

Between the Signal and the Noise

The *Best Evidence* Hoax and David Lifton's War Against the Critics of the Warren Commission

by

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Preface

Of course, having written a best selling book (*Best Evidence* is now with its fourth publisher and has had about 30 printings), and being the producer of a best selling video, I suppose I am a public figure, and criticism comes with the territory ...

David Lifton in a letter to Jacqueline Liebergott, President of Emerson College, 8 December 1992

We cannot speak of falsehood until there is this awareness of the existence of a reality within oneself and external to oneself.

Marcel Eck, Lies & Truth

On April 3, 1993, I appeared in a panel debate on the medical evidence in the John F. Kennedy assassination at the Midwest Symposium on Assassination Politics in Chicago. Speaking for the critics of the official medical findings were Dr. Cyril H. Wecht, Wallace Milam, David Lifton, and I. An opposing panel defending the government's case consisted of Dr. George Lundberg, editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Dr. John K. Lattimer, Dr. Michael West, and Dr. Marc Micozzi.

This direct confrontation between critics and defenders afforded me a rare opportunity to make two points that have been nagging at me for quite some time: First, after nearly 30 years, we still do not have a full and honest official account of what occurred on the night of November 22, 1963, at the autopsy of Kennedy's remains at Bethesda Naval Hospital, or of how the autopsy pathologists reached their ultimate findings. Second, without fact, theories just don't work.

I am neither a well-known critic nor a professional public speaker (perhaps an odd apology coming from a trial attorney, but I find it rather nerve-racking to prepare for and then face larger audiences), nor do I have any burning desire for celebrity in connection with this case. I tried to persuade all of my co-panelists on the critics' side beforehand to avoid discussion of theories, to attack the government's case on the narrowest and least vulnerable grounds, and to stick to the evidence. In all but one case, my persuasion was either unnecessary or successful. The exception was David Lifton, the author of *Best Evidence*.

Mr. Lifton, who spoke before I did at his insistence, reviewed the tape-recorded interview he did with Dr. James J. Humes, the chief autopsy pathologist, in 1966. He apparently wanted to demonstrate that Dr. Humes conceded the possibility that President Kennedy's body was altered before it was delivered to Bethesda for autopsy. No one in the audience with whom I later conferred believed the tape anywhere near conclusive of this question; some believed that the very suggestion (which was novel and unpublished in 1966) startled Dr. Humes, but that Mr. Lifton was reading way too much into Humes' remarks, especially his omission to flatly deny the alteration theory.

Mr. Lifton also propounded a series of rhetorical questions concerned with his theory that the bullet wound in President Kennedy's back was artificially inflicted after the assassination.

Mr. Lifton did not directly address the two articles that had recently been published by , featuring interviews with the autopsy pathologists. It was my understanding that this was the purpose of the debate. I believe that Mr. Lifton's use of this occasion amounted to little more than self-promotion.

When my turn came, I stated for the record that I do not subscribe to the *Best Evidence* theory. I refuted Mr. Lifton's suggestion that there was no back wound with some new information given to me just days earlier. I encouraged the audience to focus on what occurred at the autopsy, instead of looking for ghost conspirators who allegedly intercepted and mutilated the President's corpse. These remarks, however, constituted a small fraction of my presentation, which I mainly devoted to examining the autopsy pathologists' self-contradictory statements about the autopsy.

I felt (and still do) that my remarks were appropriate, well guided, and necessary. Advance flyers promoting the Symposium advertised the critics' panel as a "team" serving as counterpoint to JAMA's panel. JAMA had a unified position, i.e., the *Warren Report* was correct. The critics are not unified in their beliefs, although the news media tends to lump them together. Mr. Lifton's theory is highly controversial and yet unproved, although it has been

widely adopted and thoroughly publicized. He and I have diametrically and irreconcilably opposing viewpoints on the subject of the autopsy. The convener of the debate planned to disseminate a tape to the public. I wanted it clearly established that not all critics agree with Lifton; that my points should be answered separately; and that our views of what constitutes the heart of the problem are very different. My dual goals were to prod the audience into thought both about the credibility of the pathologists, an issue that Mr. Lifton concedes as a given, and, frankly, about the value of his thesis.

As I returned to my seat, Mr. Lifton said to me, "You're despicable." It was evident that my remarks upset him, even though I had credited him with an important evidentiary find, a witness who had conversed with White House Physician Adm. George Burkley that night. During an interchange before the audience, Mr. Lifton took out of his portfolio and read from a printout of an E-mail message I had sent him as a follow-up to a recent telephone conversation in preparation for the debate. Although the entire thrust of the message had been tactics and strategy for the debate, Mr. Lifton attempted to use a portion of it to portray my approach to the case as equivocal.

Most of the audience reaction that I received afterward was highly complimentary. I recall that the audience was generous in its response, and I believe that the tape of the event will prove that statement correct.

On the Compuserve Information Service, some discussion ensued among Symposium attendees about the episode. To explain my stand on Mr. Lifton's work, I uploaded a computer file containing an informal critique to one of the forum software libraries. One forum member, a fan of *Best Evidence* who has contributed research to Mr. Lifton, objected to its tone and disagreed with its content, whereupon a discussion of Mr. Lifton's work followed.

Approximately two weeks later, two separate essays by Lifton were filed in response to mine. One replied to my suggestion that the semi-autobiographical nature of his book was questionable in that Mr. Lifton did not appear to have much of a theory, or much evidence to support his theory, until after the House Select Committee on Assassinations completed its work in December 1978, and still had nothing to show for his years of labor. Mr. Lifton purported to trace the development of his work in arguing that I was incorrect.

The other Lifton essay was a vehement personal attack in the manner of a long-distance psychological profile by someone who admitted that he did not know me well.

Mr. Lifton complained to Compuserve authorities that I had libeled him, a misconception on his part but one that temporarily intimidated the forum operators into removing my essay from their software library. It was restored only at my insistence that readers ought to see what had aroused Lifton's ire. The forum operators, nonlawyers who were clearly swayed by the protestations of Lifton supporters and also apparently afforded Mr. Lifton the presumption of legitimacy that sometimes attaches to well-known and impressively backed celebrities, struggled to find a coherent rationale for their actions. Mr. Lifton apparently decided to help them. He subsequently joined Compuserve as a member to claim the protection of the service's rule against abusive personal insults by members against each other, a rule that appears to encompass matters falling far short of the legal definition of libel.

Mr. Lifton maintains, in effect, that to attack his book is to attack his life as he claims to have lived it, thus blurring the distinction between, on the one hand, legitimate criticism of either his book or the general trend of his work on the assassination, and on the other, personal criticism of him. Even as the sysops have permitted Mr. Lifton to promote both himself and his book through his appearances on Compuserve, they have effectively stifled any serious criticism, literary or otherwise, of his work in a forum ironically entitled "Conspiracy Theories." Instead of frankly admitting to their fear of being sued by Lifton for permitting such discussion, however, they have explicitly agreed with his position that to attack his book is to attack him personally, and have relied upon this tortuous construction of the membership rules to justify naked censorship.

Mr. Lifton has also circulated his essays privately through the mail under separate covering letters critical of my actions, personality, and mental stability. He has also made known his displeasure through phone calls to a number of well-known critics, including those with whom I have associated for many years.

The sophistry of the former essay, and both the method and pervasive inaccuracies of the latter essay persuaded me that, instead of immediately objecting to his personal attack and demanding its removal and retraction, I ought to let it stand in public view, at least until I received the opportunity to reply. Mr. Lifton's own rope is sufficient to hang him. Regrettably, however, Compuserve authorities made their own decision to permit Mr. Lifton's personal attack to remain on view, even as they denied me the opportunity to defend myself and my

substantive views with a rejoinder. The system operators (“sysops” in computerese) have persistently refused to offer any justification for this favoritism. Privately, several members of the forum have expressed deep misgivings about the level, intensity and sincerity of the sysops’ commitment to the free exchange of ideas and information, as well as their sense of responsibility. In challenging the prevalence of Mr. Lifton’s thirteen-year promotional campaign for his book and his theory, I find myself in an uncomfortably ironic position not too dissimilar from that of the early critics who confronted the *Warren Report*.

These two Lifton essays represent the written work of a celebrity author who is widely recognized as a spokesman of critical scholarship in the assassination. They contain illustrations of his use of alleged fact; his precision and accuracy; his employment of quotations as evidence in argument; his version of the early history of the critical studies movement; his appraisal of other critics, including Sylvia Meagher and Harold Weisberg; and his version of certain episodes that occurred during his research and writing of *Best Evidence*. In every sense, they illustrate those aspects of a professional writer and speaker’s craft that, as applied in his book, merit the same critical evaluation and objective scrutiny of his readers.

In the interests of comprehensiveness and understanding, I have incorporated both the sense and the substance of my original essay into this greatly expanded consideration of Mr. Lifton’s very public role in the assassination controversy and the merits of his book. I also reply directly to his personal denunciation, inasmuch as it is highly relevant to those factors just mentioned.

Besides our divergent substantive approaches to the Kennedy assassination, it is the main thesis of this book that Mr. Lifton’s *Best Evidence* is a literary deceit in multiple dimensions. As Mr. Lifton explains in the preface to his work, he was unable to obtain a publisher until his agent persuaded him to rewrite his first attempt at a manuscript as an account of his personal history in researching the assassination of President Kennedy. The motif of *Best Evidence* thereby became Mr. Lifton’s reconstructed ruminations over the medical evidence during a period of fifteen years, ranging from his earliest exposure to the subject, to an inspiration in late October 1966, through seemingly laborious and detailed investigations, and finally to a new synthesis purporting to explain how the assassination was accomplished. As the following chapters reveal, however, where Mr. Lifton tells his readers what he was thinking at certain points in his odyssey, source materials that were in his files as he wrote his book, i.e., his formal and informal contemporary writings, prove beyond doubt that the views he professed then were precisely the opposite. Furthermore, he garnered the chief evidence that allegedly supports his assassination theory only while he was in the final stages of writing the manuscript that Macmillan Publishing Company eventually published.

The first dimension of deceit, therefore, is Mr. Lifton’s fabrication of a legend that appears to lend weight and substance to his conspiracy theory.

If autobiographical revisionism was merely ornamentation on the structure of *Best Evidence*, no matter how lamentable, it might be forgiven as taking literary license to the extreme in a work promoted as non-fiction. Unfortunately, the pattern of the author’s dissimulation attenuates to obscure his long-standing predilection for bizarre hypotheses to explain the assassination, as well as the crude political philosophy that drove him, at least during his formative years as an assassination researcher, to erect the type of convoluted rationalizations of the evidence that are the bedrock of his book. The second dimension of literary deceit, then, is the deliberate concealment of a past that is prologue to the present and future.

Ostensibly, *Best Evidence* is the story of one of the true originals among all the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorists. Underlying the edifice of his book, nevertheless, one discovers an unsettling theme of derision and disparagement regarding the early critics of the Warren Commission. Mr. Lifton’s exposition of this theme turns on both their substantive philosophies and their personal traits. This substructure of his book thus comprises ridicule of the species with which he is most closely identified. Moreover, I shall point to disturbing evidence that Mr. Lifton usurped theories suggested to him by others, claiming that he considered them, only to point to their alleged faults. Viewed in isolation, Mr. Lifton’s attacks upon the critics might be interpreted superficially as feathering his own nest. There is, however, an equally distressing parallel to this theme running throughout Mr. Lifton’s body of work. Specifically, it is his affirmative exoneration of the Warren Commission, its staff attorneys, and several key participants in the events surrounding the assassination from any intent to deceive or conceal, notwithstanding abundant evidence to the contrary, as Mr. Lifton himself asserted before the promises of literary fame and fortune were held out to him. Here is the third dimension to the artifice of *Best Evidence*: a subtle, though repeated assault against those with whom its author is supposedly in sympathy, coupled with absolution for their adversaries.

Finally, there is Mr. Lifton's central theory of body-snatching and the artificial creation or alteration of President Kennedy's wounds. Through the selective use and misuse of the evidence, and with his autobiographical interludes serving to distract his readers from the development of his argument, Mr. Lifton almost succeeds in making the impossible seem credible. At bottom, however, his theory is not only absurd, but also redolent of the worst caricatures of *Warren Report* critics drawn by apologists for the official fiction.

It is in the obvious self-interest of Mr. Lifton and his true believers to portray my dissent from his work as a personality clash, and to characterize my criticisms as ill-motivated. There can be no truly persuasive response to such ad hominem retorts, as they appeal to emotion rather than logic, and to prejudice rather than fact. The bone of contention between Mr. Lifton and this author is not a conflict between personalities, however, but the struggle over an idea: How should we, as private citizens or public figures, approach the problem of getting close to the truth about the Kennedy assassination? I believe that Mr. Lifton's work seriously distracts us from this effort and is otherwise deficient. My bias is that the role of the critic is to raise questions for the government to answer, not to pose theories for the government to refute. For those reasons, I believe that, absent his renunciation of *Best Evidence* (which we cannot realistically expect of him), the critics themselves must thoroughly discredit and renounce Mr. Lifton's work before the government seizes the opportunity to do so in the guise of responding to further public demands for disclosure. The cause of learning the truth about President Kennedy's assassination is bigger than any single individual or his book. That cause cannot survive a stubborn allegiance to error but may weather its disavowal.

Moreover, the issues of strategy and tactics are too important to leave in the hands of those who make the assassination their lifetime business pursuit and command substantial media attention to their theories, including those theories that are incapable of proof and hostile to any form of disproof. The media chooses such people to provide 'bread-and-circuses' to the masses, and their theories, somehow institutionalized in a constrictive array of shooting targets, become divorced from pressing substantive issues too long ignored by both the media and officialdom.

It is not everyone who gets the opportunity to publish a book and appear on public platforms on this subject, but those who do not can still make their voices heard by writing letters to the conveners of these Symposia in Dallas and Chicago, contacting journalists, and speaking with friends and colleagues. As a general matter, we do not require charismatic leaders, and we can certainly do without shrewd manipulators. From the earliest days, the drive to force our government to tell us the truth (or to tell us that it does not know the truth) has been a grassroots phenomenon, and there it still finds its greatest strength. That essential quality must not lag.

Roger Bruce Feinman

New York City, New York
June 1993

Chapter 1

You Just Don't Understand Me, You Never Did, I Hate You

During the noon hour on Friday, November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, Malcolm Perry, an assistant professor of surgery and attending surgeon, left the Southwestern Medical School for its teaching facility, Parkland Hospital, and his usual one o'clock rounds with the residents. (3H 366). He was eating lunch in the second-floor cafeteria with Dr. Ronald Coy Jones, the chief surgical resident (3H 367), when the hospital's operator sounded an emergency page for Dr. Tom Shires, chief of the emergency surgical service. Perry knew that Shires was delivering a paper at a meeting in Galveston (*ibid.*), so after the second emergency call he asked Jones to pick up the phone. (6H 52).

The operator told Jones that President Kennedy had been shot and was being brought to the emergency room. We don't know what thoughts passed through their minds at that moment, only that Perry and Jones immediately dashed down one flight of stairs from the cafeteria to the emergency room area, and into a little cubicle known as Trauma Room 1.

When he entered 1 and saw John F. Kennedy lying before him on a stretcher carriage, dying, Perry's first thought was that the President was a larger man than he had imagined (*New York Times*, November 28, 1963). He saw the gaping wound in the President's skull, and he knew that it was mortal. (*ibid.*) But there was no time for further reflection.

Dr. Charles Carrico had already arrived at the President's side. (6H 2, 3H 359, 3H 367) Because of Kennedy's inadequate respiration and an injury to his throat, Carrico inserted a breathing tube into the mouth and down the trachea past the injury. He then attached the tube to a mechanical respirator. (6H 3) It became obvious, however, that this procedure would not secure an airway. The President's breathing was still spasmodic, and there was a leakage of air around the tracheal wound. (*ibid.*)

Dr. Perry, who was the senior attending physician at the time, decided to perform a tracheostomy, the insertion of a breathing tube directly into the windpipe through an incision in the throat. Since the throat wound's location coincided with the spot normally used for a tracheostomy, Perry made his incision directly through the wound as an expedient. (3H 367)

Other emergency procedures were attempted, but the battle had been lost from the beginning. The chief of neurosurgery at Parkland, Dr. Kemp Clark, pronounced President Kennedy dead at 1:00 p.m.

A little more than an hour later, in a second-floor nurses' classroom which had been hastily converted into a makeshift press center, Drs. Perry and Clark were confronted with a battery of klieg lights, a bewildering array of cables, whirring cameras and spinning tape decks, and a horde of newsmen hungry for a story. The world already knew that President Kennedy was dead. It needed to know how he died.

Clark, who had arrived in TR 1 as Perry was performing the tracheostomy, had not seen the throat wound in its undeformed state. (6H 20) As a neurosurgeon, he spoke mostly about the President's head injury. Perry spoke about the emergency procedures, and about the wound in Kennedy's throat. The reporters were unfamiliar with medical terms, such as "moribund" (near death), "endotracheal tube" (oral breathing tube), and "tracheostomy," and they frequently interrupted to get the correct spellings.

Following the press conference, the news media widely quoted Perry as having identified the throat wound as one of entrance.

- A UPI report published in *The New York World Telegram & Sun* on the afternoon of the assassination said, "There was an entrance wound below his Adam's apple. There was another wound in the back of his head." (NYWT&S, November 22, 1963).
- Tom Wicker of *The New York Times*: "Mr. Kennedy was hit by a bullet in the throat, just below the Adam's apple, they said. This wound had the appearance of a bullet's entry." (*New York Times*, November 23, 1963)
- Other newspapers and the television networks concurred. (See, e.g., *Dallas Times Herald*, November 24, 1963; NBC, *Seventy Hours and Thirty Minutes*, Random House. New York: 1966, p. 11; CBS News, *The*

Assassination of President Kennedy as Broadcast over the CBS Television Network, unpublished transcript of coverage on November 22, 1963, pp. 51, 97).

The question whether Perry's observation was correct or mistaken belies two basic points:

- First, Perry was reported to have made this statement by several highly respected members of the White House press corps and local reporters.
- Second, Perry's identification of the throat wound as an entry was conjecture — unknowing and unintentional, to be sure, but conjecture nonetheless in the strict sense of the word.

As he later told the Warren Commission, Perry did not examine the President so thoroughly as to ascertain the trajectory of the missile(s) that struck the President, or the pathway of the bullet through the body. (6H 15, 3H 373, 3H 374) He did not know the position in which the President had been sitting when he was shot. His conjecture, however, was based upon his professional medical experience in dealing with gunshot victims and his personal experience as a hunter. (3H 366, 6H 18) From the undisturbed appearance of the wound, Perry had concluded that afternoon that, in the words of one reporter in Dallas, "A bullet struck him in the front as he faced the assailant." (NBC, *op. cit.*, p. 11) The reporters at the news conference did not know this, and they had no alternative but to report what Perry said and what they heard.

Of course, Perry's observation conflicted with the official theory of the assassination, that President Kennedy was shot only from the rear as his limousine passed the sixth floor window of the Texas School Book Depository Building in which the lone assassin lurked. Perry's comments therefore immediately led to the question that attorney Mark Lane and others have been asking for nearly thirty years: How could accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald have shot the President in the throat from behind?

The Warren Commission labored to cast doubt that the reporters at the press conference had quoted Perry accurately, an effort in which Perry himself acquiesced. For years after the assassination independent researchers searched in vain for proof of his original statement. Lane, in particular, was eager to include film footage of the Parkland news conference in his documentary on the *Warren Report*. In his book of the same title, *Rush to Judgment*, Lane reported that the three major networks and local Dallas stations no longer had television and radio tapes of the briefing. (Lane, Mark. *Rush to Judgment*. Dell Publishing Co., New York: 1975, p. 53) Elaborating on that claim in an interview with *Playboy Magazine*, Lane said that the local Dallas stations were visited after the assassination by FBI and Secret Service agents and asked to surrender all of their tapes. (*Playboy*, February 1967, p. 50).

Then, on June 26, 1967, in the second of four nightly CBS News programs on the *Warren Report*, anchorman Walter Cronkite referred to "the transcript of that news conference" without giving his audience any additional identification or indication of its source. Since that night, there has been no further word from CBS about the document.

The [transcript of the Parkland Hospital news conference](#) to which CBS referred was not of the network's own making: it was a non-classified government document unseen by the Warren Commission.

Arlen Specter, the Warren Commission staff lawyer who developed the medical evidence in the assassination, made a feeble and somewhat transparent attempt to obtain for that investigation a recording or transcript of the statements made by Dr. Perry on November 22, 1963. Although Specter told the Commission that, "[W]e have been trying diligently to get the tape records of the television interview, and we were unsuccessful," (3H 378) there is no evidence that the Commission considered using its subpoena power at any time. Instead of inquiring on its own, the panel asked the Secret Service to undertake a search. The performance of the Secret Service was equally lackluster, for a reason I shall presently discuss. On March 25, 1964, Secret Service Director James J. Rowley wrote the Commission that no videotape recording or transcript could be found at the television networks or the Dallas stations. (CD 678)

Specter understandably did not press the issue. Perry's statement about an entrance wound in President Kennedy's throat was directly at odds with the official report issued by three military pathologists who conducted the Kennedy autopsy at Bethesda Naval Medical Center on the night of the assassination. They concluded that the President was shot twice from the rear.

One of the peculiarities of this case is that, on the weekend of the assassination, neither the Parkland group nor the Bethesda group of doctors had seen all the President's wounds. The autopsy surgeons found a wound on the upper right-hand side of his back. The Parkland doctors were unaware of this wound at the time they treated

the President, since they did not turn him over on his stomach. (6H 3, 6H 5, 3H 382) On the other hand, the Parkland doctors were the only ones who had observed the throat wound in its original state. Due to the tracheostomy that had been performed through this site, the Bethesda doctors said they did not regard it as a bullet wound while the President's body was in their hands. Only later did they infer, rather than actually trace, a path from the back wound to the throat wound. (2H 368)

Specter, as middleman, played one group against the other to coax support for his single-bullet theory that one shot, fired from the rear, hit both President Kennedy and Governor John Connally, who sat in front of Kennedy in the presidential limousine during the ill-fated motorcade through Dallas. It was a theory that both the Commission's critics and supporters agreed was the cornerstone of the case for a lone gunman. Verification of Perry's statement about an entrance wound in the throat through the production of a transcript would only have gotten in the way of Specter's strategy.

In Dr. Perry's case, the strategy was two-pronged:

1. First, without ever asking Perry to deny that he had formed an initial opinion at Parkland Hospital on November 22, to establish that the doctor's earlier comments on the throat wound had been misquoted and misinterpreted by the press; and
2. Second, to elicit Perry's opinion of the possibility of the throat wound being one of exit by asking him to assume as true the autopsy findings and other information that Specter provided.

