposition of the establishment, but the *support* the establishment gave to the theories of conspiracy in the 1960s and 1970s, increasingly yoking it to the other assassinations of the era by investigating it with not one but two official investigations at the beginning and end of this period.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the assassination slipped into history, and conspiracy theories into the realm of hobby and parlor game. A majority of Americans continued to believe in conspiracy, and a majority believe in it still. But what did not continue was the salience of the debate among the public or the professionals. The case simply no longer seemed important. It would grow less so as more and more Americans who had no living memory of the assassination came of age. For that very reason, the Dallas-led Sixth Floor Museum, dedicated to healing the wounds of Dallas and turning the attention of visitors elsewhere, could be created without concern for controversies surrounding what they either included or left out of the exhibit. And director Oliver Stone could indict the government of the most hideous crimes and complicity, in a blockbuster film seen and believed by millions, while causing little stir.

Conclusion

These anomalies in the cultural memory of the assassination would grow in the years to come, when national remembering itself seemed a quaint and useless exercise to more and more Americans. Group identity took its place as the American *desideratum* worthy of attention and respect. Because the foundation of identity became the history of each group, each was thought entitled to believe whatever it wished about its own history and entitled to the respect of others regarding those beliefs. A national identity, if it even still existed, was no longer desired or desirable, nor was its travelling companion through history, the myth of the patriotic American individual. Exhibits such as the 'Single Bullet' exhibit in Philadelphia, and commemorations such as the 2013 remembrance in Dallas reflected the view that commemorators, just by presenting their own preferred history and inviting the rest of Americans to share their feelings, were benefactors of society legitimately preserving the past.

Largely as a result of the changing explanation of the Zapruder images over the years, American expectations of what the perpetrator of political assassination must be like has changed three times since 1963. At first, the perpetrator was seen as a lone threat to be eliminated once and for all. By the late 1960s and 1970s, it was transformed into a character alternately on the run and re-emergent, striking again and again, involved in all the assassinations to come, yet ever elusive. Finally, beginning in the 1980s and increasingly thereafter, the question of the perpetrator came to be regarded as a matter for the archive of memory, a story telling us something emotionally moving about events of long-ago significance. The assassination came to be seen as an event best left to each person's private contemplation and interpretation. In the process, how Kennedy had lived became the focus, while how he died and the perpetrator or perpetrators behind his death became details of history, no more relevant to the present than the Lincoln assassination or John Wilkes Booth. Through the reinterpretation of the Zapruder frames, these three in particular, the film had come full circle from a transparently revealing motherload of evidence, to a mystery that might upend the American future if not solved, and finally to a mere historical artifact useful in helping us feel the pain of a generation largely gone. After roiling two generations, the Zapruder film had finally, in the 2000s, become for most a source of mere fascination and feeling.

Painful pasts intrude upon the present like unwelcome guests, and the effort to bid them goodbye or simply accommodate them is never-ending. Every generation wishes to reconcile itself to a history that is comfortable and familiar. If a generation is fortunate enough to inherit such a period, as most are, it merely continues the commemorative themes of the past with little notice. Such was not the lot of the first generation that had to make sense of the Kennedy assassination. Based on the palimpsestic nature of the assassination, the perpetrator(s) of 22 November 1963 did not easily fit the image of the alien 'bad guy' from central casting. The ambiguity of photographs from the one set of images that captured the killing offered a rich platform to paint the past away, making it familiar again by 'seeing' the perpetrator in the shadows of the image. Establishing whether the perpetrator had been a conspirator or a lone gunman mattered less than 'outing' him and putting the past to rest. The question that lingers is whether history will remain compelling if memory loses its historic function of perpetuating the myths that connect one generation to another. The three photographic 'shots' in Dallas have long ricocheted between the

contending imperatives of remembering and forgetting. They may now at last have lost their power to divide, consigned as they now are to a distant – and distanced – past.

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