Both tactics lured Perry into embracing the autopsy findings without recanting his original statements, while still maintaining his professional pride. The second also led Perry, in his testimony before the Warren Commission, into the very sort of speculation that the press had solicited.

Perry offered little resistance. He did not stand up to the authorities as Robert Redford and Warren Beatty do in the movies. Perry knew that his "entrance wound" statement at Parkland had thrown a wrench into the works. The morning after the assassination (i.e., the morning following the autopsy), Perry told Clark that "he had been asked by Bethesda to confine his remarks to that which he knew from having examined the President." (6H 23)

Even if Perry, four months after the assassination, felt sure of what he saw in TR 1, he would have been stepping out on a fragile and lonely limb to say so. Having a transcript of his Parkland remarks before him as he testified would have been of as little help to him as it would to Specter. Specter, the middleman, held the cards — and the autopsy report.

Specter asked Perry, not did he form an opinion at Parkland whether the throat wound was an entry or exit, not did he have a basis, but did he have a sufficient basis to form such an opinion?

"No, sir. I was unable to determine that since I did not ascertain the exact trajectory of the missile."

(3H 373).

Were sufficient facts available then to form an opinion as to the source or direction of the cause of the wound?

No, Perry replied, "although several leading questions were directed toward me at the several conferences." (6H 15)

"Often questions were directed as to — in such a manner as this: 'Doctor, is it possible that if he were in such and such a position and the bullet entered here, could it have done that?' And my reply, 'Of course, if it were possible, yes, that is possible, but similarly, it did not have to be so, necessarily.'"

(*ibid.*)

"... I could not categorically state about the nature of the neck wound ..."

(6H 12)

He could not come to a conclusive opinion from the physical characteristics of the wound in and of themselves. (6H 15) In general, Perry testified that he spoke only in terms of possibilities (3H 375, 376).

So, too, in his appearance before the Warren Commission: Would Perry please assume that the President was struck by a copper-jacketed bullet? Now, would he also assume that it was fired at muzzle velocity of approximately 2000 feet per second? Add that the bullet entered the President's back (a wound Perry had never

seen), that it went through the muscle tissue as described by the official autopsy report (a path that neither Perry nor the autopsy surgeons themselves traced), and that it exited the throat (a fact that the autopsy pathologists merely assumed). Would the wound he observed in the throat be consistent with an exit wound?

“Certainly would be consistent with an exit wound.”

([3H 373](#))

By the appearance of the neck wound alone, could it have been either an entrance or an exit wound?

“It could have been either.”

([ibid.](#))

If, that is, the hypothesis posed to Perry by Specter were true?

“That is correct, sir. I have no way to authenticate either by own knowledge.”

([6H 15](#))

In this manner, Specter sought to dispel the confusion and to reconcile the Parkland doctors’ testimony to the autopsy report. Having thus neutralized Perry, the Commission was not above overkill. The *Warren Report’s* section on the wounds said:

At the news conference, Dr. Perry answered a series of hypothetical questions and stated to the press that a variety of possibilities could account for the President’s wounds. He stated that a single bullet could have caused the President’s wounds by entering through the throat, striking the spine, and being deflected upward with the point of exit being through the head.

([WR 90](#))

The *Report* presented this information as factual, without attributing these statements to Perry’s testimony. Perry issued no such reconstruction at the news conference, although at least one press account alleged that he did (dispatch published in *Dallas Times Herald*, November 24, 1963). In his testimony, Perry simply thought he remembered (perhaps under the influence of what he had read in the press since the assassination) positing the course of a bullet. ([3H 375](#), [376](#), [6H 13](#)) The *Report* continued:

Dr. Perry said his answers at the press conference were intended to convey his theory about what could have happened, based on his limited knowledge at the time, rather than his professional opinion about what did happen ...

([WR 90](#))

Perry, however, had denied holding any theory of the wounds, either at the time of the assassination or at the time he testified. ([6H 12](#), [15](#)) Neither did he advance any theory during the press conference.

[The transcript of that press conference](#) gives the game away. It reveals that both Drs. Perry and Clark repeatedly and emphatically declined to speculate on the trajectory of the shots or their course through the President’s body. They confined themselves to what they had observed and done. They spoke of a head wound and a neck wound, without saying whether the wounds were made by one, two or more bullets.

Dr. Perry described the neck wound as an entrance wound. His opinion was definite. It left no room for doubt. He had arrived at that judgment independent of the factors that Arlen Specter would later ask him to assume, and before the best evidence, President Kennedy’s body, had been transported behind military lines.

Dr. Perry had an opinion on November 22. On the basis of the hypothesis later given to him by Specter, Perry decided that his was not “the correct opinion.” Unlike testimony, however, the Perry transcript could not be shaded through the use of hypothetical questions. Unlike the Zapruder film with its unmistakable depiction of the violent backward thrust of Kennedy’s body, it could not be ignored. Unlike scientific tests, it could not be misinterpreted. Therefore, the Perry transcript had to be buried.

The Parkland news conference was actually a White House news conference, because it was conducted by Wayne Hawks, a member of the White House transportation staff. Hawks was acting in place of Malcolm Kilduff, the assistant White House Press Secretary who accompanied President Kennedy to Dallas, and who left

Parkland Hospital with President Johnson a few minutes before the press conference began. The transcript of the news conference was on file in the White House Press office, under the nose of the White House Detail of the Secret Service, which had purportedly sought it for the Warren Commission.

Arlen Specter knew about Hawks' role in the press conference, because Malcolm Perry told him about it on the first day of his testimony. (6H 7) That was March 25, 1964, the same day that Secret Service Chief Rowley wrote the Commission to say he had been unsuccessful in locating a videotape recording. (CD 678) Since Perry did not testify again until five days later (March 30, 1964), Specter could have obtained the transcript for that session. He did not.

Several authors have devoted lengthy books to cataloguing the Warren Commission's penchant for willfully disregarding eyewitness accounts of the shooting, ignoring physical evidence that was inconvenient to its predetermined conclusions, as well as its misrepresentation, obfuscation and prevarication relating to evidence that it did receive. I have recounted the tale of Malcolm Perry and the transcript of his news conference only because it is one with which David Lifton, the author of *Best Evidence* is all too familiar. He tells us in his book that he cashed a tax refund check to buy a set of the Commission's 26 volumes of hearings and exhibits. He read all the newspaper and magazine accounts that he could find. He read many books about the assassination that were published before his. Still, there is substantial cause for restless doubt that he pursued his readings and investigations with the same purpose, intent and understandings that the overwhelming majority of other writers, researchers and critics shared.

For the benefit of those few who may never have heard about *Best Evidence*, let alone undertaken the wearying task of reading the book through to its end, Lifton theorizes that while Jacqueline Kennedy went to the front of Air Force One for the swearing-in of Lyndon Johnson, shortly before the plane took off from Love Field in Dallas to return to Washington, somebody transferred JFK's remains from a coffin to a body bag, which was secreted away — somewhere. He further theorizes that, when the plane landed at Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, the body bag was secretly off loaded from the right side of the plane as some 3000 spectators and millions of television viewers watched an empty bronze ceremonial casket being unloaded and placed in an ambulance on the left side, the area being illuminated by Klieg lights. While the ambulance drove to Bethesda, the body was flown by helicopter to Walter Reed Army Hospital for alteration (e.g., the addition or modification of wounds, and the removal of bullets), then taken to Bethesda in a gray metal shipping casket before the arrival of the empty "original" coffin. Somehow, someone managed to re-casket the body in its original coffin without anyone else noticing. According to Lifton, the body in the gray metal casket was sheathed in a body bag, with the head wrapped in a sheet. The President's throat wound was sutured and his skull had no brain.

The autopsy pathologists at Bethesda, according to Lifton, were deceived by the "medical forgery" into believing that the President had been shot from behind, rather than from in front of the limousine in which he rode through downtown Dallas. Specifically, Lifton alleges a plot that enlarged JFK's head wound and added two rear wounds, one in the head and one in the upper back. He alleges that neither of those rear wounds were seen by the nurses and doctors who handled the President's body at Parkland.

Lifton pretends to posit only a small, high-level plot involving a clique of officials. ("America's Unsolved Mystery," *Palm Beach Post*, November 22, 1991, p. 1D) With the briefest reflection, however, the *Best Evidence* thesis clearly requires not only a group of assassins, but legions who could plant a phony bullet at Parkland Hospital, plant phony bullet fragments in the President's limousine, steal and then alter the President's corpse, alter the Zapruder film, and alter the autopsy X-rays and photographs. It would have required utilization of the type of sophisticated project management computer software that did not even exist in 1963 to coordinate and move the President's body, hordes of unidentified conspirators, coffins, coffin guard teams, doctors, Secret Service Agents, F.B.I. agents, and Kennedy staffers, as well as to conduct the complex array of operations that he envisions. Still, he insists that it was a small plot.

People are entitled to their sincerely held beliefs on the subject of President Kennedy's assassination. Nevertheless, when a prominent writer about the assassination dares to suggest, as David Lifton did in passing in a footnote to his book ("The critics' conclusion that the Commission 'covered up' had created blind spots in their research effort. My friendship with Liebler caused me to put aside my suspicions and realize that a person could, in good faith, hold the Commission's position." [Hard cover, p. 299 fn]), and now does again in essays published both privately and on the on-line Compuserve Information Service, that the Warren Commission and its various counsel were as honest and objective in their account of the evidence as newspaper reporters attempting to simply report news, it seems not only fair but urgent that those who are familiar with the record

question that writer's bona fides as a critic, as well as the true nature of the role that he appears to perform in this controversy. Indeed, Mr. Lifton does not stop at exonerating the Warren Commission; he insists that neither the doctors who treated Kennedy at Parkland Hospital, nor the surgeons who performed the autopsy at Bethesda lied about the events of November 22. While his book implies that the latter's military superiors (or other unidentified attendees at the autopsy) were involved in a body swipe that appears to resemble a game of musical caskets, Mr. Lifton nevertheless takes great pains in exonerating the White House physician, Navy Admiral George G. Burkley, of any culpable knowledge or involvement.

In Mr. Lifton's view, the Warren Commission stands on equal footing with the rest of the world vis-a-vis the Kennedy assassination: all of us were merely deceived by invisible plotters who phoned up the evidence. He writes:

I was taken with the idea that the Commission had been the victim of a monstrous deception, and was decidedly uncomfortable with the notion that because the *Warren Report* was written in a one-sided fashion, that meant the investigation was a fraud.

(*BE*, Chapter 15)

These are, however, decidedly different views than those that were ostensibly held by "the old Lifton," the one whose myriad conspiracy theories merrily skipped along the farthest fringe of assassination research and criticism of the Warren Commission during the Sixties. So different, in fact, that one might be tempted to argue in his manner that David Lifton is really dead, and that an imposter has taken his place. Were the difference clearly based upon principle, exemplified by a frank confession of error corrected through maturation and scholarly re-evaluation, one might lament his defection from the critics' ranks without faulting this aspect of either his book or his current dogma. Unfortunately, Mr. Lifton carefully conceals his former beliefs about the Commission, as well as his gestalt view of the assassination, and invents a completely false legend for himself which throws the entire autobiographical aspect of *Best Evidence*, as well as the marrow of his forensic argument, into serious question.

Sadly, the "disguise and deception" of *Best Evidence* are by no one except David Lifton.

It was Lifton who once wrote of the early Warren Commission critic, Edward Jay Epstein, some seven months before the latter's *Inquest* was published, "[H]e seems to want the recognition of being an important critic of [the Warren Commission's] work, yet somehow say it wasn't their fault. I think he is deceiving himself about the character of some of those men and his work will be the less hard hitting because of this." (Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, November 21, 1965)

Indeed, Lifton criticized Epstein for overlooking what he termed the Commission's "moral guilt." And he also accused the Warren Commission of "sanctioning" a cover-up, excoriating Epstein for "refusing to condemn" them. (ibid.)

Later, Lifton offered that some Warren Commission attorneys "deceived themselves to the point that they actually believe their own 'big lie,'" and he referred to "constraints ... that prevented a completely free and impartial inquiry." (Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, December 5, 1965)

But who are the deceivers and who are the deceived?

At the beginning of his Chapter Two of *Best Evidence*, Lifton gives us an account of his public confrontation with former CIA Director and Warren Commissioner Allen Dulles over the backward snap of JFK's head in the . One searches his narrative in vain for any thought or feeling in reaction to this encounter. In fact, however, Lifton could scarcely conceal his disgust with Dulles. Contemporaneously, he would write: "What I was surprised at was the rather disgusting ease with which he lied through his teeth when necessary." And Lifton conceded that such a man would lie "for reasons of state." (Lifton, David. Notes and Comments on an Interview with Allen Dulles, December 7, 1965)

The New Lifton castigates pioneering critic Mark Lane's style of public speaking in *Best Evidence*, yet after hearing the very debate between Lane and Liebler that serves as his vehicle for such denigration, the old, private Lifton explicitly agreed with Lane's characterization of the *Warren Report* as "a moral crime, a hoax, and a fraud." (Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, October 13, 1966)

And he continued:

I also believe the *Report* was authored by people who, at least at some level knew that what they

were authoring was a complete cock and bull story.... The *Report* itself, as you put it, deliberately uses the English language in the service of obfuscation and guile.

(*ibid.*)

Should the merciful rationalize Mr. Lifton's conversion from critic to apologist for the Warren Commission in terms of a transition from the nascent, hastily formed judgments of a novice researcher to the deeper, more intellectually mature insights of a scholar, they ought first to consider that he expressed virtually the same sentiments again in 1969, and as late as mid-March 1970 in correspondence with Sylvia Meagher, author of *Accessories After The Fact* and two indices to the official investigations of the assassination.

In *Best Evidence*, Lifton appraises Meagher and, with seemingly pinpoint precision, describes his own state of mind as of November 4, 1966:

Sylvia Meagher represented the view that the Commission and its staff were conscious concealers of the truth — deliberate, criminally culpable liars.

I could no longer subscribe to that view, for it failed to take into account falsified evidence. Many critics didn't allow for that possibility.

In reality, long after he professes to have arrived at this conclusion, Lifton wrote to Meagher:

There are instances where I think the staff was deliberately dishonest, and I will not hesitate to say so (or, perhaps better, demonstrate this as fact.) I don't think its [sic] all oversight, overwork or deception by others.

(Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, October 13, 1969) (*Emphasis supplied*)

(The "deception by others" reference puzzles this writer, since it seems to contradict Mr. Lifton's claim in *Best Evidence* that he was developing its central theory of a deceived autopsy at the time.)

Mr. Lifton was then coordinating the ordering, reproduction and distribution of major portions of the Warren Commission's unpublished files to her and other critics, a subject that I shall later revisit. In a transmittal memorandum covering approximately 2200 pages of documents known as "the Gemberling reports" (after FBI Agent Robert Gemberling of the Dallas Field Office), Mr. Lifton advised he had selected them with a bias toward revealing that the Warren Commission's attorneys "were trying not to tell us something," and that they would "sweep disagreeable information (disagreeable in the sense that it was in conflict with the conclusions of the particular area of the investigation that came under the aegis of the staff attorney involved)" under the rug. (Lifton, David. Memorandum, March 13, 1970)

Chapter One of *Best Evidence* describes a November 2, 1965 meeting between David Lifton and Wesley Liebler concerning letters that Liebler had received from various former Warren Commission staff attorneys in response to his queries on behalf of Lifton about a splice in the Zapruder film. As the two of them walked to a photocopy machine, Lifton wrote circa 1978, "I kept up a running stream of comment that it was only a matter of time now until the entire *Warren Report* came apart at the seams." But in his contemporary record of this same conversation, Lifton follows the word "seams" with a comma instead of a period, and continues his self-quotation: "and that I feel sorry for the staff attorney's [sic] who were 'used' and who still have their whole careers ahead of them." (Lifton, David. "Interview with ", November 30, 1965) (Lifton, David. "Interview with W.J.L." [unpublished memorandum])

Lifton, who wrote in his book that, during the mid-Sixties he thought Liebler stood separate and apart from the other Warren Commission staff attorneys, omitted his insight about their being "used" from his book, but clearly entertained the belief in 1965 that certain staff attorneys would be damaged were the *Warren Report* proved false. Today he argues that they were honest men who were deceived by the evidence.

What happened to David Lifton between the time he left work and school, co-wrote an article for *Ramparts*, also wrote those letters to Sylvia Meagher and memoranda to his files, and the time when he found his literary agent and publisher? Did an honest change come about in him? Did he formulate his present-day hypocrisy on the basis of some changed analysis of the 26-volumes, or was it a pitiable effort to make his body swipe and alteration scheme seem less demonist to his benefactors and the public? How was he transformed from a young man who courted the approval of the major critics of an earlier day to one who now lunges to disparage, defame and discredit them? Who turned David Lifton? Or, was there any need to turn him, i.e., did he actually feign at

being a critic in his correspondence and dealings with Meagher (and/or others) from the start?

In what must seem another lifetime, Mr. Lifton graduated from the Cornell University School of Engineering and Physics in 1962 (*New York Times*, January 12, 1981, Section C, p. 17). With his background in math, physics, and engineering, he had planned to become a scientist. (“JFK: Lone-Assassin Debate; Four Doubters Have Pursued Truth For Decades,” *Sacramento Bee*, January 7, 1992, p. F1) At the time of President Kennedy’s assassination, he was 24 years old and pursuing an advanced degree in engineering at while working nights as a computer engineer at North American Aviation, then a prime contractor for the Apollo space program. (“His J.F.K. Obsession: For David Lifton, The Assassination is a Labyrinth Without End,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1988, Magazine, p. 20)

In 1966, he was drummed out of UCLA for neglecting his studies. (ibid.) He allegedly quit his job with North American and asked his parents for financial support to pursue his assassination research. (ibid.) He had no plans to write a book about the assassination, he claims that he just wanted to devote maybe half a year to studying the matter (ibid.)

Lifton’s study of the assassination only began with his purchase of a set of the Warren Commission volumes. He also obtained photocopies of the Commission’s working papers, i.e., interoffice memos and letters to investigative agencies. (“His J.F.K. Obsession: For David Lifton, The Assassination is a Labyrinth Without End,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1988, Id.).

In a memoir of his experiences during the Sixties, Warren Hinckle, former editor of *Ramparts* magazine, remembers Lifton as “a pushy UCLA engineering student who was known as ‘Blowup,’ since his specialty was enlarging photographs of Dealey Plaza taken the morning of the assassination and finding figures lurking in the background. Lifton did not like to hear no for an answer and was persistent in insisting that one pick out the figure of a man among a forest of black and white dots in a twenty times enlargement of a Polaroid snapshot of Dealey Plaza he toted around like a billboard paster going to work.” (Hinckle, Warren. *If You Have a Lemon, Make Lemonade*, G.P. Putnam’s Sons; New York: 1974, p. 214)

Besides the expense he incurred in the reproduction of official documents and photographs, during the 1960’s and 70’s Mr. Lifton seems to have engaged in an extensive travel itinerary while pursuing his studies of the assassination. He went to the National Archives in Washington, , at least three times, spending six weeks there the first trip, one month the second. He also visited Dallas, the scene of the assassination, and made additional trips to Florida, Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, Washington and Bethesda to interview witnesses. (“His J.F.K. Obsession: For David Lifton, The Assassination is a Labyrinth Without End,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1988, Id.; Lifton’s own accounts of his travels in *Best Evidence*.)

He spent as much as \$800 a month in long-distance phone tolls over the fifteen years preceding the publication of his book. (“David Lifton’s Startling Study of JFK’s Murder,” *The Washington Post*, September 5, 1980, Style Section, p. C1) That comes to \$9600 a year in long-distance bills alone, figure a rounded \$10,000 a year to include local charges, or \$150,000 in total for use of the telephone. Since man does not live by the telephone alone, one must assume that, during his fifteen year sojourn, Mr. Lifton somehow managed to absorb the same customary and usual expenses of most single people living in a major urban center — such as Los Angeles — for rent, utilities, food, clothing, his automobile, and a modicum of leisure activities. Add to these the incidental, but nonetheless sizable, expenses of his research, such as audio tape recorders; audio tapes; maintenance and repair; books, both local and out-of-town newspapers, magazines; reproduction costs associated with photographs, films, and microfilms, as well as thousands of pages of documents; more than several file cabinets, file folders, etc., and one can only puzzle over how he managed to make his own way during those years. His correspondence with Sylvia Meagher discloses that, at various times, he also had one or two girls transcribing audio tapes.

In retrospect, it seems ironic that Mr. Lifton would call it “a miracle that so much evidence in the case has been turned up by a group of freelancers working on a shoestring.” (“For Conspiracists, Vindication Day; Government is Beginning to Acknowledge What Really Happened,” *The Washington Post*, December 30, 1978, p. A4)

Whose shoestring?

During the fifteen years preceding the publication of *Best Evidence*, Mr. Lifton wrote two articles for magazine publications, one for *Ramparts* in 1967, and one for *New Times* in 1978. In between these assignments, he served briefly as a consultant to the producers of the motion picture, *Executive Action*. Also in 1978, he appeared as a critic/commentator on WETA-TV’s broadcasts of the House Select Committee on Assassinations hearings. Then, Macmillan gave him a \$10,000 advance for the book. (*The New York Times*, January 12, 1981, Section C, p.

17) Before the publication of *Best Evidence* in late 1980, Mr. Lifton is not known to have held any job — regular or otherwise — following his departure from North American Aviation. His correspondence with Sylvia Meagher tells of long days and nights allegedly spent at the UCLA library, burning the candles at both ends in working on the case. Therefore, it appears that during the twelve years between the time he left North American and the time in 1978 when things began to pick up for him, he had only one published magazine article, one brief consultancy to a motion picture company, and no other ostensible source of income. It has been suggested that his parents subsidized him during all this time as he investigated the assassination of President Kennedy. If that is so, then Mr. Lifton is most fortunate to have had parents possessed of a generosity, indulgence and patience very rare in the middle-class milieu from which he sprang.

On a shoestring, Harold Weisberg mounted more than a dozen difficult lawsuits. Mr. Lifton offered no help, he merely gleaned the field that Weisberg sowed.

By the summer of 1975, nearly ten years after he began his study of the Warren Commission volumes, Mr. Lifton reportedly had not written a word of his manuscript. He is quoted as saying, “It was still in the form of file material, conclusions, memos, but not a manuscript.” (“His J.F.K. Obsession: For David Lifton, The Assassination is a Labyrinth Without End”, *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1988, Magazine, p. 20) His longtime research assistant, Patricia Lambert would tell him, “David, you have to create a manuscript. You can’t just have these thoughts, your files, your research and your concepts. You have to tackle the process of writing every day.” (ibid.) Mr. Lifton alleges in his Compuserve essays that he took “a major gamble” in writing his book without a publishing contract, although what he was risking by that time is unclear, as he appears not to have had another gainful pursuit.

Lifton states that he completed a manuscript by August 1976. When he did try to produce a book, however, it turned out that he could not find anyone interested in publishing it. (ibid.) Indeed, twenty-three (23) publishers, apparently not realizing the quality of his investigative skills, rejected his first manuscript before he received a contract from Macmillan Company in 1978. (ibid.) About that time, Mr. Lifton, while keeping his Los Angeles apartment, moved into his parents’ house in Rockaway Beach, Queens, to rewrite his manuscript under the tutelage of his New York literary agent, Peter Shepherd.

It was Shepherd who, according to Lifton’s “Acknowledgments,” encouraged him to revise “an abstract evidentiary analysis” into “a personal narrative.” He implies that they expected this revision to take no more than “several months.” Lifton alludes to the availability of his files at his West Coast abode. Presumably, by working assiduously to recast what he had already written, Mr. Lifton might have fulfilled his original expectations if, that is, his evidentiary analysis was substantively complete and the only remaining issue was the form of his narrative. Instead, the project stretched out over four years. Lifton and Shepherd had “hundreds of meetings.” Lifton credits Shepherd not only with conceiving the organizing principle of the book, but also with “guiding” him and editing his manuscript.

Living in the same room he grew up in, Lifton may well have recalled all the Erle Stanley Gardner mysteries he read as a child (ibid.), possibly harboring dreams of becoming a great lawyer in the manner of the protagonist, Perry Mason. We know that, as he slept in his childhood bedroom, he gave some thought to his contemporaries raising families and pursuing careers. (ibid.)

According to Mr. Lifton’s “Compuserve essays” the first ten chapters of his book were submitted to his publisher in August 1978. A contract was consummated around that Christmas.

Even as he reworked his manuscript into a semi-autobiographical account of his research, he continued researching for the book despite the exhortations of his agent to finish the project. As Lifton admits at the beginning of his Chapter 25, though, “there were certain loose ends in my theory that I needed to investigate.” Those “loose ends” turned out to provide the core of the theory that Mr. Lifton popularized.

The House Select Committee on Assassinations conducted its investigation during the time Lifton began to work toward finishing the new manuscript. During the summer of 1979, Mr. Lifton located one of the House Committee’s witnesses, Paul O’Connor. It was O’Connor whom Lifton claims provided much of the most sensational revelations upon which the *Best Evidence* theory turns:

- JFK’s body allegedly arrived at Bethesda Naval Hospital in a military-issue pinkish-gray shipping casket, not the ceremonial bronze casket in which it had left Parkland Hospital in Dallas;
- The President’s body was in a body bag;
- The President’s cranium was empty, i.e., the brain had been removed.

Mr. Lifton also informs us that, in July 1979, he also found Dennis David, upon whose recollections Mr. Lifton based his “Air Force One Insight,” which holds that the President’s body had been intercepted.

By August 1979, according to Mr. Lifton, he had completed and submitted to Macmillan Chapter 23 of his book. The book has 32 chapters. Mr. Lifton probably means to signify by omission that the last eleven chapters were completed after August 1979.

Today, at 54 years old, living in the same West Los Angeles apartment from which he conducted his research for *Best Evidence*, Mr. Lifton has spent his entire adult life on the Kennedy assassination to the exclusion of other experiences and accomplishments. His passion for this subject would seem unusual in view of the odd behavior he displayed on the very night of President Kennedy’s murder: While most of us who are able to recall that weekend sat at home with our families or friends in a state of shock and dumb anguish, Mr. Lifton is reported to have gone out dancing, hardly an indication that the assassination struck him in the deep, personal way that his long association with the subject might suggest. (“His J.F.K. Obsession: For David Lifton, The Assassination is a Labyrinth Without End”, *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1988, Id.)

In conversation with this writer, Harold Weisberg, the dean of assassination authors and researchers, has expressed curiosity about the possibility of a familial relationship between the late founder of Harold Ober & Associates, the venerable New York City literary agency that housed Mr. Lifton’s agent, Peter Shepherd, and one Harold Ober who, Mr. Weisberg alleges, formerly worked for the Central Intelligence Agency’s covert domestic intelligence operation. It bears mention that Messrs. Weisberg and Lifton had a severe falling out during the era of the Garrison investigation, and there is no love lost between them. I have not made any effort to investigate Mr. Weisberg’s hypothesis because, even if it proved correct, the connection with Mr. Lifton and his book would seem tenuous at best, and probably completely inconsequential. I record these musings merely as an example of the direction toward which some critics’ thinking about Mr. Lifton’s work has leaned. Furthermore, I see no need to spin my wheels in attempting to prove that Mr. Lifton’s is a “black book,” for I have already satisfied myself that it is a ridiculous book arguing for a ridiculous theory.

Chapter 2

The Scent of a Woman, Part I

Sylvia Meagher was the most perceptive and articulate critic of her time, yet susceptible to anyone who seemed to share her goal of achieving justice for both the accused assassin and the Warren Commission. There is a delicious story about Sylvia and the researcher Ted Gandolfo. Gandolfo has specialized in the collection of audio tape and other research materials relating to the assassination since the early days of the case. He was (and, from what I have heard recently, remains) an ardent supporter of Jim Garrison, in whom Sylvia had no faith, as she did not hesitate to assert during the late-Sixties. Their relations were accordingly quite strained, although Sylvia did consent to appear on Gandolfo's public access cable television program in New York City in 1977 to help him along.

During the mid-Eighties, Gandolfo was working on a book that he eventually published privately. For over a year, he frequently called Sylvia using the alias, "Bob Foster," disguising his voice and pretending to be calling from out-of-state. As "Foster," he asked for her advice as he worked on his book. His knowledge of the case impressed her, and she was eager to see the results of his work. They spoke frequently about how wonderful it would be to get together for dinner in New York whenever he was in town.

When she eventually caught onto the ruse, Sylvia was furious. I empathized with her feelings, but encouraged her to think of Gandolfo's actions as a backhanded compliment; he needed her guidance so badly — knowing that she would have nothing to do with him if he used his real identity — that he saw a need to go to such extraordinary lengths to solicit it. This seemed to assuage her anger. For a variety of reasons that will appear, there would be no similar reconciliation in the offing between Sylvia and David Lifton.

Between late 1965 and the end of 1970, Sylvia Meagher and David Lifton had frequent contacts by mail and telephone. In a working relationship that ran the gamut from hot-to-frigid, Mrs. Meagher during that period nevertheless generously gave Mr. Lifton of her time, advice and expertise. Among other materials, her files contain a thick collection of their correspondence and her notes of their telephone conversations.

Lifton has repaid Sylvia by portraying her as either a shrike or a dummy or both. He describes her in his essays as "extremely domineering," having "steely suspicious eyes," and "boiling over" with envy, as well as "confused" about the Warren Commission, in that she believed them guilty of a cover-up (how foolish she was to entertain such thoughts). He whines about what he perceived as her "viscous abuse" [sic], implying that it related to his failure to produce a book. He knows otherwise, although he is not telling. Writing twenty-three years after she discarded him, and over four years after her death, Lifton still demonstrates that conviction of righteousness, coupled with the feeling of being misunderstood, which pervaded the letters he wrote to her a quarter-century ago.

As Sylvia extended to him the help and encouragement that he solicited from her, and attempted with piercing logic couched in the most gentle and collegial reprimands to dissuade him from theories that are charitably described as untenable, (see Chapter 12), Lifton lied to her repeatedly; appropriated material from her unpublished manuscript for his own *Ramparts* piece; sought unsuccessfully to elicit her sanction of — perhaps even her participation in — a shady intrigue to obtain a bootleg copy of the Zapruder film; and sought to rupture her friendship with at least one other major critic. At every point in their relationship, he abused her, until she would tolerate no more.

In the prologue and first chapter of his book, Lifton establishes the close working relationship he formed with former Assistant Counsel to the Warren Commission, Wesley J. Liebeler, whom he first met on October 12, 1965. He paints the critics as unreasonably suspicious of this liaison, perhaps even paranoid. He portrays Sylvia Meagher as a screaming, shrieking woman whose primary concern was the protection of her unpublished manuscript for *Accessories After The Fact*, worried that Lifton would be "co-opted" by Liebeler, whose reticence to publicly renounce the Report that he privately conceded was defective rendered him morally indistinguishable in her eyes from those other Commission lawyers who towed the party line.

Here again, however, Mr. Lifton fails abysmally to own up to the truth, including the central thrust of Sylvia's objections, and his serious misrepresentation to her of the nature and extent of his contacts with Liebeler. He

essentially repeats his misrepresentations in his Compuserve essays: "She was deeply angered by Liebel's law seminar and by my attending that class..."

It was not the mere fact of Lifton's association with Wesley Liebel that aroused Sylvia Meagher's concerns and elicited her objections. It was the fraternizing nature of that association. Was he merely auditing Liebel's law school classes and discussing matters with him in a corridor, as he assured her verbally and in writing in downplaying the extent of their dealings? (Meagher, Sylvia. Letter to David Lifton, November 4, 1966) Or, was he conferring privately with Liebel, disclosing the insights, stratagems, disagreements, weaknesses, conversations, correspondence, works-in-progress and raw research that the critics had shared with Lifton and/or among themselves in private counsel? In the highly adversarial atmosphere of the day, and the fear that they were being watched (which turned out to be justified), Mrs. Meagher and other critics were concerned that Mr. Lifton's apparent fascination with Liebel could lead, even inadvertently, to potentially damaging, or at least embarrassing, disclosures.

In *Best Evidence*, Lifton implicitly admits that he provided Liebel with ammunition to use against the critics; that Liebel intended to defend the *Warren Report* at any cost; and that ultimately Lifton ceased to trust him and began to withhold information from him.

[Note: By early November 1966, Liebel apparently realized that nothing could ever satisfy Lifton. Lifton reports him as saying, "You've got a commitment to this (head surgery theory) that goes way beyond rationality, and you're never going to change your mind no matter what happens." (*BE*, Chap. 11)]

Does Lifton, in chronicling his progressive disenchantment with Liebel, demonstrate the grace, dignity and intellectual honesty to admit that Sylvia's fears were warranted? On the contrary, he portrays her as a shrewish, shrill-sounding ideologue.

Looking at the available facts and circumstances of Lifton's controversy with the critics over his lovefest with Liebel a quarter-century later, I find some degree of fault on both sides, with the balance of equities leaning heavily in favor of the critics. The critics appeared all too eager to assume the worst about Lifton's relationship with Liebel, and *Best Evidence* strongly implies that their assumptions were not wholly incorrect. On the other hand, Mr. Lifton displayed a stunning naïveté, in thinking that he could successfully walk the tightrope and maintain his good standing with the critics. The critics saw the problem in terms of a political struggle; Mr. Lifton saw it in terms of academic freedom. They could not counter his logic; he could not fully understand their fears. But they did not need his help; he needed theirs, and this imbalance of power (which Mr. Lifton seems to resent as "domination"), coupled with his apparent desire to have it both ways, most likely tempted him to mount the pretense of "the big secret" that he could not reveal — as I shall presently document — a secret that turned out to be nothing more than a strained interpretation of a clause within a sentence within a document that everyone had read, but a secret that intrigued the critics just enough to stop short of "cutting the bait."

Lifton gave Sylvia Meagher and other critics another reason to mistrust him for, by early November 1966, he was beginning to tell them that he had made some kind of discovery of great and conclusive significance that he was unwilling to reveal to them, unwilling to submit for their consultation, information, advice, help and friendship, even as he did not hesitate to seek information from them — an "earthshaking discovery" that he was unwilling to share with the critics, but willing to share only with his "partners of first choice," Wesley Liebel and Arlen Specter.

The breach of faith that Sylvia Meagher had only feared before, now unfolded. She pointedly remarked to him: "The time has come for you to ask yourself some searching questions about the alleged hostility of the other researchers and their reluctance to have dealings with you. Who is out of step with whom?" (Meagher, Sylvia. Letter to David Lifton, November 4, 1966) She was "shocked and outraged" at Lifton's conduct, and broke off all contact with him for a long time. (Meagher, Sylvia. Letter to Harold Weisberg, January 28, 1981)

Lifton attempted to see Meagher while she was visiting Los Angeles in mid-January 1967. While she refused to see him, she accepted his phone call on her last day in , January 15. She noted, "Admits his great big discovery, the one he took to , is flash in pan." (Meagher, Sylvia. Note for record re phone call from Lifton, January 15, 1967) Meagher also recalled this phone conversation in a memorandum she wrote after resolving finally to break off contacts with Lifton. (Meagher, Sylvia. Note for the record, August 25, 1970; Lifton told her the sensational discovery he had taken to Liebel was "mistaken".)

Besides Meagher's contemporary accounts, there is abundant corroborating evidence for Mr. Lifton's self-imposed isolation. As his book came to light, *The Washington Post* reported that Mr. Lifton "was forever

tantalizing his contacts in the research community with the claim that he was the only one on the right track. 'He always claimed he was the one researcher among us who knew the answer,'" The *Post* quoted one unnamed source as saying ("David Lifton's Startling Study of JFK's Murder," *The Washington Post*, September 5, 1980, p. C1) Ordinarily, I would not rely solely upon even a well-respected newspaper's quote from an unnamed source, neither is there any need to do so. The *Post*'s report not only conforms to my recollection of limited personal contacts with Mr. Lifton during the mid-to-late-Seventies, but to his own admissions.

At various times in the past two years, I may have mentioned to various people that I am 'working on a manuscript' for publication. None of them know what area [of the case] it is, or any specifics ...

(Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, February 12, 1969)

I am not dealing with any of the *Warren Report* critics in regard to my new work. This has been my policy since I started to work full time on this case, in the fall of 1966. There are people with whom I have perfectly cordial relationships (such as Fred Newcomb, or Bill O'Connell) yet with whom I do not discuss even the existence of such matters.

(*ibid.*)

I don't want new ideas, research materials etc. to be stolen by someone who hears about it on the grapevine.

(*ibid.*)

He also exhibited worry for his personal welfare. (*ibid.*)

Specifically, he said he had "lowered a wall of silence" between himself and anyone who was sympathetic in any way towards Jim Garrison. That included a large number of critics, but not Sylvia Meagher, who was vocal in her distaste for Garrison's evidence and methods. "Even knowledge of the area in which I am working is absolutely taboo." (*ibid.*) Contrary to the apparent implications of this quote, however, Mr. Lifton did not disclose his alleged "head surgery insight" to Meagher.

One must approach Lifton's correspondence with Sylvia Meagher with ever-present caution. Although hindsight might lull readers into concluding that the foundation of *Best Evidence* was indeed the big secret, the Lifton-Meagher correspondence tends to indicate on closer inspection that, within the period encompassing their relationship, he was studying and either writing or attempting to write on unrelated areas of the assassination (in which case much of the semi-autobiographical account of his researches in *Best Evidence* falls under suspicion), or else that he was deliberately misleading her into believing that he had taken her into his confidence while actually throwing her off the track. Based upon the article "His J.F.K. Obsession: For David Lifton, The Assassination is a Labyrinth Without End" (*Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1988, Magazine, p. 20), previously cited in this work, which establishes through personal interviews that by 1975 Mr. Lifton had no manuscript at all; his January 1967 article for *Ramparts Magazine* entitled, "The Case For Three Assassins" (discussed in the next chapter of this manuscript); and inferences reasonably drawn from the record of Mr. Lifton's correspondence with Meagher, I have concluded that the semi-autobiographical account contained in *Best Evidence* for the development of Mr. Lifton's theory during the years up to late 1970 is, at best, grossly exaggerated and, at worst, a literary deceit.

For example, as late as January 1970, Lifton called the following matters that he and Meagher had discussed "integral" to his work and subject to confidentiality:

- the alleged interception of the Zapruder film before it went to *Life Magazine*, and the eradication of the alleged car stop that was reported by a handful of eyewitnesses to the assassination (the film alteration theory is briefly discussed in a footnote in the book);
- the administrative relationship between Gemberling, Shanklin, and the Dallas Field Office investigation, including Shanklin's transfer to Dallas before the assassination (not covered in the book);
- the alleged substitution of windshields before one was sent to the FBI laboratory for analysis (another footnote in the book);
- the shooting of Governor Connally as an "accident" (ignored in the book);
- the accidental happenstance of Zapruder's film (not explained in the book);
- the manner in which Jack Ruby got into the Dallas Police Department's basement to shoot Oswald (not

- covered in the book) (Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, January 23, 1970); and
- the paraffin tests of Oswald's hands after his arrest in the Texas Theater on the afternoon of the assassination (this, too, is not covered in *Best Evidence*).

It seemed evident to many when his book was published that Lifton's "earthshaking discovery" was the alleged "head surgery" reference in the [Sibert and O'Neill report](#), something about which both Harold Weisberg and the team of Fred Newcomb and Perry Adams had already written.

There is no doubt that, as early as 1966, Mr. Lifton raised a question about the meaning of the "head surgery" remark in the Sibert and O'Neill report. This is documented in FBI file materials that I have examined. The questions are, "Where and when did he get The How?" and, "When will he tell us The Who?"

Chapter 3

I Don't Pick Brains, I Eat Them

Mr. Lifton took umbrage at the following paragraphs in my informal critique of his work on Compuserve:

If Lifton had originally set out to prove his *Best Evidence* scenario, why did he spend 14–15 years prying information and ideas out of other researchers, pretending all the while that he had some great secret which he would never agree to reveal? The reason is that he had nothing. This semi-mythical manuscript which he told people he was working on (the one he would not even show to a staff attorney on the , even though he could have been assured that its contents would not be disseminated) could not have contained anything more than a pedestrian rehashing of a well-covered area which, by the late-1970's, many found just plain boring.

I believe Lifton reached a dead end until his agent persuaded him that he could sell a book cast in terms of a personal odyssey through the wilderness.

If Lifton had this theory nailed down when he first found his agent, why did it take him nearly three years to rewrite his original manuscript? That manuscript would have been pure gold! It would not have required the addition of 'the personal touch.' If it needed work in matters of style or syntax, Macmillan would have rewritten the book for him and rushed it into print!

The history of Mr. Lifton's manuscript was sketched in Chapter One. There was a misstatement in the first paragraph quoted above: The manuscript that Mr. Lifton told people he was working on during the years before 1975 was not "semi-mythical;" it was an outright, full-fledged lie.

Aside from "the big secret," Mr. Lifton for years maintained a pretense of being hard at work on a book manuscript when, in fact, he was not.

I have been working, day in and out, and making solid progress generating typescript.

(Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, March 17, 1969)

Compare this, however, with what he told an interviewer as the third edition of his book went public in November 1988: "It was still in the form of file material, conclusions, memos, but not a manuscript." ("His J.F.K. Obsession: For David Lifton, The Assassination is a Labyrinth Without End," *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1988, Magazine, p. 20)

Lifton told Meagher he was writing a section of his manuscript that would "blast away at the performance of the staff." (Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, March 27, 1969)

It was still in the form of file material, conclusions, memos, but not a manuscript.

("His J.F.K. Obsession: For David Lifton, The Assassination is a Labyrinth Without End," Los Angeles Times, November 20, 1988, Magazine, p. 20)

My work is progressing very nicely. I am so excited over portions of this manuscript that I sometimes have trouble getting a full night's sleep.

(Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, June 2, 1969)

It was still in the form of file material, conclusions, memos, but not a manuscript.

("His J.F.K. Obsession: For David Lifton, The Assassination is a Labyrinth Without End," Los Angeles Times, November 20, 1988, Magazine, p. 20)

I have hundreds of pages behind me...

(Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, June 2, 1969)

It was still in the form of file material, conclusions, memos, but not a manuscript.

(“His J.F.K. Obsession: For David Lifton, The Assassination is a Labyrinth Without End,” Los Angeles Times, November 20, 1988, Magazine, p. 20)

The manuscript is based on evidence, much of it new, but all of high pedigree and legitimacy [sic]. The inferences from evidence are very carefully made. Now, as regards political matters: the political superstructure that one places on an operational substructure is largely a function of the evidence, and the facts.

(Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, August 7, 1969)

I have told a few people that I am writing a manuscript. No one who is on the grapevine, however, knows the specifics that I told you in the telephone conversations we had back in January and February.

(Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, August 7, 1969)

It was still in the form of file material, conclusions, memos, but not a manuscript.

(“His J.F.K. Obsession: For David Lifton, The Assassination is a Labyrinth Without End,” Los Angeles Times, November 20, 1988, Magazine, p. 20)

It was Sylvia Meagher’s understanding, based on previous conversations and letters, that Mr. Lifton felt his basic case was “coherent and conclusive.” Yet she grew increasingly impatient with his failure to produce a finished manuscript. Although she would not agree to assist him in the writing of his work, she offered to help Lifton resolve any uncertainties that might be plaguing him, were he to deal with her candidly. (Meagher, Sylvia. Letter to David Lifton, August 12, 1969)

Lifton responded:

[T]he basic case is coherent and complete. What still remains to be done? Basically, what remains to be done is the writing of sections of exposition which, for the most part, have already been researched.

(Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, August 31, 1969)

It was still in the form of file material, conclusions, memos, but not a manuscript.

(“His J.F.K. Obsession: For David Lifton, The Assassination is a Labyrinth Without End,” Los Angeles Times, November 20, 1988, Magazine, p. 20)

Either Lifton was telling Meagher the truth about his manuscript in progress, or he was simply prevaricating, or he was being duplicitous for some ulterior purpose. His representations of the subject areas of his work certainly do not correlate in the main with the subject, substantive contents, and major theme or theses of his book.

In *Best Evidence* it is not only the chronology of his philosophical musings about the Warren Commission’s honesty and integrity (or lack of it) that Mr. Lifton has reconstituted and woven into a fictitious autobiographical construct; the same conclusion obtains regarding his analysis of the substance of the evidence.

Mr. Lifton writes in *Best Evidence* about his reaction upon reading the first critical appraisal of the *Warren Report* to receive widespread media attention:

I first read *Inquest* in June 1966. I thought Epstein was wading in very deep waters when he extended his “political truth” concept to the deliberate falsification of the Kennedy autopsy.

(BE, Chapter 4)

And later in the book, he ridicules the notion that the autopsy pathologists’ testimony could have been untruthful:

To believe that Humes’ testimony was false, one had to believe that a navy commander would deliberately lie, risk criminal charges, and bluff the Chief Justice of the United States.

Compare, however, Lifton's diametrically opposed contemporary view:

I consider the entire Bethesda autopsy result to be incorrect and fraudulent. It is unfortunate but true that those who argue for a rearward hit in the President's head, although they concede the Bethesda autopsy to be false in other areas (like the first shot exiting at the throat) assume that in this one area, possibly, the doctors aren't lying 'that much', and that possibly the exit wound on the head shown in the artist's drawing does exist.

The double-head-hit theorists thus invoke Bethesda autopsy descriptions of the head to find an exit wound for a rearward entering bullet.

I believe the Parkland Hospital description, only, on this point. I do not accept the Bethesda autopsy.

(Lifton, David. *Memorandum re: Head Snap Phenomenon and Zapruder Film Frame Sequence*, March 20, 1967) (Emphasis added)

What Lifton wrote in March 1967 is completely at odds with what his book alleges he was thinking at the time.

"Three Assassins" was an able synopsis of the Kennedy assassination controversy as it stood in late 1966. It is not my purpose to review the details of that controversy. Rather, I raise the subject of Lifton's only previously published work on the assassination because it stands in astonishing contrast to his later work, *Best Evidence*, where Lifton gives an account of the progress of his research and theory that is grossly inconsistent with the contemporary published work.

As late as mid-October 1966, Lifton could still say, "I believe at least two men were shooting, and probably several more than three from about three different locations." (Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, October 13, 1966) In "Three Assassins," Mr. Lifton argued for a crossfire scenario in Dealey Plaza, and accepted as true that both the President and Texas Governor John Connally had been struck by shots from the rear, as well as from in front of the limousine. Yet, according to *Best Evidence*, by the time Mr. Lifton wrote and published "Three Assassins" in *Ramparts*, he was well on his way to developing the "trajectory reversal" theory that is central to the body swipe and alteration thesis of his book, not a hint of which is to be found in the *Ramparts* article. The inconsistency is not completely lost upon Mr. Lifton, because he does fumble over it for two or three pages in his book, finally conjuring up the lame excuse that he did not regard the senior management of *Ramparts* (Warren Hinckle and Robert Scheer) as smart enough for him to explain his theory to them. Who among us is indeed worthy? The key question, however, is what did Mr. Lifton find so good about the evidence upon which he relied in "Three Assassins" that soured for him by the time he wrote *Best Evidence*? It is this strange metamorphosis in either the evidence or himself that Mr. Lifton declines to elaborate, even as he disparages other assassination critics for holding views similar to those he originally expressed.

In "Three Assassins," Lifton accepted that both Kennedy and Connally sustained wounds to their backs during the shooting, and he posited at least two gunmen firing from behind the presidential limousine, while also arguing for shots to Kennedy's head and throat from at least one assassin firing from in front, i.e., the grassy knoll. In *Best Evidence*, Lifton ignored Connally's wounds and theorized that Kennedy was not shot in the back after all, the wound was artificially inflicted by plotters.

In "Three Assassins," Lifton cited and discussed the testimony of Glenn Bennett, a Secret Service agent riding in the follow-up car behind the President who saw the second shot hit him, in support of both the existence and location of the President's back wound, never providing any inkling that Bennett's testimony and written report could be doubted. (Lifton, David and Welsh, David. "The Case for Three Assassins," *Ramparts*, January 1967, p. 82 [hereinafter, "Three Assassins"]) Furthermore, Lifton pointed to the holes in the President's suit jacket and shirt as corroborative of the back wound's location. (ibid.) In *Best Evidence*, Lifton branded Bennett a liar and part of the conspiracy; he insinuated that Bennett's role in the plot was to provide a false Secret Service cover story for the phony back wound. Furthermore, the holes in the President's clothing he now deemed fake.

Examining the *Warren Report's* "single-bullet theory," i.e., that one shot pierced both President Kennedy and Governor Connally, Mr. Lifton discussed the bullet fragments embedded in Connally's wrist and thigh. ("Three Assassins," pp. 84-85) In *Best Evidence* this evidence is ignored.

Mr. Lifton asserts that all the ammunition allegedly recovered by investigators was planted.

The *Ramparts* piece cast suspicion on Dr. James Humes for burning the original draft of his autopsy report. (“Three Assassins,” pp. 81, 91) *Best Evidence* exonerates Dr. Humes as an honest guy.

In *Ramparts*, Mr. Lifton conceded, “The fact that the Parkland doctors observed no entry wound there [on the rear of the President’s head] does not mean that it did not exist, and it is conceivable that a hit from the rear occurred.” (“Three Assassins,” p. 90) [And notice the similar view Lifton expressed three months after the publication of the article: “It is possible that the doctors at Parkland missed a rear entrance wound on the head. This is generally conceded. For example, no Parkland doctor testified to right temporal entrance wounds...” (Lifton, David. Memorandum re: Head Snap Phenomenon and Zapruder Film Frame Sequence, March 20, 1967)] In *Best Evidence*, however, what was once conceivable became impossible, and the impossible (creation of a false entrance wound after-the-fact) became both conceivable and lucrative.

In 1967, Mr. Lifton pointed to the Warren Commission’s “consistent failure” to call witnesses who thought shots came from the knoll. (“Three Assassins,” p. 93) From at least 1980 through the present, however, the Warren Commission has been okay with him.

In a survey for *Ramparts* of the eyewitnesses who thought that one or more shots came from the grassy knoll, Mr. Lifton did pick up the testimony of Paul Landis, Jr., another agent riding in the follow-up car (“I heard what sounded like the report of a high powered rifle from behind me, over my right shoulder.”), and presidential aide David Powers (“My first impression was that the shots came from the right and overhead...” (“Three Assassins,” p. 97), so it is clear that he studied the testimony of the Dealey Plaza witnesses who heard shots from either direction, including those who thought that all or some came from behind the presidential limousine.

Was “Three Assassins” replete with factual errors? Did someone check the many citations to the official record in that article and find them inaccurate or nonexistent? And, which of the above mentioned points from the article are less valid today than they were twenty-six years ago? Upon what grounds?

Mr. Lifton requests our confidence and belief in his explanation that he really didn’t mean it; while he was working on bringing “Three Assassins” to publication, he was actually developing a completely different theory of the case. I do not accept what I call his “split personality” hypothesis.

He says in the Compuserve essays, “By the end of December 1967, I not only had a case that the wounds were different in two areas of the body, but I had the beginnings of a theory as to when and where the body had been intercepted — on the east coast, at Bethesda, in connection with the events surrounding the ambulance chase.”

As we have seen, Mr. Lifton was thinking about many areas concerning the assassination. We have also seen, to some extent, that the views he held then were radically different from the views he says he held then in his book. This point will be further developed later. There is no doubt that, in late 1966, Lifton asked the FBI about the head surgery remark in the Sibert and O’Neill report. The iron facts are, however, that the theory Lifton claims is his own was first published by others, and that he did not find the witnesses who were key to the version presented in his book until 1979.

The “Sources” listing at the end of his book, revealing that many of his interviews are dated 1978 or later, implies that much of his formulation of the *Best Evidence* theory is based on interviews with witnesses who were either first identified by the HSCA or whose military orders not to talk remained in effect until the HSCA investigation.

In the Compuserve essays, Mr. Lifton explains the progress of his research according to what he terms “Areas A and B.” While Mr. Lifton sank deeper into the quagmire between “A” and “B”, trying to figure it all out, the body alteration theory was first published by Fred Newcomb and Perry Adams in an article for the September/October 1975 issue of *Skeptic* magazine, excerpted from their unpublished manuscript, “Murder From Within”, a fact that is nowhere acknowledged in *Best Evidence*. The Newcomb/Adams thesis was precisely that advanced by David Lifton in his book, i.e., the alteration of the wounds between Parkland and Bethesda. Like Lifton, only sooner, Newcomb and Adams posited a high level plot implemented by the Secret Service.

At the very least, one would have expected to see Mr. Lifton report the impact that this *Skeptic* article had on his research, any fault that he found with its evidence or logic, some evaluation of his conversations with either Newcomb or Adams (surely he must have found the time to call them before he completed his unpublishable first draft in August 1976). After all, hadn’t he felt “isolated” with his terrible secret all those years? Didn’t he want some company?

The subject of “changes in the size and shape of the wounds” is not original to David Lifton. Previous authors wrote extensively about the apparent discrepancies between the Parkland and Bethesda descriptions of the wounds.

About “evidence” that the body was intercepted. Lifton says he discovered the “ambulance chase” in 1967 and knew that, “something happened at Bethesda.” This is what he calls his “Area A.” He discovered nothing except a group of witnesses, *dramatis personae* minor, whose stories (when they were able to remember anything at all) contradicted each other so wildly that they made no sense.

He claims that by February 1971, as he was “soliciting Dr. [Cyril] Wecht’s help in connection with my work”, he already had formulated “a series of lengthy memoranda” which, as it turned out, “correspond [sic] exactly to what is in *Best Evidence*” chapter by chapter in “many key areas.” It is noteworthy that he points to material he prepared after his dealings with Sylvia Meagher ended in 1970. The record of those dealings varies dramatically from what he alleges in his book and strongly implies that, if he did have “the beginnings of a theory”, it did not take any concrete form until after that period. He claims that these memos to Dr. Wecht dealt with:

- Alteration of the neck wound (Chapter 11);
- The statement in the Sibert and O’Neill report mentioning surgery (Chapter 12);
- Alteration of the head wound (Chapter 13);
- Trajectory reversal (Chapter 14);
- The theory of the pre-autopsy autopsy (Chapter 18)

Mr. Lifton interviewed a number of Parkland Hospital personnel in 1966. It bears mention that, with only three exceptions, he did not interview any participant in the autopsy until 1978 or later. The three exceptions were

- the chief autopsy pathologist, Dr. Humes (1966);
- the photographer, John Stringer (1972);
- and the radiologist, Dr. John Ebersole (1972).

Mr. Lifton discusses these three interviews in his book. They make no reference to any observations of the neck wound. Mr. Lifton’s theory of alteration to that wound relies chiefly on another researcher’s interview of Ebersole in 1978. Therefore, before the time of the HSCA investigation, Mr. Lifton had nothing except possibly an analysis of official and other published resources, including the confirmation by the Parkland doctors of their Warren Commission testimony.

Chapter 18, dealing with the theory of “the pre-autopsy autopsy”, dwells on Lifton’s vain search of medical texts for support of his “head surgery” theory. It relies heavily on the HSCA’s published interview with two of the autopsy pathologists (published in 1979), as well as Lifton’s consultations with Drs. Michael Baden and Charles Wilber during the late Seventies. In substance, the chapter contains nothing that was unavailable in published sources before 1979. It is simply Lifton’s own highly conjectural analysis of the Warren Commission testimony, material contained in other assassination books, and his reading of medical textbooks. By cleaving the post-1978 material from the rest of the chapter, what remains is clearly a rudimentary and inconclusive hypothesis that the parietal wound in Kennedy’s head was surgically enlarged to gain access to a brain that Mr. Lifton did not have reason to think was absent from the cranium until he spoke to Paul O’Connor in 1979.

Most noteworthy in Chapter 18 of *Best Evidence* is Mr. Lifton’s passing reference to the fact that, “an earlier version of his manuscript [presumably the one that he completed in 1976 but could not sell] was submitted for review by a prestigious pathologist.” The doctor refused to buy Lifton’s theory. Indeed, *Best Evidence* does not name a single physician who says that a surgically removed and re implanted brain could have escaped the attention of a pathologist at autopsy. Living in denial, Lifton turns this fatal shortcoming into another theory: Humes speaks in riddles that only Lifton can understand, i.e., when describing gunshot damage, Humes really means surgery. Lifton does not ignore, but pretends to harness in support of his theory, Boswell’s statement to the HSCA’s forensic pathology panel that, “the dura was completely — as you can see here — completely destroyed, practically.” ([7 HSCA 247](#))

Mr. Lifton did not complete any kind of manuscript until August 1976, before “Area B” sprang to mind. According to Mr. Lifton’s own chronology, none of the chapters to which he refers were written until after he received his book contract at the end of 1978.

Mr. Lifton leaps forward to his set of “1979 discoveries”, after the HSCA investigation, and well after he received his book contract. He “discovered” that something happened in Dallas before takeoff. This is what he calls his

“Area B.” Again, he discovered nothing that he did not make happen himself, and his interpretation of events has been hotly contested.

Lifton asserts that Dennis David’s account of the arrival of one casket at Bethesda before the arrival of another meant that, “the Dallas casket was empty.” Assuming *arguendo* David’s recollections were accurate, he did not know what those caskets contained. That is Lifton’s assumption. On that, and O’Connor’s recollections — which Mr. O’Connor has since modified in part, but which also have been contradicted by other witnesses involved in the autopsy — Mr. Lifton leaps to the conclusion that the body was placed in a different casket before Air Force One took off from Love Field in Dallas. This is his self-proclaimed “Air Force One Insight.”

The question remains, what was Dave Lifton doing during all those years that he was bluffing people with his non-existent manuscript about a non-existent secret? As Mr. Lifton’s Compuserve essays and the later chapters of this study make clear, he was canvassing the research community for information, ideas, or theories to incorporate in his work. He would tell people that, while he could not disclose to them what he was working on, if they would share their information with him, he would put it in his book.

In all, it appears that Mr. Lifton, either on his own or with the help of others, amassed a number of ideas and theories that he could not tie together, let alone prove, until he obtained a commitment from a publisher. During the ensuing year or more that he spent writing the book, he struggled to make it all work for him.

The flimsiness of Lifton’s support for the *Best Evidence* scenario, the careful juxtaposition of interview excerpts to make them seem more persuasive than they actually are, his near total dependency on HSCA-developed sources, and the obvious haste with which the later chapters of the book are formulated, compared with the earlier portion of the book, all tend to the conclusion that Lifton urgently needed cash.

David Lifton says in the Compuserve essays, “*Best Evidence* presents a radical approach to the evidence in the Kennedy assassination ... one which, if there was a special prosecutor, could provide a valuable roadmap [sic] for a new investigation.” We shall come to understand that, by “radical approach to the evidence,” what he really means is, “I ignore what I don’t like.”

Of more immediate interest, however, is why didn’t he give his road map to the old investigation, i.e., the House Select Committee on Assassinations? He seems to say in his book that, just as with *Ramparts*, it’s because they weren’t smart enough. Judging from the recollections of one former HSCA staff member, however, Mr. Lifton may have withheld his alleged secrets and his unpublished manuscript in pursuit of his own very different agenda.

During the planning stages of the HSCA investigation, senior staff attorneys became interested in conducting a limited dialogue with the Warren Commission critics. In early 1977, Kevin Walsh was a staff researcher whose responsibilities included advising his colleagues on the critics’ work. Because he was previously familiar with the case, Walsh was asked to submit the names of discreet individuals who would best be able to give the attorneys useful in-person briefings. The plan was to invite them to the Committee’s offices for “discussions of the evidence with an eye toward planning our course of investigation.” Walsh saw this as “a critical opportunity to assist a duly authorized congressional investigation in benefiting from the years of prior scholarship and unofficial investigations.”

He says that David Lifton, who stationed himself in Washington during much of the Committee’s activities, was “lobbying intensely for an introduction to the staff.” Walsh did not know Lifton well and had only met him for the first time in 1976. On the recommendation of a well-respected West Coast researcher, however, Lifton got the first opportunity to brief the HSCA staff. Walsh now recalls it as “the worst mistake I ever made.” He describes what happened:

The entire J.F.K. Task Force was assembled and also a number of senior counsel from the Task Force ... [Lifton] took the stage and launched into his college circuit lecture talking down to some of the best qualified and most experienced detectives and prosecutors Congress had ever employed. He spoke to the staff as though they were children and would have to prove themselves before he would reveal any sensitive information. He flat-out declared he had explosive evidence that he was saving for his upcoming book and would only discuss the outline of it when the Committee evidenced that they were serious and knew their basics. Staff members were furious, and when Mr. Lifton declined to answer several of the first questions, senior staff counsel canceled the meeting and I was strongly criticized for having brought the man in.

(Walsh, Kevin. Memorandum, June 3, 1993)

Walsh attributes the Committee's decision to scrub their planned series of briefings by the critics to Lifton's performance, which he calls an "embarrassing disaster."

Lifton omitted all mention of this briefing session from *Best Evidence*, while attempting in Chapter 24 to convey a completely contradictory impression of his attitude toward the HSCA:

I had decided to keep my distance from the Committee because I suspected their motives and methods.... I felt I might be used, and didn't want my material discredited ... But I felt some guilt about the course I was following ...

In fact, however, the HSCA did not seek Lifton's advice; he was aggressive in seeking access to them. It was Lifton, according to Walsh, who was "most persistent" and "immediately available" to receive an audience with the staff. It might therefore be supposed that Lifton, who had confided his great secret in former Warren Commission attorneys years earlier, would be bursting to tell it to the HSCA. Lifton, who had spent all those years since 1966 hunting, diagnosing, and assimilating the work of various other researchers, might have been expected to be eager to share his vast store of knowledge with what some people fear was the last official investigation. Yet, it appears that, when they finally gave him the crucial opportunity, Lifton instead stonewalled them, insulted them, and humiliated his sponsor. In discussing his relations with staff counsel (see *BE* p. 554), he also conceals a fact that he related to me in a contemporary conversation, that he refused their request to make his manuscript available. Walsh says the incident had "long-lasting implications for the critics' opportunities" to achieve meaningful input into the HSCA investigation. Indeed, although I could only look at the situation from the outside, it seemed as though the critics generally were left out in the cold.

In August 1977, Sylvia Meagher called me and insisted I hold our conversation in the strictest confidence. She had been invited to submit a memorandum to Professor G. Robert Blakey, the new Chief Counsel to the HSCA who was hired in June, and to attend a weekend colloquium of several prominent critics with Blakey and members of his staff that September. She asked me to assist in preparing the memo, but I was to tell no one because Blakey insisted that she sign a secrecy oath as a pre-condition to her participation. Sylvia had serious misgivings about both the colloquium and the oath itself, but she acquiesced because she did not want to be criticized for withholding her support from an investigation that the critics had worked so hard to achieve.

Although the memorandum was heavily weighted toward problems with the medical evidence, other areas were discussed. We tacked on a list of 25 questions that I prepared to be submitted to Dr. George Burkley, the former White House physician. Sylvia sent the memo to Blakey and went down to Washington to attend the September colloquium.

That same month, the House Select Committee's forensic pathology panel convened for the first time, and six members of the panel, accompanied by HSCA staff counsel, met with Drs. Humes and Boswell. Considering the fundamental significance of the medical evidence to the case as a whole, one might assume that the HSCA staff would have absorbed the critics' insights and suggestions long before then, had they regarded the critics as serious and credible. (Sylvia was not the only critic to submit concrete proposals for investigating the medical evidence.) Walsh, on the other hand, believes that the purpose of the September 1977 colloquium was to get the participants to sign non-disclosure agreements. (Walsh, Kevin. Memorandum, June 3, 1993)

To the best of my knowledge and recollection, Sylvia never heard from Blakey or the staff again (at least, not on an official basis). Immediately upon the conclusion of the HSCA investigation, Blakey released the verbatim transcript of the September 1977 colloquium, obviously to make the point that he had given the critics their say.

Several years later, at my behest, Sylvia inquired of one of her former HSCA contacts, Donald "Andy" Purdy, who was chiefly responsible for developing the medical evidence, what had become of our memo and the list of questions for Burkley. Purdy told her that he never saw the memorandum — a document solicited from and prepared by one of the most respected *Warren Report* critics. This episode, and the already obvious propensity of the HSCA to promote and ridicule some of the more tenuous conspiracy theories, indicated that, whatever Kevin Walsh and others of similar sympathies and goals might otherwise have achieved, after Lifton, the HSCA did not take the critics in a serious vein.

Dr. Burkley consistently refused to grant private interviews to writers and researchers regarding the President's wounds and the conduct of the autopsy. He died in early January 1991.

Chapter 4

What's Wrong With All of You? Why Can't You See How Scholarly I Am?

(When is a scholar a scholar?)

I have a great respect for, and love of scholarship and debate.

David Lifton (1993)

Jean Hill was one of the eyewitnesses who was standing closest to the presidential limousine during the fatal wounding sequence of the assassination. In Chapter One of *Best Evidence*, David Lifton very quickly glosses over his interview with Jean Hill on November 20, 1965. He says “she stuck by her story that shots came from across the street from where she was standing.” But in his own contemporary memo of that interview, Mr. Lifton reports that Mrs. Hill specifically denied seeing anyone shoot the President. Mr. Lifton’s book ascribes to her the statement, “She ... characterized the *Warren Report* as a fraud and a hoax.” In fact, it was Mr. Lifton who used those words, while Mrs. Hill offered him nothing more than epigrammatic statements to deflect his questioning. (Lifton, David. Phone Call Notes — Conversation with Jean Hill, November 20, 1965)

In reconstructing his November 30, 1965, meeting with former Warren Commission Assistant Counsel Wesley Liebeler, Mr. Lifton indulges in some regrettable dramatization that departs from his contemporary memoir of the discussion both in substance and nuance. He thereby not only alters meaning but also appears to revise the chronology of what he represents as a true account of his experiences. For example, the possible causes of the backward snap of the President’s head during the assassination were discussed during the meeting. In his book, Lifton reports:

Liebeler argued a bit about whether a neuromuscular reaction could have caused this, but he did not press the point.

In his contemporaneous memo of the interview, however, Mr. Lifton reports the exchange this way:

I briefly discussed the possibility of the head [backward] reaction coming from a muscular reaction, and carefully explained why the neurosurgeon I spoke to ruled that out.

(Lifton, David. “Interview with,” November 30, 1965)

This is more than a mere error in attribution. In his book, Mr. Lifton does not refer to any consultation he had with medical experts on the head snap until the time of his preparation for writing “The Case For Three Assassins” (his *Ramparts* article) and a meeting with Liebeler that occurred on October 10, 1966, nearly one year later. Apparently, in his book, Mr. Lifton has finessed some early medical research he performed, but that he cares not to disclose, or else has juxtaposed it with later events. His disturbing revision of this conversation implies, however, that he received a professional opinion either noncommittal or unfavorable to his viewpoint.

Returning to the meeting of November 30, Mr. Liebeler was accompanied by a reportedly attractive young woman named “Willie.” Mr. Lifton writes in his book: “Willie seemed quite impressed with the physics of the argument.” But the self-congratulatory tone of this statement is strikingly at variance with his contemporary memo, which does not quote her as reacting to anything that Lifton said, but instead implies that the woman, who was of foreign extraction and spoke with a thick accent, had difficulty following the back-and-forth between Lifton and Liebeler.

During the discussion, Mr. Lifton’s book has Liebeler lighting his pipe, a gesture seemingly reported as though by a novelist to impart quality to his character, but Lifton’s contemporary account reads: “Liebeler is now lighting his pipe or cigar (I was too preoccupied with the girl to notice which).”

Was Mr. Lifton’s memory of his conversation with Liebeler and the woman any better thirteen-to-fifteen years after the event? Mr. Lifton, after reviewing his files much sooner, seemed to say no in a letter to Sylvia Meagher dated June 24, 1969: “I’d forgotten many of those quotes he said to me, even the incidents themselves.”

Mr. Lifton's *Best Evidence* contains hundreds of citations to a public record that was and remains available to other researchers. In large measure, he also cites to his personal telephone or in-person interviews with witnesses, almost all of which in the years after 1965 he recorded on tape. These remain his personal property and he has not released them. There seems nothing wrong or unusual about that. Without meaning to offer any direct comparison, William Manchester did hundreds of hours of interviews in preparing his book, *The Death of a President*. These remain sequestered and subject to his exclusive control. Other authors and journalists also prefer to exercise dominion over their research materials, even long after their finished product has seen the public light.

Since the essential theories and conclusions of *Best Evidence* rest heavily upon Mr. Lifton's own interviews, however, he requires his readers to implicitly trust in the accuracy and selectivity with which he reproduces quotations from them, this notwithstanding his lack of formal journalistic credentials or any previous reputation as a nonfiction author. Like other readers of *Best Evidence*, I do not have access to his tapes. As if the Jean Hill and Wesley Liebeler examples were not reason enough, it accordingly seems fair and appropriate that we examine the degree of care and fidelity to the facts exercised by Mr. Lifton in the use of quotations that are otherwise verifiable, as such examination may bear upon the reliability and trustworthiness of his book.

Mr. Lifton reports in his Compuserve essays that, before we appeared together in Chicago, he "didn't really care whether Feinman agreed with my body-tampering theory or not," but that he was merely curious about my beliefs. He has me stating a theory of the wounds that he implies was in accord with the official (i.e., Warren Commission) version. Then, according to him, Lifton just happened to call the Midwest Symposium organizer, and just happened to mention my alleged statements. He says that the organizer wanted to "yank" me from the debate, but that, "I defended Feinman's presence on the panel." In other words, Lifton asks his readers to accept that I was on the medical panel only at his sufferance.

As will presently become obvious, Mr. Lifton, knowing that he was about to appear on a platform with a serious individual — not the kind of stage performer and media-hyped celebrity that he has become, but a trial lawyer who knows the evidence as well as or better than he does — was afraid of finally being exposed as a quack. So, he called and he taped, and when I told him what I thought about *Best Evidence*, he shivered and he shook. Then he went to the Symposium coordinator to insinuate that I ought to be removed from the panel.

To successfully hunt prey, one must first learn its habits. Just as important, one must learn to wait. The prey may temporarily vacate its habitual feeding ground; it may hibernate; it may resort to camouflage; it may even decide to mount a preemptive attack. The hunter must prepare for either eventuality. Modern technology has neither improved upon nor vitiated these ancient truisms; it is merely harnessed to their service.

Despite the winter, Sunday night, March 21, 1993, was the kind of night for which God and Howard Johnson invented the rich flavor of chocolate ice cream. That night, David Lifton, having exhausted my patience fourteen years earlier, and having given me a two-year respite since his last call, telephoned me to chat about our forthcoming appearance on April 3 at a panel debate in Chicago with representatives of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* over the medical evidence in the assassination of President Kennedy. I expected him to call, only I did not know when.

This is the story of how David Lifton stuck his head in the noose I prepared for him.

We had last seen each other at the Symposium in Dallas in October 1992, and as a follow-up to our encounter I had sent him a recently released document and an analysis that I had written in September. The document was a February 1965 report by former Lt. Col. Pierre A. Finck, one of the three pathologists who performed the Kennedy autopsy, to his Commanding Officer at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, Maj. Gen. William A. Blumberg. My analysis began by pointing to the suspicious circumstances surrounding the sequestration of this long-sought memorandum. More than one researcher, including this writer, had filed requests for the document with the shortly after its existence was revealed by the House Select Committee on Assassinations. The AFIP did not then have the Finck Memo because, it now seems, it was never part of any official AFIP file. Finck wrote his memo and sealed it in a manila envelope bearing the inscription, "To be opened only by General Blumberg." After Blumberg died in 1985, his widow transferred the private papers he kept at home to the AFIP. Sometime later, an archivist discovered the sealed envelope among Blumberg's other possessions.

Here are some excerpts from my analysis of the Finck memo:

2. According to Finck, they didn't wait for him to begin the autopsy, so the real story could be what took place before his arrival. Finck's statement that by his arrival at 8:30 p.m. the chest cavity had

been opened and the heart and lungs removed is in direct conflict with other witness statements that the Y-incision was done much later. Recall Lifton's interview with Ebersole in 1972 as mentioned in his book, and Art Smith's interview with Ebersole in 1978, as well as other witness statements interspersed in *Best Evidence* and *High Treason 2* (notably Captain Karnei in the latter reference). Note his statement that X-rays of the chest had been taken, as well as the head. Given their alleged initial understanding of the wounds, they would have no reason to X-ray and open the chest cavity unless the back wound had already been noted or they were considering the possibility, advanced by the Parkland doctors, that a bullet coursed downward into the chest of Kennedy after entering his throat.

It may be this [head] photo was posed to mislead or just one segment in a series of photos that, if viewed in the entirety, would have conveyed a fuller appreciation of the situation. Likewise, the X-ray showing frontal bone removed....

12. Photo of internal aspect of occipital wound. Where is it? It's my belief that this is what has become known as Fox #8, which ... is habitually reprinted in books in portrait rather than landscape orientation, and I am willing to concede this point to Finck and the Warren Commission apologists.

14. Note the clear contradiction: At first he said that when he came in the chest had been opened. Here he says: 'The President's family insisted to have only the head examined. Later the permission was extended to the chest.' This is the real story, which lost its context in the excerpts. Either he's making this up as he goes along, or he's relating instructions conveyed to him that allegedly were given earlier than his arrival time. If this were so, the incident reported by Sibert and O'Neill in their investigative insert (which makes no mention of Finck) happened before Finck's arrival and they knew about the back wound before Finck was there, and Roy Kellerman lied to the Warren Commission....

17. Harold Weisberg correctly points to a conflict between Finck's report and his Shaw testimony regarding the limitation of scope. He testified he was ordered not to dissect the neck. Harold would also agree, I gather, that Finck's testimony referred only to X-rays of the head that had been taken before his arrival, not to X-rays of the chest as well. The key here is that Finck's request to mark the protocol incomplete was entirely appropriate, and if the allegation that the Kennedys had restricted the scope of the autopsy were true, Galloway and Humes should have had no objection. Harold established previously that the authorization form contained no limitation. Absent any confirmatory statement from Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, now the only living witness, I conclude that this whole business of assigning responsibility to the family is a lie, and my feeling is that J. Edgar Hoover was of the same opinion.

24. Turning to Finck's single-spaced summary, which is dated seven days earlier than his transmittal memo to Blumberg. Note the following with respect to the upper back wound: 'It was stated that this was an entrance.' This is in the single-spaced version, but in the double-spaced version, 'I stated that this was an entrance.'

25. Further in neither the double-spaced draft (?) summary nor the report itself, does he remark upon any examination of the adrenals. 'I was told that the Kennedy family first authorized the autopsy of the head only and then extended the permission to the chest.' This clarifies and confirms my earlier impression. As Harold notes, he has no personal knowledge of the alleged restrictions.

Among my conclusions were these:

4. There exists in the public record of this autopsy a serious anomaly between Sibert and O'Neill's main report and their investigative insert pertaining to Burkley's attempt to limit the autopsy, in that their main report alludes to Dr. Humes' locating the back wound only 'during the latter stages,' a point with which the testimony of Kellerman is in agreement. The gravity of this anomaly is accentuated by Finck's allegation in his report that the chest had already been opened by the time of his arrival at Bethesda. The story just doesn't gel. Upon reflection, some of the most striking inconsistencies among interviewed witnesses to this event focus upon the examination of the chest

cavity.

[Note: The “investigative insert” to which I referred was a field office memorandum filed separately but concurrently with their main narrative report on the autopsy by FBI agents Sibert and O’Neill in the Baltimore Field Office (FBI #62-117290-878X, November 26, 1963). The memo summarized a conversation that occurred in the morgue before the start of the autopsy. In that memo, the agents reported that Admiral Burkley, the White House physician, “questioned any feasibility to do a complete autopsy to obtain the bullet which had entered the President’s back.” Secret Service agents Kellerman and Greer had testified to the Warren Commission that the back wound was not discovered until late in the autopsy, and the FBI agents’ main narrative seemed on its face to corroborate that testimony. Here, for example, is what Kellerman told the Warren Commission:

Mr. Kellerman. Just for the record, I wish to have this down. While the President is in the morgue, he is lying flat. And with the part of the skull removed, and the hole in the throat, nobody was aware until they lifted him up that there was a hole in his shoulder. That was the first concrete evidence that they knew that the man was hit in the back first.

Mr. Specter. When did they lift him up and first observe the hole in the shoulder

Mr. Kellerman. They had been working on him for quite some time, Mr. Specter — through the photos and other things they do through an autopsy. And I believe it was this Colonel Finck who raised him and there was a clean hole.

(2H103)/

5. In further comparison with Sibert and O’Neill, Finck’s report reveals nothing on the formulation of any conclusions, no matter how tentative, as to trajectories at the time of autopsy. Finck doesn’t say at any point that a path leading to the throat wound was considered, or that any explanation — even a tentative one — was advanced for what happened to the bullet that entered the President’s back. He doesn’t say what they made at the time of the autopsy of a bruise at the top of the lung or the hemorrhaging he noticed in or about the pleural space, although Humes and Boswell told Specter in their preparatory interview before testifying that they attributed this at the time to the tracheotomy. He makes no mention of bruising in the strap muscles (or the alleged lack of contusions at the sites of the chest drainage tubes and intravenous incisions). This report would have us believe that the question of what happened to the bullet was simply left hanging. Even in the face of their assumed inability to find either a missile or a path for the missile that entered the back, their senior officers refused to permit a complete autopsy, including dissection of the neck, while Lee Harvey Oswald was living to stand trial. This is very damning. Even more disturbing. Col. Finck does not seek any dispensation for signing a false report despite his clear and unequivocal knowledge that the autopsy was incomplete, and despite the denial of his request to see the clothes. Aside from the tepid resistance he claims to have offered, he does not imply that anyone twisted his arm, threatened him, or so much as merely ordered him to sign the report against his will.

11. What Finck’s various omissions tell us, and what I think he is perhaps relating here, is that he will not personally vouch or be held responsible for whatever he wants us to think may have transpired before his arrival. His alleged understanding is that X-rays and photos had been taken; the brain had been removed; the chest cavity had been opened, and the heart and lungs also removed. Allegedly, they haven’t found a bullet, and they require his assistance in assessing the situation, but they won’t permit him to perform a full examination to that end. It would be interesting to gauge his response to the question why he believes his presence was required at all, and what his role actually consisted of?...

In early January 1993, I learned that I would be a member of a panel representing the government’s critics in the Chicago debate, and that David Lifton would also appear. I immediately suggested to all my co-panelists that we confer on a coordinated strategy. The only one to respond affirmatively to this idea was Dr. Cyril Wecht. The discussions in which I participated among and between the co-panelists did not begin until March. Privately, I had some misgivings about Lifton’s participation. I discussed these with other interested parties, who appeared to have independently arrived at the same opinion, i.e., that Lifton’s *Best Evidence* theory would offer a vulnerable target against which the participants could focus their attack on the critics. (As it turned out, none of

us had much to worry about; the *JAMA* panel seemed to have a limited grasp of the facts.) I did not disclose my views to the organizer of the Midwest Symposium, Douglas Carlson, since it was clear to me that he had already extended a commitment to Lifton.

In early March, I called my colleague and co-panelist, Wallace Milam (also a longtime friend and associate of Lifton and a closet-adherent of the *Best Evidence* theory), to ask about his presentation. Wallace was in the process of putting the finishing touches on a marvelous video he planned to present in rebuttal to one that was being sold by Dr. Michael West, a *JAMA* panelist. He indicated that Lifton wanted to play a tape of his 1966 interview with Dr. James Humes. He told me that he wished to speak first on our panel, and that David Lifton wanted to follow him. Wallace said, "Everyone is wondering what Roger Feinman is going to talk about." I feigned indifference to the order of speakers, though I was secretly pleased — amused that few people alive knew my views (therefore making it difficult for the other side to prepare to debate me, as Dr. John K. Lattimer graciously confirmed in the moments before the debate got underway), and pleased that David wanted to go before me. All that I was willing to say for the record was that, in general, I planned to speak about the credibility of the autopsy pathologists. I did not want any additional details to get back to Lifton until I heard from him directly, as I was sure I would. Besides, whatever Lifton planned to present at the Symposium, I would be able to instantly adjust my remarks to avoid any repetition of his points.

In view of our impending joint appearance, some personal contact between Lifton and me was clearly necessary. In May and October 1992, *JAMA* had published interviews with the Kennedy autopsy pathologists that seriously damaged the thesis of Lifton's book, *Best Evidence*, to wit, that they told the truth about what they saw and did that night, either acquiescing in or oblivious to the fact that they had been deceived by the clandestine infliction and surgical alteration of Kennedy's wounds between the time the body left Parkland and the time it arrived at Bethesda, and by the extraction of bullets from his body before autopsy. The pathologists not only repudiated the theory, but also made statements seriously contradicting their own previous public and private pronouncements about the autopsy. I half-expected Lifton to tell me that he was prepared to abandon the central theories of *Best Evidence* and to admit that the conduct of the pathologists themselves — not some unknown plotters of a conspiracy external to the morgue — merited the closest scrutiny. I was interested in knowing how Lifton proposed to reconcile his theories with the obvious import of these interviews. I was fairly confident that he could not.

Although I had not given any thought to David Lifton or his book for many years, based on previous personal contacts and the oral reminiscences of other critics, I had the impression that Lifton, for whatever reason, tended to solicit ideas from others before stating his own. I also knew that he tapes at least some of his phone calls. Finally, I knew that Lifton practiced what I call "the doctrine of preemption," one of whose corollaries is to tell the other guy's story and knock it down before the other guy can even open his mouth to speak (I shall presently explore another corollary of the same doctrine). He also jealously guards his flank. With events threatening to overtake Lifton and his book, I knew that his call would come, so I waited while attending to my own affairs.

Despite my confidence, when Mr. Lifton did call on March 21, I was slightly taken aback by the change I sensed in him. I recalled that, years earlier, he had seemed better able to express himself fluently; now he seemed to have difficulty speaking in whole sentences and forming coherent questions, certainly more distracted. He stumbled over words, and frequently seemed to lose his train of thought. We began by comparing notes on [*JAMA's most recent article on the Kennedy assassination*](#), and our understanding of the format of the debate. I found myself having to repeat myself to him several times to get a point across.

Then Lifton changed the subject to our substantive remarks at the debate: "Okay, well, look, um, one of the things I thought I wanted to open up for discussion, which — uh, I was kinda — I'm trying to construct my talk, and I was wondering, um, I was wondering if we could just s-swap notes a little bit. I — I know what Wallace is doing, and I have no idea what you're doing, and I have no idea what Cyril's doing, and I know that I definitely want to come after Wallace's video, and I was curious what, y'know what your take on all this — "

I got the idea. "What I want to focus on is the personal credibility of the autopsy pathologists, and just that aspect," I said.

"Wha — what do you mean by personal credibility of the autopsy pathologists?"

I explained, "The contradictions in the statements they've made over the years and their testimony. There are a number of different issues. Why? Does that conflict with what you want to do?"

“Oh, no. Not necessarily ... I — uh — ah — I asked because, um — who told me? Uh, Wallace said to me or who is it? Aguilar said to me that you were surfacing something brand new, um, that you had from years ago, and, I was, you know, curious what area you were gonna bring in, and then I was going to tell you what I was going to do.”

I said, “Yeah.”

“Are you surfacing anything brand new that — ?”

“It depends ...”

As I expected, Mr. Lifton told me that he wished to focus on what was said in the conversation at the outset of the autopsy that had been reported by Sibert and O’Neill in that brief field memo they filed separately from their [main narrative report](#). But there was more, as I already had learned from Wallace Milam. “I’m going to deal with a conversation that I had with Humes in 1966,” he said, “which was a better cross-examination than Andy Purdy ever did.”

As I listened to the same voice that had become naggingly familiar during the late-1970’s, I thought, “Does David have anything left upstairs? Andy Purdy never examined or cross-examined Humes!”

Although Mr. Lifton has since implied that I “sandbagged” him at the debate, I made it crystal clear to him that I disagreed with his book. I said, “Of course, we can disagree on conclusions, and it’s just as well that we’re going to have some diverse viewpoints. You’ve made a case in *Best Evidence* that I don’t think anybody can either prove or disprove. I mean, it’s a hypothesis ... I don’t subscribe to it ...”

“Well, I’m curious,” Lifton said, “What do you subscribe to?”

I told him, “I think that the autopsy is crooked ...”

“What I’m getting at is, you think the autopsy was crooked; as the body lied there [sic] before them, what do you think the body had on it? Did it show the President as he was seen in Parkland, or does it show the President — I mean, now, which database does it reflect?”

Objection! Leading the witness. Nevertheless, I overruled my own objection and replied, “It may very well have reflected the database that we see in the photographs, but that’s an incomplete database, and it’s an inconclusive database. I — ”

“No, no,” Lifton interrupted, “When you mean the photographs, do mean that you believe that when the body was lying there that the back of the head was as pretty and as intact as the rear photograph of the back of the head?”

I had never heard anyone besides Lifton describe the bloodied head of the murdered President as “pretty.” But I was too deeply into the conversation to back out gracefully. “No, I think what they probably did was to take the piece of skull with hair on it that Clint Hill described as laying on the back seat of the limousine, and they recuperated that wound for the purpose of that photograph.” [Note: Clint Hill’s written report on this point is found at [18H 742](#), and his testimony is found at [2H 141](#).]

“Well, that’s reconstruction of it prior to autopsy photography — ”

Lifton was reaching to find a common ground, so I had to cut him off: “Wait a minute! We don’t know when that photograph was taken.” He made no response to this.

“But I mean — so, um — I guess I was curious what you thought the body looked like when it was lying there, and I was going to ask you wound-by-wound — ”

I had no patience for this. “Well, let me explain. I’ve got a problem with the X-rays. My problem is from the standpoint of technical authentication, I don’t think that the House Committee succeeded in authenticating these materials. The photographs are a different matter. I’m willing to accept the photographs as genuine only because as a lawyer — and I know this is going to grate on you based upon what you wrote about in the book — but I can take the evidence they give us and still argue a case against them. In other words, I don’t have to rely upon a theory that these photographs are fake. If they are, that would be a phenomenal find, and certainly it would blow the case wide open, but I can take the evidence that they give me and still argue a case against the autopsy.”

I sensed some confusion on Lifton’s part. “I don’t know which case is ‘a case’, in other words, if you take the

photographs that they give you — just in a nutshell, because I don't mean to split hairs with you here, but in a nutshell, take the photographs — what do you think those photographs show about which way he was hit in the head?"

"They don't! I mean, not conclusively. For example, they show us a photograph of the anterior-posterior view of the skull, with that semi-circular notch above the forehead, but they don't show us a view from the posterior-anterior. What's inside that semi-circular notch? Is there coning or beveling inside? What does that notch mean? Also, we don't know how much skull was removed at autopsy before that photograph was taken. The massive damage to the head, combined with the extensive fragmentation of the bullet, could indicate that, even if the shot came from behind, it was not the kind of ammunition that Oswald was using, so there's an argument right there."

"You can give me that argument, but what do you think happened to Kennedy in Dealey Plaza, based on — "

Finally! A direct question. "Oh, my own personal belief is that he was shot from both directions, from both behind and in front, and I think it was exactly as some of the witnesses said: He was shot in the temple; I think that he was shot first from behind, and then another bullet hit him tangentially from the right front and shot the top of his head off."

"You think he was shot twice in the head?"

"Yeah."

"And from the rear, where was that entry wound?"

"Exactly where Humes placed it."

"Oh, in other words, you buy it that Humes — you believe in the Humes entry wound in his testimony, his original testimony?"

"Yeah."

"And how come that Humes entry wound wasn't seen in Dallas?"

For an instant, I considered rebutting this oft-repeated inaccuracy, but I didn't want to prolong the conversation. "There could be a number of reasons for that. It could have been covered with hair or with blood — any number of reasons for that."

"And where was the exit for that?"

Another leading question, which I decided to deflect: "It may not have exited. According to Sibert and O'Neill, their original theory was that the extensive fragmentation of the head was caused by the impact of the bullet from behind, and that there was no exit, and that makes very good sense to me based upon the fragmentation of the bullet. How could any bullet [fragment] have created that massive damage to the right of the skull?"

We continued fencing, but it was clear that I was not going to convince him and he was not going to convince me of anything. As the conversation dragged on, Lifton repeated his view that the back wound was artificial. I could not agree. We also spoke about the photograph of the rear of the President's head. I argued that they were posed rather than faked. I was surprised to hear Mr. Lifton agree with me, since he has argued in public that these photographs are forgeries.

Then, Lifton told me how he planned to revitalize the *Best Evidence* theory in a sequel. In his next book on the medical evidence, he explained, he plans to augment his theory with a new angle that two of the Parkland Hospital doctors were involved in the plot to alter Kennedy's wounds, and that some of the alteration occurred at Parkland. Although he named the doctors, I will not repeat his assertions; to do so would only dignify the ludicrous. Another "clandestine interval?" As our conversation ended, I tried to persuade Mr. Lifton to stick to the evidentiary issues during our debate and avoid the discussion of theories. To emphasize the point, I followed up our conversation with an electronic mail message. Nevertheless, I had the distinct feeling of déjà vu.

Warren Hinckle of *Ramparts* had no better luck with Lifton twenty-six years ago: Hinckle tried to explain to him that, "it is necessary to break the ice before you can go swimming in winter." (Hinckle, Warren. *If You Have a Lemon, Make Lemonade*, G.P. Putnam's Sons; New York: 1974, p. 227) It made no difference.

Mr. Lifton states in his Compuserve essays that I hid my beliefs from him, and that I somehow implied that I wanted to win a position on some future JFK investigation. The reader can judge whether or not Lifton has been

truthful. Comparing me to Arlen Specter, however, is the unkindest cut of all.

After our conversation, Lifton called the convener of the Midwest Symposium, Douglas Carlson, in an apparent attempt to have me removed from the panel. Lifton complained to Carlson that, "I don't really know where Feinman stands." Carlson says that Lifton's written account of their conversation lost the flavor of the original: "He expressed some concerns. He indicated he thought you might take issue with some of his findings, and that your views might be contrary to his and there wouldn't be uniformity. I never expected that anyway." Mr. Carlson did not recall Mr. Lifton defending my presence on the panel. (Author's interview with Douglas Carlson, May 13, 1993)

As those who were present remember, and the taped record of the event will reveal, Mr. Lifton was prepared with copies of our electronic mail exchanges to protect his work in the only manner he knows how: the false personal attack.

Avoiding a substantive response to the questions and criticisms that I have directed toward his book and its theory of the assassination, Mr. Lifton in his essays persistently seeks to construct an argument that I hit him below the belt in Chicago, and that I have a personal vendetta against him, assumedly based upon some element of jealousy that he has published a book. This ad hominem approach should have a familiar ring to students both of rhetoric and the history of Germany in the Twentieth Century alike. Mr. Lifton bases his allegation that I hate him and have attacked him personally on his versions of certain quotations from the Compuserve Politics Forum's message board. For example, he quotes me as saying:

It is correct to say that I do not like David Lifton ... I do not like his methods. I do not trust his motives. I do not believe he is objective. I do not believe he is sincere. I do not trust him.... And, although it might have turned out otherwise, I do not believe that *Best Evidence* can be taken seriously as a work of scholarship, history, journalism, criticism, or other form of non-fiction.

Mr. Lifton's use of ellipses significantly changed the meaning, color and tone of the full quote, which was as follows:

It is correct to say that I do not like David Lifton. **However, since I only know him through his work on the case or through my personal dealings with him in connection with the case, and not socially, it is the functional equivalent of saying that** I do not like his work. I do not like his methods. I do not trust his motives. I do not believe he is objective. I do not believe he is sincere. I do not trust him. **I do not believe he has helped us (quite the contrary, I believe he has hurt us).** And, although, it might have turned out otherwise, I do not believe that *BEST EVIDENCE* can be taken seriously as a work of scholarship, history, journalism, criticism, or other form of non-fiction. (Emphases supplied to accentuate Mr. Lifton's deletions)

The clear thrust of this passage was this writer's opinion of Mr. Lifton's book and his role in the assassination controversy.

In another example of Mr. Lifton's mangled use of brackets and ellipses to slice and dice a quotation, he completely eviscerated the central point of another of my statements:

I sincerely believe that *Best Evidence* is one of the greatest publishing hoaxes since Clifford Irving's book on Howard Hughes. The theory of body snatching and body alteration has no merit whatsoever. I do not believe that [*Best Evidence*] ... could have [been] written ... in good faith.

The unexpurgated passage, however, read as follows:

I sincerely believe that *BEST EVIDENCE* is one of the greatest publishing hoaxes since Clifford Irving's book on Howard Hughes. The theory of body snatching and body alteration has no merit whatsoever. I do not believe that **the same man who co-authored "The Case for Three Assassins" in *Ramparts* could have written *BEST EVIDENCE* in good faith. I do not believe that Macmillan exercised responsible judgment in publishing this book without critical analysis and factchecking venturing beyond its exposure to a libel suit.** (Emphasis supplied to accentuate Mr. Lifton's deletions)

Part of the basis for my belief that Mr. Lifton has been pulling our legs, i.e., the dramatic variance between his theory in "Three Assassins" and the one he presents in *Best Evidence* was completely omitted by Mr. Lifton in his misuse of the quote, and he has failed to satisfactorily reconcile his earlier work with the semi-autobiographical

account of his research in *Best Evidence*.

In this chapter, I have confined my examination to only those quotations or facts alleged by Mr. Lifton in connection with conversations or events that actually occurred, but were completely misreported by a writer who presents himself and his book to the public under the rubric of scholarship. Regrettably, Mr. Lifton also sees fit to engage in the invention of quotations that were never uttered and events that never occurred. These will be mentioned in passing during the ensuing portions of this study.

Chapter 5

Act of Desperation

Best Evidence and the Decline of Pre-Publication Review

I was particularly revulsed at [sic] what I thought were his totally unnecessarily [sic] gory treatment of the medical aspects.

(Lifton, David. *Letter to Sylvia Meagher, February 13, 1968*) (Re: Jim Bishop's book, *The Day Kennedy Was Shot*)

It is not a good enough conspiracy theory for David Lifton that President Kennedy might have been shot from two directions, or perhaps just from the rear, albeit not from Oswald's alleged perch in the south easternmost corner window of the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository building. In Lifton's view, Kennedy was shot from one direction only: the front of the limousine (, pp. 349-350) (all page references are to the original hard cover edition of *Best Evidence*).

Why this insistence upon rejecting any rear entry wounds? Lifton's "logic" is that there were no shots fired from the rear simply because the shots were fired from the front, and because it would be easier to fabricate downward slanting trajectories by adding rear wounds to the President's body later on. He never explains why the framing of Lee Harvey Oswald required that there be no rear shots, only front shots. (*BE*, see around page 363) He is, of course, impressed by the Zapruder film's depiction of a violent backward jerk of Kennedy's head and torso, but fails to explain how this justifies his assumption that there was no hit in the President's back below the neck.

The chief problem that Lifton encountered in attempting to prove his thesis was the apparent discrepancies between the accounts of the Parkland doctors, the accounts of the Bethesda doctors, and what the autopsy photos and X-rays allegepy show regarding the nature of the President's wounds. In Lifton's world, it is necessary that alteration was pre-planned.

A conspiracy to alter the President's body before autopsy would, almost by definition, seek to accomplish its ends covertly, and in a manner that did not call attention to itself. Such a scheme would anticipate that President Kennedy might not die immediately, and that he would be ministered by doctors and nurses — whether at Parkland Hospital or elsewhere — all potential witnesses to the conspiracy's effects. It simply would not do to have one set of medical witnesses available to testify at an inquest or trial, and explain how the wounds appeared to them, while another group of doctors from Bethesda gave a widely divergent description. Unless the Parkland witnesses were either killed or controlled, any such alteration scheme would necessarily attempt to achieve maximum congruity with their observations. Any changes made to the body would not fashion conflicts between the "Dallas evidence" and the autopsy evidence — only in the interpretation of that evidence as to the source and direction of the shots. The conspiracy would incorporate into its calculations that the Parkland doctors did not turn the President over on his back. Moreover, the Parkland doctors would have to be carefully questioned to test their observations — which, in fact, they were, both by the Secret Service, before it sent the "official" autopsy report to the FBI, and by Specter, before Humes and his colleagues testified.

Simple logic, as well as the indisputable history of the government's hanping of the medical evidence, both militate against Lifton's before-the-fact, pre-planned scenario and in favor of an after-the-fact, ad hoc response to the developing situation. The necessity of any changes to the body therefore remains perplexing. To put the problem another way, was the conflict between Parkland and Bethesda a real conflict or a false conflict? If real, was it because the body was covertly altered before the autopsy?

A reasonable argument can be made that the discrepancies between the two versions of the wounds are not so clear cut. To the presumed chagrin of Mr. Lifton and the Liftonites, the Parkland doctors and nurses are not in unanimity about how the head wound looked. According to the *Boston Globe*, which interviewed many of them in 1981, six agreed with the so-called McClelland drawing of a large, gaping wound in the occiput (including McClelland himself) that was first published in Josiah Thompson's *Six Seconds in Dallas*. Six other doctors stated that the autopsy photo reproduced as a tracing in the House Committee on Assassinations volumes was

consistent with their recollections. That photo showed no gaping wound in the rear of the skull. (“Dispute on JFK Assassination Evidence Persists Eighteen Years Later,” *Boston Globe*, June 21, 1981, Focus Section)

There was a Parkland doctor who saw something on the skull that Mr. Lifton and his fans erroneously insist no human eye has ever seen. Dr. Robert G. Grossman, a neurosurgeon, worked next to Dr. Kemp Clark at Kennedy’s head. He told the *Boston Globe* that he saw two separate head wounds: a large defect in the parietal area above the right ear, and a second, smaller wound located squarely in the occiput. Grossman suggested that the confusion surrounding the location of the massive head wound could be the result of the imprecision with which the term “occipital” is used: “There is this ambiguity about what constitutes the occipital and parietal area.... It’s very imprecise.” And, he said, it’s possible that his colleagues loosely used the word “occipital” in describing a wound that extended to the back fifth of the head, or that they assumed, without lifting up the head, that the defect did reach the back. (“Dispute on JFK Assassination Evidence Persists Eighteen Years Later,” *Boston Globe*, June 21, 1981, Focus Section)

Liftonites persistently ignore evidence discrepant with their claim that the Parkland witnesses are in unanimity on the appearance of the President’s head. They are quick to argue that if “X” number of witnesses did not see a wound in the occipital region consistent with the Bethesda autopsy report, there really was no such wound. On the contrary, that several witnesses say they did not see a wound is evidence for nothing more than that they failed to notice it. One man says he saw it, and his testimony is competent and sufficient proof that it was there.

Lifton alleges that, during the Bethesda autopsy, the rear head entry wound was not fully apparent at first, but was reconstructed in its circumference with the bone fragments received by the pathologists during the late stages of the autopsy. He himself concedes that, if his theory is correct, the X-rays showing the hole had to have been made after the reconstruction (*BE*, pp. 533-34), and probably after midnight (*BE*, p. 526), rather than before the start of the autopsy as Humes has insisted.

Mr. Lifton bases this aspect of his theory of reconstruction upon a tenuous interpretation of ambiguous remarks by Humes and Boswell during a colloquy with some members of the HSCA’s forensic pathology panel while they were examining photographs. I have studied the transcript of that colloquy numerous times since its publication in 1979. It is unclear to me whether the pathologists were referring to piecing together the rear entrance wound, or to the wound that they maintain is an exit on the right-front of the head. At one point during the transcript, they state unequivocally that, apart from the entry wound, the occipital region was otherwise intact at the site of entry. The matter requires official clarification.

Mr. Lifton also generally argues that the main damage to the President’s skull was in the occipital region, and some of the top-back was blown off, but the top front was intact. [E.g., radiologist John Ebersole quoted as saying the front of the body (viz., the head) was intact. (*BE*, p. 546)] He argues that the conspirators enlarged the head wound during their removal of the brain for the purpose of extracting bullets.

Unfortunately for Mr. Lifton, a number of his autopsy witnesses describe the large wound in the head as being in the same posterior location where some of the Parkland doctors placed it. This, after the head was supposedly altered to remove evidence of a front-to-back hit. For example, radiologist John Ebersole said that when the body was removed from the casket there was a gaping wound to the back of the head, (*BE*, p. 543) and photographer John Stringer told Lifton that the main damage to the skull was in the occipital region. [Stringer’s account would appear to agree with both Godfrey McHugh (a “Bethesda witness” and the so-called “Parkland version”, although it disagrees with the autopsy photos. (*BE*, pp. 515 ff.) If the body was altered before autopsy, how were Ebersole and Stringer able to view this damage?]

In groping for the unifying theme in this fugue, Lifton found his key in the report of two FBI agents who attended the autopsy at Bethesda Naval Hospital, which became known as the [Sibert-O’Neill Report](#). Lifton became unhinged by the “surgery to the head area” reference in Sibert-O’Neill, which may have been someone’s mere offhand (i.e., eyeball) reaction to seeing the wrapping on JFK’s head when his body was removed from its Dallas coffin.

Few of the hundreds of other researchers and writers who have pored over this document ever ascribed any greater significance to this language, but Lifton alleges that it signified to him (as early as 1966) a scheme to alter the President’s wounds to conceal the facts of the assassination. He spent the next fifteen years reasoning from this conclusion, which he dubs “trajectory reversal.”

Lifton’s reliance on the “head surgery” clause in the Sibert and O’Neill report rests on three implicit assumptions:

- an autopsy pathologist made the statement; and
- it was a diagnosis, not a question or an offhand response to some question; and
- it was made truthfully and accurately

What evidence does he cite that Humes made the surgery remark? Only J. Edgar Hoover's statement in November 1966 that the agents merely reported "oral statements" made by the autopsy physicians. (Hoover's statement was published by *The New York Times* on November 26, 1966, at pages 1,25.) Lifton does not advise his readers that the entire thrust of Hoover's statement was a response to early books critical of the *Warren Report* in the nature of downplaying the significance of the Sibert and O'Neill report. Five years after Lifton's book was first published (but three years before he issued the Carroll & Graf edition), Jack Anderson reported an interesting revelation about the Hoover statement. Citing internal FBI memoranda, Anderson wrote that, contrary to the news media's understanding at the time, Hoover's statement was not prepared in response to press inquiries but at the specific request of President Johnson through Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas. (*Washington Post*, April 1, 1985, page B13)

Furthermore, Lifton tells his readers that, "the only doctors present at the time the body was removed from the coffin were Humes and Boswell." (*BE*, Chap. 12) The Sibert and O'Neill report defeats him, however, as Lifton clearly proves in the same chapter. Admirals Kenney, Galloway and Burkley were in the morgue, as were Captains Canada and Stover, all doctors.

How did Lifton decide that "surgery" really occurred? He read a passage of Humes' Warren Commission testimony to a neurosurgeon over the phone. Later, as recounted in Chapter 10, he visited in person with the pseudonymous neurosurgeon, "Dr. Morris Abrams". In assisting the doctor's understanding of the brain lacerations, Mr. Lifton supplied him with the knowledge that two metal fragments were recovered from the forward right side of the head. But he either omitted to tell "Abrams" or omits to tell us about the passage in Sibert and O'Neill's report pertaining to the extensive metallic fragmentation (estimated at 40 particles) dispersed throughout the brain. Furthermore, while he presents the neurosurgeon's comments as probative of surgery, Lifton was not dealing with a forensic specialist.

Lifton attempts to bolster his "surgery" thesis by arguing that Humes (to whom he attributes the surgery remark based on the hearsay public pronouncement of J. Edgar Hoover, see *New York Times*, November 26, 1966) was told a fragment of skull that had been brought into the autopsy room was "removed," another factoid gleaned from the Sibert and O'Neill report. Of course, the word "removed" might easily have been a euphemism connoting "blasted out during the shooting." Beyond Lifton's semantic foolery, however, this purported analysis was devious because Sibert and O'Neill reported that the skull fragment was delivered "during the latter stages of the autopsy," whereas someone reportedly made the surgery remark at the very beginning. Why wasn't there enough room in a 747-page hard cover book, or any of the subsequent paperback editions, to include the full five-page Sibert and O'Neill report upon which Lifton builds his empire? The only reasonable answer is that readers would then be able to see what deceptive use David Lifton makes of it.

Unquestionably, Lifton's chief witness in support of his "head surgery" theory is Paul K. O'Connor.

On the weekend of the assassination, O'Connor was a Navy 3rd Class Petty Officer attached to the National Naval Medical Center as a student medical technician. Before November 22, he had been working in the Bethesda morgue for six months on 24-hour duty. This meant that he was subject to call at any time.

O'Connor told me last year that, at approximately 2:00 p.m. on the afternoon of the assassination, he and his partner, James Curtis Jenkins, were in the morgue when the Commanding Officer of the National Naval Medical Center, Admiral Calvin Galloway, came in and told them that they would be getting "a very important visitor." They immediately understood this to mean that President Kennedy's remains were being brought to Bethesda for autopsy. Galloway also told them that they were confined to the morgue for the duration. This was O'Connor's first experience in working with a gunshot victim as a "Med Tech" student at Bethesda. (Author's Interview with Paul O'Connor, October 25, 1992)

Mr. Lifton's account of the same introduction to O'Connor's story omits his witness's mention of "2:00 p.m." Therein lies a problem, since Bethesda, Maryland, was one hour behind Dallas, Texas. If O'Connor is correct, officials at Bethesda knew that the autopsy would be held there at nearly the same moment that Dr. Kemp Clark pronounced President Kennedy dead at Parkland Hospital. This is not beyond the realm of possibility, but it does contradict the widely held belief among students of the assassination that Bethesda did not become the site of the autopsy until Jacqueline Kennedy selected it while en route to Washington aboard Air Force One.

My overall impression of O'Connor was that he is sincere and truthful to the best of his ability; that he remembers vignettes or anecdotes about the autopsy, some of which he has obviously discussed with other participants; but that he has great difficulty placing the events of that night into temporal or sequential order and context. Considering the passage of years, this is hardly surprising, neither does it serve to completely discredit his recollections. It does mean, however, that his statements must be evaluated with great care and caution.

I asked him about the "head surgery" clause in the Sibert-O'Neill report that Lifton expanded into a book:

A: You know something? That surgery of the head remark I think started with Sibert or O'Neill. Now what they meant by that, I don't know, but it seems like it's overridden everything else, and it gets involved — there was no surgery of any kind. And I know what surgery looks like.

Q: Did you hear anyone ask a question like, "Did anyone do surgery to this head?" or was it a definite statement —

A: There was a question asked somewhat to that effect, but I don't know who asked it, unless it was Humes. I don't know what he was referring to though.

O'Connor allegedly told Lifton there was no brain in the President's skull when the body arrived in the morgue; the cranium was empty. (*BE*, p. 601) What he told me, however, was that, "There was no brain, just brain tissue." The difference between no brain, some brain, or very little brain shatters Lifton's theory, which holds that the brain was surgically removed, then reimplanted, before the body reached the autopsy.

Mr. O'Connor's partner that day, James Curtis Jenkins, has said that there was a brain in the President's cranium when the body arrived. (Livingstone, Harrison. *High Treason 2*. Carroll & Graf, New York: 1991, p. 92 [and see, *op. cit.*, at pp. 131-135, Livingstone's detailed discussion of the conflicts he found in the statements of Jenkins and O'Connor regarding the hanging of the President's body prior to autopsy.]

[Note: Researcher and writer Jerry Policoff points out that, if Lifton's reliance on O'Connor for the allegation that there was no brain is well placed, then the autopsy doctors lied when they purported to conduct a supplemental autopsy on the President's brain two weeks after the assassination. Policoff maintains that Lifton cannot have it both ways, although that appears to be his frequent preference.]

The John Ebersole situation is both analogous to the sensation that Lifton makes out of O'Connor's recollections, and illustrative of the perils and pitfalls in evaluating the accounts of witnesses who have come forward many years after the event. Ebersole was nominally the radiologist in charge of X-raying the President's body and reading those X-rays. He told researcher Art Smith in 1978 that the throat wound was sutured at the outset of the autopsy. Lifton repeated the suture story as he obtained it from Smith. (*BE*, pp. 541, 606) Ebersole also recalled that the autopsy began at 10:30 p.m. that night (*BE*, p. 519). This allegation of the autopsy's starting time was a clear error lacking any verification or corroboration, and it is universally contradicted by other available accounts. Lifton excuses Ebersole's mistake, concluding that the throat wound was sutured sometime before what Ebersole thought was the start of the autopsy.

Paul O'Connor, on the other hand, told Lifton that he saw an open tracheotomy wound, not a sutured one, in the anterior neck. (*BE*, pp. 601, 604) (O'Connor confirmed to me that he did not remember any sutures to the throat wound when the body arrived.) How does Lifton reconcile the divergent observations of O'Connor and Ebersole? He never satisfactorily resolves the problem in his book.

O'Connor explained to me, however, much more of the story than Lifton tells the readers of his book. O'Connor told me that the throat wound was sutured at the behest of the White House physician, Admiral Burkley:

A: When he came in he was very upset, very agitated ...

Q: When you say agitated, in what way? Do you mean grieving, or angry, or what?

A: Well just about all those emotions, okay? Boiled into one. [He] paced back and forth, paced back and forth, walked back and forth. He'd go over to the phone and call the tower.

Q: How do you know he was calling the tower?

A: Well, later on we found out he was calling Bobby. Y'know, word gets around the hospital. So, he'd make his phone call and get back and say: "The Kennedy family wants you to do this, that, but

don't do this, that and the other." So, he was talking to someone in the Kennedy family. We knew that because that's what his words were. "The Kennedy family requests that you not do this, not do that, blah, blah, blah, blah."

Q: Did you personally overhear any of what he was saying —

A: Oh, yeah, sure.

Q: — at the time?

A: But I, verbatim? I couldn't really — I remember that one conversation involved the neck: To make sure the neck wound was sutured and cleaned up real nice, words to that effect — just leave it alone. We were prepared to dissect the neck, which meant we'd have to do more incisions.

When Ebersole's account is taken in conjunction with O'Connor's recollection of throat-wound suturing, it becomes more plausible that the throat wound was sutured that night, not when the body arrived but instead during the autopsy at the direction of Admiral Burkley. Ebersole, who was in and out of the room performing the tedious process of, first taking the X-rays in the morgue, and then leaving to develop them in another area of the hospital, therefore most likely did see a sutured throat wound that night, but is confused as to just when he saw it as the autopsy progressed. (At this writing, Ebersole is terminally ill. The author has been informed that Ebersole was recently interviewed by Dr. David Mantik, another researcher with impressive medical qualifications, and retracted the "suture statement.")

In similar fashion, O'Connor, who admits that he left the morgue during the taking of preliminary X-rays, and at other times to get supplies, may be confused as to just when he noticed the nearly empty cranium.

It is difficult to separate Lifton's theory of the assassination and his concomitant conclusions about the medical evidence from his reconstruction of what he believes was done to the body of the President and how it was accomplished. The two areas are inextricably bound together; one predicates the other. To afford Lifton the full justice he is due, and to illustrate the grand sweep of his design, some abbreviated treatment of this aspect of his book is warranted.

Lifton has always been an advocate of the grassy knoll assassin(s). His *Ramparts* piece in 1967 was one of the early "classics" of the genre. The dilemma that confronted him (and everyone else who has dealt with this evidence) is that, notwithstanding the Zapruder film, the [Perry news conference](#), and abundant eye- and ear-witness evidence, umpteen forensic specialists who examined the autopsy X-rays and photos before 1981 refused to lend their support to this theory.

Lifton's "solution" to the crime arose as the expedient method of overcoming the obstacle of the autopsy photography and concluding his personal odyssey.

The implication of Lifton's theory of the assassination is that the alteration and reconstruction of the wounds, and the concomitant planting of bullet shells at the scene of the crime (and of a bullet on a stretcher at Parkland Hospital, see *BE*, p. 345) were necessary. His conspirators had advance knowledge of how President Kennedy would actually be hit by their infallible marksmen, and of what alterations to the President's body would be required to conceal the facts of the crime. Lifton does not conceive of *ad hoc* improvisation (*BE*, pp. 362–64).

One assumption implicit in this argument is that Lifton's conspirators were willing to gamble that a front shooter would hit his target, and that they never intended to shoot President Kennedy from other than in front. A further assumption is that the conspirators concluded it would be more desirable for them to fabricate downward trajectories than for a rear shooter to inflict them during the assassination.

Texas Governor John Connally was unquestionably struck from the rear. "Lifton makes no attempt to explain Connally's wounds within the terms of his theory. He does not seem to notice the problem at all." (Powers, Thomas and Alan Rich, "Robbing the Grave," *New York Magazine*, February 23, 1981, p. 46) Would Lifton have us presume that Governor Connally volunteered to take a near fatal shot from behind to assist the conspirators in persuading the world that someone was indeed firing from the rear? Or, perhaps the assassins, throwing caution to the winds, chose to shoot Connally from the rear, but not JFK, to that same end, supremely confident in their ability to hit one but not the other by mistake. What if whoever shot Connally (assuming as James Reston, Jr. does, that he was a deliberate target) had missed and instead shot Kennedy by mistake?

Another, even more pivotal weakness of Lifton's trajectory reversal idea (*BE*, p. 343) is that it rests upon the

assumption that the three bullet shells which were found on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository near the window from which the Warren Commission alleged that Oswald fired the shots were planted by conspirators, and upon the further assumption that the plan called for the number of wounds inflicted during the shooting to correlate perfectly with the number of allegedly planted bullet shells.

This, however, is not necessarily so: If a greater number of shells existed than wounds, it could be explained away that one or more of the shots fired had missed their target. If, however, fewer shells existed than wounds “attributable” to them, then the wounds would have to be correlated in such a way as to accommodate the number of shells. Moreover, Lifton makes no effort to address the weighty issue whether the three shells would have been planted before or after the shooting, let alone how or by whom.

Lifton acknowledges this problem:

One fact of my hypothesis was that it demonstrated, in theory at least, that the plotters could know, once they saw the body, how much ammunition was needed, and so could coordinate the planting of bullets with the fabrication of trajectories.

(BE, p. 359)

Really? How would they know how many bullet fragments to plant? Did they know how many times John Connally was struck? Could they plant fragments in Connally’s chest, wrist and thigh?

Wasn’t it necessary, in Lifton’s world, to plant the three cartridge shells beforehand? Ignoring the faults implicit in his a priori reasoning, consider the consequences. I am grateful to researcher W. Anthony Marsh for pointing out that, if the conspirators had planted the three cartridge shells in the Book Depository, but “gotten lucky” and made the fatal hit with one shot from the knoll, the conspiracy would have been immediately exposed. As he further muses, the number of known or suspected separate and distinct shots far exceeded the three shells recovered (JFK’s head and upper back/lower neck, Connally’s chest and wrist, the limousine windshield and chrome topping, and bystander James Tague).

I agree with many students of the case that there are doubts about the legitimacy of CE 399. Looking at the totality of Lifton’s ammunition–planting scheme, however, why plant a whole bullet on a stretcher, but only fragments in the car? What about the fragments that actually were found in the President’s skull, or those that were too minute to recover? Were they planted (and perhaps “sprayed” through the brain) too?

How did the plotters know that a bullet fired from the front would not completely escape the limousine and later be recovered — maybe hours or days after the shooting?

Bullets make tracks through the body, not just holes on the skin surface. Conspirators would have to chance that the autopsy pathologists would not be curious why fake rear bullet entries on the right side of the President’s body and head did not make exits on the left front side of the body and head.

One of the earliest seeds of doubt concerning the case was the eye– and ear–witness testimony that sounds of gunshots attracted their attention to the knoll. Also, Lifton’s conspirators would have had to consider the possibility that a grassy knoll assassin would be apprehended by police or aroused citizens before he could either conceal his weapon or escape or do both.

- What if Kennedy had lived? What if he had miraculously escaped from Elm Street with only a non–life–threatening throat wound?
- What if Jacqueline Kennedy or someone else in the limousine had been hit from the grassy knoll or front by mistake?
- What if an innocent bystander had been accidentally hit by a grassy knoll bullet?

During the early days of the controversy surrounding President Kennedy’s assassination, critics of the Warren Commission contested the single–bullet theory, that one shot traversed the bodies of both President Kennedy and Governor John Connally causing a total of seven wounds to both men, with evidence from the Commission’s own investigation that the President’s back wound was too low to have followed a trajectory consistent with the Commission’s reconstruction. In *Best Evidence* David Lifton takes the same body of evidence and bends it to his own purposes, contending that it was fraudulent and, therefore, untrustworthy.

Lifton argues that the wound in President Kennedy’s back was shallow and had no exit because it was artificially made by the conspirators during the alteration of Kennedy’s body. He reminds us that Sibert and O’Neill’s

account of the unsuccessful probing of that wound at autopsy is “inconsistent with the subsequent autopsy conclusion that the bullet passed all the way through...” (BE, p. 344). (Here, Lifton overstates his case. The inconsistency was only with a downward trajectory from back-to-front.) Distracting his readers with autobiographical musings, Lifton does not detain us with an explanation of why he relies on the Secret Service description of the head wound, while rejecting their description of the back wound as a sham. (BE, pp. 311–312)

How does Lifton account for the fact that the President’s back wound was too low to support a downward trajectory from the sixth floor of the Depository? How could such a crucial mistake arise in such an elaborate scheme? Lifton theorizes that back wound was fabricated before anyone knew of the throat wound. (See BE, p. 347 fn.) The mistake in placing the fake back wound too low was due to his conspirators’ ignorance. (BE, p. 374) It may be asked why, if the conspirators were ignorant of the throat wound, which could later be termed the exit for a bullet, they found it necessary to create the back wound at all? In other words, why deliberately create a wound for which there would be no apparent exit? Naturally, Lifton has an answer for this. He theorizes that the conspirators meant for the so-called “stretcher bullet” (CE 399) discovered at Parkland Hospital to be “paired” with the false back wound that they would create, so they planted the bullet at Parkland Hospital. (BE, p. 345) Further, according to Lifton, this was the only purpose of the wound — to link it to an “Oswald bullet”, not to conceal the true nature of the wounds on the front of the body. (See BE, page 347 fn., and pages 372–374)

Weighing the weaknesses and the risks inherent in such a scheme, the argument appears preposterous:

- It commits the conspirators to using up one whole bullet out of three (i.e., the shells found in the depository).
- (Would not Lifton’s conspirators have had to make absolutely sure, before planting the bullet, of how Kennedy indeed was hit? Wouldn’t it be careless of them not to? In other words, Lifton wants it both ways: a careful, pre-planned scheme to alter the body, but with no immediate reconnaissance to determine what alterations were necessary or tolerable.)
- It assumes that no Parkland doctor, nurse or orderly would even have the opportunity to observe the President’s back;
- It assumes the bullet would indeed be found and turned over to the Secret Service, not lost or pocketed by a souvenir hunter;
- It assumes Jacqueline Kennedy would be silent as to whatever she observed.

A more elegant and obvious solution, it seems, would have been simply to embed a slug in the back wound and have it found at autopsy. Would this not have provided the strongest possible case against Oswald?

Lifton’s thesis that the back wound was fake, and any evidence that it was real was invented for corroboration, labors under a weighty burden of evidence.

Secret Service Agent Glen Bennett was riding in the right rear seat of the Secret Service follow-up car behind the presidential limousine. Bennett saw a shot hit the President in the back, probably the second shot fired in the assassination. During the return trip to Washington aboard Air Force One on the afternoon of the assassination, Bennett wrote the following notes in hand:

The President’s auto moved down a slight grade and the crowd was very sparse. At this point I heard a noise that immediately reminded me of a firecracker. I immediately, upon hearing the supposed firecracker, looked at the Boss’s car. At this exact time I saw a shot that hit the Boss about 4 inches down from the right shoulder; a second shot followed immediately and hit the right rear high of the Boss’s head.

([CE2112 at 24H 542](#))

But see Bennett’s formal typed report, in which he differs on sequence.

I heard what sounded like a fire-cracker. I immediately looked from the right/crowd/physical area/and looked towards the President who was seated in the right rear seat of his limousine open convertible. At the moment I looked at the back of the President, I heard another fire-cracker noise and saw the shot hit the President about four inches down from the right shoulder. A second shot followed immediately and hit the right rear high of the President’s head.

([CE1024; 18H760](#))(dated 11-23-63)

Since David Lifton's theory requires that President Kennedy was not shot in the back, because he alleges that shots were fired only from in front, Lifton is forced to insinuate that Bennett was in on the plot, and that his reports of what he observed were intended to provide a "cover story" for the plotters. In Chapter 11 of *Best Evidence*, Lifton asks why else the Director of the Secret Service, James Rowley, would have sent Bennett's reports to the Warren Commission. Lifton fails to mention, of course, that by providing Bennett's reports, Rowley was offering eyewitness evidence that the location of the back wound was far below where the official autopsy results placed it.

If Rowley intended to prove either the existence or the location of the back wound to the Warren Commission, his effort was certainly redundant. The Commission both received and ignored abundant evidence in this regard. Lifton did not consider an equally plausible motive: Secret Service Agent Kellerman testified that no one was aware of the wound in President Kennedy's back until his body was lifted up from the autopsy table by one of the pathologists, Lt. Col. Pierre Finck. As I discussed in Chapter Four, Kellerman's testimony directly contradicted a field memorandum filed by the FBI's Sibert and O'Neill as an adjunct to their narrative report on the autopsy. There, the FBI agents reported that, during a conversation that included Kellerman, Dr. Burkley referred to the back wound before the start of the autopsy. Rowley's transmittal of the Bennett reports to the Commission contradicted the sworn testimony of another of his agents, Roy Kellerman. Rowley may have meant to alert the Commission that Kellerman's testimony was erroneous, perhaps even deliberately untruthful, by providing them with the Bennett statements. This could have been a bureaucrat's canny ploy to wash his hands clean of a possibly deliberate effort by the Secret Service to discredit the FBI's reporting of the autopsy.

Whatever Rowley's motivation may have been, however, there are certainly less sinister possibilities than the one that Lifton proposes.

Lifton alleges that the plotters created fake holes in the rear of the President's clothing. The holes in the clothing were artificially inflicted in the wrong locations, however, because the conspirators, not realizing the existence of the throat wound at the time, had committed the mistake of making the back wound too low. (*Best Evidence*, Chapter 9) How does he dismiss the discrepancy in the holes' sizes? The conspirators made another mistake. If that is the case, however, their "mistake" was most fortuitous. For one thing, it left minute traces of copper embedded in the margins of the "fake" bullet holes: "Minute traces of copper" were found around the edges of the holes in the back of the jacket and shirt. ([FBI, Memo of Jevons to Conran, November 26, 1963, #62-109060-1086](#)). Also, Lifton's conspirators "mistakenly" made one hole higher on the back than the other.

Consider the testimony of FBI Special Agent Robert Frazier, who was assigned to the FBI laboratory's firearms identification unit in Washington, D.C.:

Mr Frazier There was located on the rear of the coat 5-3/8 inches below the top of the collar, a hole, further located as 1-3/4 inches to the right of the mipine or the seam down the center of the coat; all of these being as you look at the back of the coat. (5H 59)

Mr Specter Did any tests conducted on the coat disclose any metallic substance on that area of that hole?

Mr Frazier Yes, sir. I had a spectrographer run an analysis of a portion of the hole which accounts for its being slightly enlarged at the present time. He took a sample of cloth and made an analysis of it.... Traces of copper were found around the margins of the hole in the back of the coat, and as a control, a very small section under the collar was taken, and no copper being found there, it was concluded that the copper was foreign to the coat itself. (5H59)

Mr Frazier I found on the back of the shirt a hole, 5-3/4 inches below the top of the collar, and as you look at the back of the shirt, 1-1/8 inch to the right of the mipine of the shirt, which is this hole I am indicating. (5H 60)

Mr Dulles Is the hole in the shirt and the hole in the coat you have just described in a position that indicates that the same instrument, whatever it was, or the same bullet, made the two?

Mr Frazier Yes; they are. They are both — the coat hole is 5-3/8 inches below the top of the collar. The shirt hole is 5-3/4 inches, which could be accounted for by a portion of the collar sticking up above the coat about a half inch.

Mr Dulles I see.

Mr Frazier And they are both located approximately the same distance to the right of the mipine of both garments. Now, on the front of the shirt, I found what amounts to one hole. Actually, it is a hole through both the button line of the shirt and the buttonhole line which overlap down the front of the shirt when it is buttoned.

Mr Specter Proceed.

Mr Frazier This hole is located immediately below the button being centered seven-eighths of an inch below the button on the shirt, and similarly seven-eighths of an inch below the button hole on the opposite side.

The Chairman You are speaking of the collar button itself, aren't you?

Mr Frazier The collar button.

The Chairman Yes.

Mr Frazier In each instance for these holes, the one through the button line and the one through the buttonhole line, the hole amounts to a ragged slit approximately one-half inch in height. It is oriented vertically, and the fibers of the cloth are protruding outward, that is, have been pushed from the inside out. I could not actually determine from the characteristics of the hole whether or not it was caused by a bullet. However, I can say that it was caused by a projectile of some type which exited from the shirt at that point and that is again assuming that when I first examined the shirt it was — it had not been altered from the condition it was in at the time the hole was made.

Mr Specter What characteristics differ between the hole in the rear of the shirt and the holes in the front of the shirt which lead you to conclude that the hole in the rear of the shirt was caused by a bullet but which are absent as to the holes in the front of the shirt?

Mr Frazier The hole in the front of the shirt does not have the round characteristic shape caused by a round bullet entering cloth. It is an irregular slit. It could have been caused by a round bullet, however, since the cloth could have torn in a long slitlike way as the bullet passed through it. But that is not specifically characteristic of a bullet hole to the extent that you could say it was to the exclusion of being a piece of bone or some other type of projectile.

(5H60-61)

FBI photos taken of the President's jacket and shirt are part of the Warren Commission exhibits in the National Archives and have been published in numerous books about the assassination. Lifton's imagined conspirators had such a hot streak that day that they made it appear as though a bullet entering the President's back would have had to turn upward to exit his neck.

Sylvia Meagher, in a note to page 140 of her treatise, *Accessories After The Fact*, called attention to another of Arlen Specter's shenanigans in the development of the medical evidence:

Two nurses who had assisted the team of doctors in the emergency room remained there with the President's body after he was pronounced dead. Both nurses testified that they undressed the body, cleaned it, and wrapped it in sheets. The natural question for counsel to pose was whether either of the nurses had seen a wound in the President's back while performing these procedures, but this was not asked. (6H136-137, 141)

Harrison E. Livingstone will reveal in a book soon to be published that one of the Parkland nurses, Diana Bowron, who was within close proximity to the President at all times, has been located. She was one of those who washed and cleaned the body after death to prepare it for transport. She has been interviewed and has made a signed statement. She has also examined the purported photograph of the back wound. She says there was a bullet wound in Kennedy's back at Parkland, approximately six inches below the juncture of the neck and shoulder.

Lifton suggests an attempt to hide the throat wound from the autopsy pathologists (BE, p. 545), but he does not explain why his conspirators would not likewise have attempted to conceal the holes in the President's shirt collar, and the nick in the tie.

About the throat wound. If it was an entrance, as the Liftonites contend, then why would the entering bullet make such a neat round hole in the throat yet only a small tear in the right lateral wall of the trachea? And, where would that bullet have gone? In the nearly twenty-nine years since the Warren Commission's evidentiary appendices were published, no one has yet proposed a persuasive answer to either of these questions.

Mr. Lifton has alleged that damage sustained to the windshield of the presidential limousine during the assassination was also faked to support the illusion of shots fired from the rear. Lifton got a copy of former Dallas Police Chief Jesse Curry's book, *JFK Assassination File*, in December 1969. (Lifton, David. Postcard to Sylvia Meagher, December 13, 1969). Had he studied the clear photographs in Curry's book, as researcher W. Anthony Marsh has done, he would have found a nice one of the limousine at Parkland Hospital's emergency room loading dock, taken moments after the assassination. The photo shows damage to the windshield and its chrome trim.

How does David Lifton deal with the fact that the medical technicians say the autopsy photos are fake? For example, X-ray technician Jerroll Custer has said that the autopsy X-rays now in the National Archives are not the ones that he took during the autopsy, and are not of President Kennedy. (Livingstone, Harrison E., *High Treason 2*. Carroll & Graf, New York: 1991, p. 130) While it is difficult at times to tell, it appears that David Lifton argues for either one of two propositions:

- Either the alteration of the President's body that he terms a "medical forgery" was so skillful that it fooled the pathologists at the autopsy bench,
- or else it was bungled and the pathologists were fully aware of the scheme.

Lifton theorizes that the rear head wound that he believes was seen in Dallas was "erased" by restoring the back of the head, at least on the autopsy photos and X-rays (*BE*, pages 505–506) He suggests that the false photographic and X-ray record was created after midnight.

Was President Kennedy's body altered to deceive the autopsy surgeons, or to deceive the camera? Was there no alteration to the body, but falsification of the photographic record? These questions are central to the conspiracy question, yet after leading his readers through several hundred pages of endless speculation before raising them, Lifton does nothing more than to fudge his answers.

If the "medical forgery" of wounds on the President's body that Lifton has imagined was so good, why substitute faked photos and X-rays? Lifton replies:

"The plot was elegant in conception but bungled in execution," he is reported to have explained. "What was supposed to happen isn't what did happen ... and that's why what did happen looked so chaotic and blundering."

(*His J.F.K. Obsession: For David Lifton, The Assassination is a Labyrinth Without End*, Los Angeles Times, November 20, 1988, *Id.*)

In other words, Lifton's bogeymen, though unknown and invisible, are subject to Murphy's Law.

Recapitulation

Lifton's conspiracy theory, which earns a new definition for "internal logic", requires assassins firing frangible bullets only from somewhere in front of Kennedy for the purpose of leaving the rear of his body unmarked, and for leaving only shallow entrance wounds later to be enlarged to appear as exits, and further calls for post hoc accessories to the crime manually creating rear entrance wounds to mislead the autopsy surgeons.

His assassins could not risk firing from behind Kennedy for fear of creating undesired trajectories, although rear-to-front trajectories are exactly what they wanted!

In Lifton's arcane world, everyone purposefully acts in a certain way to achieve diametrically opposite results. He claims to enjoy a profound psycho linguistic empathy and rapport with Dr. Humes, the chief autopsy pathologist. As I discussed in Chapter Three, no matter what Humes has said in his testimony, Lifton always seems to know what he really means.

Lifton ignores that the autopsy X-rays and photos were secreted away; that physical specimens from the autopsy are still missing; and, that the chain of possession of all these items is muddled. Why would these events have occurred if, as Lifton asserts, a perfectly planned medical forgery framing Lee Harvey Oswald went undetected?

Chapter 6

A Night at Bethesda

In February 1989, University of Wisconsin History Professor David Wrone showed this writer a draft of his own critique of David Lifton's *Best Evidence*, entitled "Anatomy of the Most Successful Assassination Fraud." Examining the movements of Kennedy's casket from its arrival aboard Air Force One at Love Field, Dallas, to its arrival at Andrews Air Force Base, Professor Wrone painstakingly established the absence of any moment when the casket was left unattended by President Kennedy's friends and staff or the Secret Service, and pointed to Lifton's failure to demonstrate the existence of any mysterious helicopter that his plotters could use to kidnap the body at Andrews. Noting that Lifton's two-casket theory was based on interviews with dramatis personae minor held sixteen and seventeen years after the event, Professor Wrone offered the professional historian's perspective:

Evaluating witness testimony in a crime as complex and infamous as the assassination of President Kennedy calls for mature judgment associated with common sense and much experience. The mind through memory tends to expand time frames, collapse and even intertwine events often with selective enhancements and embellishments, to the absolutely convinced correctness of the individual.

As we have already seen in the cases of Paul O'Connor and John Ebersole, not every witness statement running against the official doctrine can be taken as "absolute truth", to be pounded into a theory that pretends to reconcile all inconsistencies. It is unnecessary, however, to dismiss the witnesses whom Lifton interviews regarding the coffin movements (page 399 ff.) on the basis of the weakness of eyewitness testimony. It is Lifton's use of their "testimony" itself that is outrageous, as shown by an objective appraisal of his alleged reconstruction of the casket switch through the use of a "decoy ambulance" at Bethesda. In this chapter, I illustrate Mr. Lifton's use of the dispersal and juxtaposition of interview fragments throughout his text, which one must reassemble to make any sense of them.

Lifton tells us that two coffins were delivered to the Bethesda morgue. First, the President's altered body arrived from parts unknown (presumably Walter Reed Army Hospital) in a pinkish gray metal casket. The bronze ceremonial casket that left Parkland Hospital bearing the President's remains arrived later. It was allegedly empty. Through sleight of hand, the body was replaced in the bronze casket in which it left Dallas. That casket was taken outside the hospital and brought back in bearing the body. The two caskets were switched somewhere in the middle of this farce without anyone noticing. Integral to the plot, according to Lifton, was the alleged deception foisted upon the military honor guard that was supposed to meet the President's casket at the hospital and carry it into the morgue. He alleges that, for a time, the honor guard lost track of their charge after the Navy ambulance that we all saw on television at Andrews Air Force Base arrived on the hospital grounds. The confusion allegedly resulted from the conspirators' use of an unmarked black hearse to spirit the body into the morgue. Lifton implies that the honor guard erroneously regarded this as a decoy ambulance.

As author Thomas Powers succinctly noted about Lifton's theory, "This is something he figured out." (Powers, Thomas and Alan Rich, "Robbing the Grave", *New York Magazine*, February 23, 1981, p. 46)

For simplicity's sake, we might do well to first review the [report of FBI Agents Sibert and O'Neill](#). They wrote:

On arrival at the Medical Center, the ambulance stopped in front of the main entrance, at which time Mrs. JACQUELINE KENNEDY and Attorney General ROBERT KENNEDY embarked from the ambulance and entered the building. The ambulance was thereafter driven around to the rear entrance where the President's body was removed and taken into the autopsy room. Bureau agents assisted in the moving of the casket to the autopsy room. A tight security was immediately placed around the autopsy room by the Naval facility and the U.S. Secret Service. Bureau agents made contact with ROY KELLERMAN...

Liftonites, scrutinizing this passage microscopically, contend for a distinction in Sibert and O'Neill's use of the words "body" and "casket".

None of the witnesses Lifton cites in support of his decoy ambulance scenario remembers "the ambulance chase"

in quite the same way. Lifton interviewed members of the casket honor guard with the following results:

Corporal Timothy Cheek had only a vague recollection of trying to find the ambulance and finally catching up with it at the morgue entrance. Lifton quotes him, but does not cite his account in direct support of his thesis.

James L. Felder echoes the decoy ambulance story, but he doesn't remember which of the two ambulances was the decoy. All he remembers is following the first ambulance from the front of Bethesda around back, losing it, returning to the front, seeing a second ambulance, returning to the rear again and unloading a coffin. Lifton quotes him, but does not cite him in direct support of his thesis.

Douglas Mayfield (*BE*, page 408) tells about chasing an ambulance around back, losing it, returning to the front and picking it up again. (He doesn't speak in terms of two ambulances, and Lifton doesn't say whether he asked Mayfield about a second — or decoy ambulance.) Lifton quotes, but does not cite Mayfield in direct support of his thesis.

Notice Lifton's persistent questioning and his highly suggestive, leading questions to Hubert Clark (*BE*, page 409). Clark says there was a decoy ambulance, but his recollection is vague, even under Lifton's prompting. Lifton does not cite him in direct support of his thesis.

Richard Gaudreau (*BE*, page 414) does not have an independent recollection of there being more than one ambulance until Lifton prompts him. He clearly cannot remember the details. Lifton quotes, but does not cite Gaudreau in direct support of his thesis.

From General Godfrey McHugh, Secret Service Agent William Greer and the presidential physician, Dr. George Burkley, Lifton produces nothing in support of his scenario.

Another witness not interviewed by Lifton on his theory of an ambulance chase was Sorrell L. Schwartz. Schwartz was a pharmacologist at the Naval Medical Research Institute, a component of the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, . On the night of November 22, 1963, he was recruited to serve with the duty officer. He wrote to *Time Magazine* (*Time*, February 16, 1981, p. 4):

[W]e did not lose track of the ambulance containing the bronze casket after it arrived at the medical center. On that night there were a large number of spectators around, and our intention was to get the ambulance to the morgue before the crowd gathered. The honor guard, along with a Navy enlisted-man driver, the other duty officer and me, rode to the morgue on the guard truck at high speed, believing that the ambulance was following. When we got there, the ambulance was not seen. Since the Secret Service driver was unfamiliar with the grounds, we decided he was lost. Retracing our path, we found the ambulance still at the front of the hospital amid many onlookers. In our haste we had left without confirming that the ambulance was behind us. On the second try we did it right.

At no time was the ambulance out of sight of at least several hundred people, from its arrival at the center until the bronze coffin was unloaded at the morgue.

Lifton's star witness is Dennis David, whom he interviewed in 1979.

David says the first "ambulance" came onto the grounds of the hospital from the back gate, bearing the body (*BE*, page 571). He describes the first "ambulance" as an unmarked black Cadillac (i.e., a hearse) not a gray Navy ambulance (*BE*, page 575). David says the casket it carried was plain gray metal (page 579). The second ambulance was the empty one arriving with the official motorcade (*BE*, page 571). He did not, however, witness the arrival of the "second ambulance" at the morgue (*BE*, page 573). David says that, after the black hearse arrived, he went to the front of the hospital. He then went up to the balcony to the rotunda. From there he witnessed Jackie and Bobby's arrival. (*BE*, page 576)

Although he tells Lifton that he supervised the entry of a casket, unloaded from the first ambulance by a group of sailors (*BE*, page 571), he admits that he has no personal knowledge that the body was in the first ambulance (*BE*, page 581); he simply alleges he was told this by Commander Boswell, one of the autopsy pathologists (*BE*, page 573). Furthermore, while Lifton cites his interview with David as support for the fact that Humes, Boswell, Admiral Kenney (Surgeon General of the Navy) and Captain Stover were in the morgue when the first casket arrived (*BE*, page 580), it is not until a full nine pages later, however, that Lifton discloses that David "had emphasized that he had never entered the autopsy room itself." (*BE*, page 589)

It is on the basis of such testimony by a man who knows nothing, and for whose tale no corroboration is offered,

that Lifton makes his case.

Dennis David told Lifton that the first “ambulance” came onto the hospital grounds from the back gate. According to Dennis David, it was allegedly an unmarked black Cadillac. (BE, p. 575) This is the one he says had the body. (BE, p. 571)

On the day of the assassination, Dr. Russell Madison was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force attached to the Air Force Radiological Institute, a satellite unit of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology operating at Bethesda Naval Hospital. Madison always drove to and from work. He was accustomed to using the back gate of the hospital grounds at the end of each day because it was the closest gate to the radiological research unit where he worked. It was also closer to his home, and enabled him to avoid heavy rush hour traffic on Wisconsin Avenue.

The night of the assassination was different from all other nights in Madison’s experience. He left work at approximately 6:30 p.m., but when he headed for the back gate, “It was locked, because I’d usually go out that way and I couldn’t get out.” Also, no guard was posted at the gate. Madison turned around and drove out the front gate of the Medical Center grounds. He did notice that the helipad at the rear of the hospital was lit. Did he see any activity that aroused his interest? “Absolutely not, there was nobody around.” It was the only time that he was unable to use the back gate. (Author’s interview with Russell Madison, May 25, 1993)

According to the report of the casket team leader, the casket team unloaded the casket into the morgue at 8:00 p.m., one hour and five minutes after the Secret Service reported it had arrived at the front of the hospital. (BE, p. 406). According to Humes, he received the body at 7:35 p.m., so Lifton’s question is: What did the casket team carry in? Sibert and O’Neill say that the preparations for the autopsy began at 7:17 p.m., and the autopsy itself began at 8:15 p.m. (BE, p. 484) These are the bases for Lifton’s finding time unaccounted for (approximately 45 minutes) and concluding that there were two separate casket entries.

Paul O’Connor (interviewed by Lifton on August 25, 1979) (BE, p. 598), stated he saw a gray shipping casket enter the morgue at 8:00 p.m. Lifton arbitrarily concludes that O’Connor was describing events he witnessed at least an hour earlier, and that his testimony dovetails with that of Dennis David (BE, p. 605), except that O’Connor said he thought the body was brought in by helicopter, one that may have landed in the rear of the hospital (id.). Lifton quotes O’Connor in his book, but does not use him in direct support of the musical caskets thesis. When I questioned O’Connor, he stuck by his original story notwithstanding Mr. Lifton’s revision, saying that, at about 8 o’clock in the evening, the back door of the hospital burst open and six men came in carrying a “pinkish gray, nondescript, cheap, shipping casket.”

Lifton does rely upon O’Connor for the allegation that the President’s body was in a combat-style body bag. According to one of Mr. Lifton’s own witnesses, Hospital Corpsman James Metzler, there was no body bag. (Livingstone, Harrison, *High Treason 2*. Carroll & Graf, New York: 1991, p. 89) Before it left Parkland Hospital, the President’s body was wrapped in rubberized plastic sheeting, besides a hospital bed sheet, to protect the O’Neal Funeral Home’s casket from seepage. When the casket was opened in the Bethesda morgue, the plastic stuck against the President’s throat and the back of his skull. (Bishop, Jim, *The Day Kennedy Was Shot*. Funk & Wagnall’s, New York: 1968, p. 452)

For Donald Rebentisch, a petty officer who was stationed at Bethesda on the night of the autopsy, there was no big secret. Rebentisch was studying dental and medical equipment repair at the hospital at the time. According to Rebentisch, two ambulances carrying two caskets were employed — one of them empty and one with the body of Kennedy — in a deliberate charade to slip the President’s body into Bethesda Naval Hospital. Rebentisch says his commanding officers told him the secrecy was planned to avoid the media and other onlookers. The empty casket was brought in the front door while the casket carrying Kennedy’s body was driven in a 1958 Chevrolet hearse to the back of the hospital where medical officials were to perform an autopsy:

“It was about 4:30 p.m., when our chief petty officer came to me and about five other petty officers and told us to go to the back of the hospital. I’m talking about the loading ramps where they used to bring in supplies.

“He told all of us that we were going to be there and we were going to bring the President’s casket into the mortuary. We were told not to leave our posts.

“The chief said we got all the ... ghouls and reporters and the TV and everybody at the front of the hospital He said there would be an empty casket in the ambulance. He said the President’s body would really come in the back.

“This made sense to me. I felt there was nothing wrong with this. I just bought it, as did the rest of us.”

Rebentisch said he and five other officers took the President’s casket out of the black hearse and pushed it through a rear freight entrance, 35 or 40 minutes before another coffin was taken through a mass of reporters and photographers at the front door. “Rebentisch said he doubted most of Lifton’s claims.” (*The Associated Press*, January 23, 1981, AM Cycle) Robert Muma, who was a Bethesda staff dental technician, corroborated Rebentisch’s account:

“There were two ambulances that came in. One was lighted. It came up to the front door. The second one they kept dark and it went around to the back. That was the one that had Kennedy in it. It was common knowledge that there were two caskets.”

(*The Associated Press*, January 23, 1981, AM Cycle)

Another of Rebentisch’s associates, Paul Neigler, also corroborated the former petty officer’s story. (*United Press International*, January 24, 1981, AM cycle)

In an “Epilogue” to his Dell and subsequent paperback editions of *Best Evidence*, Lifton refers to Donald Rebentisch surfacing after the initial publication of his book. He chortles at the notion that a mere security measure might have been employed. Nevertheless, he omits to mention the front entry of the bronze ceremonial casket, and he also fails to grapple with the fact that Rebentisch and his colleagues were stationed at the back of the hospital from 4:30 p.m. that afternoon until they carried the casket containing the President’s remains. None of them mentioned the comings and goings of more than one vehicle or more than one casket.

How, if at all, did Lifton’s conspiracy distract the participants in the autopsy from the fact that there were two caskets in the morgue? He implies they were told that the gray shipping casket contained the remains of a military officer awaiting burial. Harold Weisberg discusses the theory:

To promulgate his case of a shell game with caskets, Lifton makes a big thing of his representation that there was no corpse of a colonel for another casket and seeks to support this by alleging that he colonel was not buried in Arlington, as had been reported. To make this appear credible he had an associate call Arlington Cemetery and ask if a colonel had been buried the next day. He claims the response was that nobody was buried the next day. Inference, the stories were false.

The falsity is Lifton’s. He fails to inform that the next day was a Saturday and that there were not burials at all at Arlington on Saturdays.

(Weisberg, Harold. Letter to Edwin McDowell [*New York Times*], February 4, 1981)

Overview of The Two-Casket Entries/Two Audiences — Lifton’s Developing Theory (BE, pp. 585-586)

STEP ONE: 6:45 entry (gray casket) (first entry of the body).

- What evidence does he have that the body was taken in at 6:45? His only source is Dennis David.
- The Navy Ambulance arrives at the front entrance at 6:55 p.m. (I did not have this in my original essay and may not need it to make the point.)

STEP TWO: 7:05–7:17 p.m., Navy ambulance and “chase”

- Source: inference liberally drawn from Sibert & O’Neill–related FBI documents.
- Lifton’s conclusion: the empty Dallas casket is brought to the morgue; Sibert & O’Neill barred; JFK’s body transferred to the Dallas casket and put in the “correct” ambulance.
- 43 minutes elapse before,

STEP THREE: 8:00 p.m. casket team entry; MDW casket team and McHugh bring Dallas casket to morgue.

- Sources: casket team interviews, Wehle, McHugh, et. al.
- Conclusion: President’s body is brought to the morgue in the Dallas casket for the official autopsy. The body has already been altered.

Queries:

- What happened to the empty plain gray metal casket? Where did it go?
- What if the casket team had caught up with the Navy ambulance before or during Step Two?
- If the body had been altered at Walter Reed, why the first entry? Why not simply transfer the body from hearse to ambulance?
- Who was the second casket entry intended to deceive?
- How does McHugh get into the “correct” ambulance?
- Isn’t Lifton ignoring the time that was required for initial measuring, X-raying and photographing of the remains before the first incision (7:17 p.m.–8:15 p.m.)? Dr. Humes, Secret Service Agent Kellerman and the FBI team of Sibert and O’Neill, as well as other witnesses, have told us that there was a period of initial X-raying and photography. Secret Service Agent Kellerman’s testimony before the Warren Commission seems to have accounted for this duration.

Mr Kellerman Let’s come back to the period of our arrival at Andrews Air Force Base, which was 5:58 p.m. at night. By the time it took us to take the body from the plane into the ambulance, and a couple of carloads of staff people who followed us, we may have spent 15 minutes there. And in driving from Andrews to the U.S. Naval Hospital, I would judge, a good 45 minutes. So there is 7 o’clock. We went immediately over, without too much delay on the outside of the hospital, into the morgue. The Navy people had their staff in readiness right then. There wasn’t anybody to call. They were all there. So at the latest, 7:30, they began to work on the autopsy. And, as I said, we left the hospital at 3:56 in the morning. Let’s give the undertaker people 2 hours. So they were through at 2 o’clock in the morning. I would judge offhand that they worked on the autopsy angle 4-½, 5 hours.

([2H102-103](#))

Lifton concludes that the details are less important than establishing a break in the “chain of possession” (*BE*, p. 422). He is impatient with trifling details — and evidence.

Appraisal of the Facts

If ever there was a scheme such as Lifton’s to overthrow the Government of the United States, then only the Marx Brothers had the skill and impeccable timing to execute it. It seems that Lifton’s theorized covert operation was an open secret to nearly every serviceman on duty at Bethesda that Friday night. Lifton has exploited the fading memories of men who were, even then, frightened and perplexed by the whirlwind of history surrounding them. In the process, he has tried to convert understandable security precautions into a hopeless maze of intrigue. Essentially, however, *Best Evidence* produces no direct evidence of a single assertion forming a link in Lifton’s chain of irresponsible conjecture.

Lifton manipulates his facts in the interest of his system by seizing upon the minor details that he has gleaned from the minor players in the drama of that tragic weekend. His industriousness summons the sage admonition of one of our finest writers of history:

The contemporary has no perspective; everything is in the foreground and appears the same size. Little matters loom big, and great matters are sometimes missed because their outlines cannot be seen.

(*Barbara Tuchman, When Does History Happen, New York Times Book Review, March 8, 1964.*)

As Professor Wrone has concluded, “In hiding his determinative philosophy, his irrationalities, aberrations, and hasty, wrong judgments [Lifton] is dishonest with the reader ... *Best Evidence* ... is not the objective search of a scholar, plastic in formulation, changing with the evidence, honest with his past.”

Is it mere coincidence that this book appeared so soon after the House Committee investigation? There is a striking parallelism between the treatment accorded to Warren Commission critics by both Chief Counsel G. Robert Blakey and David S. Lifton. Blakey held a weekend conference with several Warren Commission critics in September 1977, purportedly to elicit their views under conditions of strict secrecy. He never called upon them again throughout the committee’s investigation, but after the committee had issued its findings, he cited this conference as evidence that he had given their critics their day.

Lifton picked the brains of the critics for fifteen years, adopted some of their approaches to the evidence as his own, and then purported in his journal of self-discovery to dismiss all of them. (“I felt isolated and, for the first

time, saw the other Warren Report critics as mere tourists engaged in an academic exercise. I had found something fundamental — I had glimpsed the possibility of treason.”) (*BE*, page 240)

Both the HSCA and Lifton exonerated everyone in sight of complicity in the murder, and of the cover-up of the crime, leaving only sinister ghosts to blame for the assassination.

An Odd Official Silence

The sequestration of the House Committee’s files created the very environment that fostered the publication of *Best Evidence*.

Lifton’s allegations cast such a stain on the integrity and reputation of the national government and the rule of law that one might think a forthright response would by now have been made by the government.

Perhaps the official silence is due in some measure to the fact that Lifton’s book is not wholly without merit.

He mounts, for example, a searing indictment of the House Select Committee on Assassinations for its refusal to make public the contents of its behind-the-scenes interviews with various dramatis personae in the assassination controversy, a brazen step beyond even the Warren Commission’s penchant for secrecy. (None of this material is subject to disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, which applies only to agencies of the Executive Branch.)

He also offers a painstaking and up-to-date analysis of the gross variance between what the autopsy X-rays and photos show, what the Bethesda doctors wrote in their report, and what the Parkland doctors in Dallas observed while vainly attempting to save the President’s life.

At bottom, however, Lifton’s book belies the conceit that the assassination of President Kennedy can be “solved” through evidence that is incomplete, ambiguous and thoroughly tainted. As the late Thomas Stamm suggested, preoccupation with such evidence is equivalent to focusing on the magician’s diversionary technique, which is intended to conceal and cannot explain the mechanics of his tricks. The tragic irony of David Lifton’s work is that, like the Warren Commission itself, he was constrained by the lack of solid fact to resort to speculative improbability in constructing a “logical” explanation for the assassination.

It is noteworthy that this technique achieved currency in several more recently published works.

Sadly, Lifton’s book inaugurated a trend in the publishing industry, whereby it has seemingly become impossible for a serious, responsible student of the assassination to see his work commercially published unless he posits a neat and fanciful solution to the crime, witness such books as *Reasonable Doubt* by Henry Hurt; *Contract on America* by David Scheim; *Mafia Kingfish* by John H. Davis; *On the Trail of the Assassins* by Jim Garrison, and — in the realm of fiction — *Libra* by Don DeLillo. To date, no critique of the methodology and conclusions of the House Select Committee on Assassinations comparable to earlier published books and articles about the Warren Commission’s *Report* has appeared in print, and it has grown increasingly unlikely that any will in the near future. Thus, the public controversy initially stirred by Edward Jay Epstein’s scholarly and understated book, *Inquest*, which began as a thesis for his Master’s Degree at Cornell University, has been fueled by pap. It is, to borrow the title of a popular song, “running on empty.”

Serious valid criticisms of the medical evidence in John Kennedy’s assassination have been raised by several researchers and authors, and the subject is indeed worthy of further study. Unfortunately, the erstwhile House Select Committee and the Congress as a whole blocked our access to those very materials which could appreciably advance our knowledge. These include staff counsel interviews, sworn depositions and affidavits of participants in the creation of the medical record — resources which cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be regarded as highly classified or related to the protection of national security. The most logical step toward satiating our hunger for the solution to a case which cannot be solved through the available evidence is to demand access to that which continues to be withheld.

Chapter 7

The Original Work of a Scholar

Apart from his “head surgery” on direct quotations, Mr. Lifton also demonstrates a propensity toward egregious errors on the simplest facts capable of the simplest verifications. The following examples should suffice to illustrate the point that Mr. Lifton apparently has difficulty in establishing dates, times and chronologies, an ability that is undoubtedly quintessential to the split-second timing of his reconstruction of events on the night of November 22, 1963, in *Best Evidence*:

- He contends that I met the late Sylvia Meagher in the Spring of 1975, when I was 27. I first made her acquaintance in 1974, when I was 26.
- He cannot state with any degree of certainty whether he and I met face-to-face in 1976 or 1977. It was 1977. He says I was about 28. I was 29.
- He alleges that I attempted to interview former Warren Commissioner John J. McCloy while I was working for CBS. As I clearly stated in my *Third Decade* article, “The Greatest Secret I Ever Learned About The Kennedy Assassination,” which Lifton has read, this happened after I left CBS.
- He says, “Sometime around 1977, Feinman was accepted at Yeshiva University, where he began in 1978, at age 30.” I began studying law at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University in late August 1977, at the age of 29.
- He alleges that I graduated from law school in 1981. It was 1980.
- He describes a dinner of several critics, not including Mr. Lifton, with Oliver Stone as taking place on Friday evening, April 2, 1993. It was Thursday evening, April 1.

Weisberg’s Clothes Were Too Big: The “Z-202/Willis #5 Analysis”

In Chapter Five, I introduced the subject of Lifton’s inculcation of Secret Service Agent Glen Bennett as a conspirator in the assassination. I explained why it was necessary for Lifton to do so to save his theory. How he accomplished it is a prime example of Lifton warping the fruits of his predecessors’ research to confuse the public.

Lifton carefully read and analyzed *Whitewash II*, and circulated an analytical memo about it to his friends. (Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, January 2, 1967)

Weisberg and Lifton were out of sorts, however, over Jim Garrison’s investigation of Lifton’s friend, Kerry Thornley (also a former Marine buddy of Lee Harvey Oswald). Lifton described the effect of his rift with Weisberg upon his work:

His work manifests itself in my own effort, only to the extent that I have been able to make use of his published material.

(Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, October 13, 1969)

In *Best Evidence*, discussing the reasons for his conclusion that Bennett lied about witnessing a shot strike Kennedy’s back, Mr. Lifton liberally grafted and presented as his own work the detailed and original analysis of the photographic evidence that Harold Weisberg included in Chapter 17 of his second book, *Whitewash II* (self-published in 1965 and republished as a Dell paperback in 1966) without acknowledging or attributing Weisberg, as if the same thoughts had spontaneously popped into his head.

Weisberg found a correlation between Zapruder frame Z-202 and Willis #5, which is the fifth photograph in a series of pictures taken by bystander Phil Willis. Lifton observed that in Willis #5, Bennett is seen looking toward the right instead of at President Kennedy, and that, since the first shot presumably occurred at Z-210 and Willis took his fifth photo less than a second earlier, Bennett allegedly could not have seen the first shot hit the President.

Unlike Weisberg, however, Lifton stopped short of telling his readers that Willis testified before the Warren Commission that it was the sound of the first shot that caused him to squeeze the camera shutter and take that

photograph. If so, as Professor David Wrone has pointed out, the bullet would have been fired before Z-202/Willis #5 because bullets travel faster than sound.

Weisberg set the time for the first shot to coincide with Z-190 (the House Select Committee thirteen years later put it at Z-189). This would mean that Bennett could very well have seen the first shot strike the President and then, as seen in Willis #5 taken two-thirds of a second later, immediately turned in reaction to the sound of that shot.

Regardless of the strained relations between Mr. Lifton and Mr. Weisberg, the practice of attribution does not turn on the estrangement between a writer and the originator of his source material.

Mr. Lifton was not estranged from Thomas Stamm, a New York researcher (deceased, 1980) whose letters and monographs approached the highest standards of literacy on this subject. Stamm was one of the first researchers to view the Zapruder film at the National Archives. He wrote of his observations, and Sylvia Meagher decided to quote a major portion of his essay in her manuscript, *Accessories After the Fact*, which she wrote during 1965–1967. Mr. Lifton had access at *Ramparts*' offices to a copy of Sylvia's then unpublished work while he was writing "The Case For Three Assassins" for the magazine.

The *Ramparts* article included the following quote from Stamm's essay:

"[T]he sudden explosive violence with which President Kennedy is slammed back against the rear seat is unmistakable." This is credited to Stamm in a footnote.

The following language appears two paragraphs later in Lifton's article:

The violent backward and leftward thrust of Mr. Kennedy's head begins at the instant of impact of the fatal head shot; the two events appear to be simultaneous and to have a relationship of cause and effect. That the backward thrust could have resulted from a bullet fired from behind and above would seem a manifest impossibility ...

This entire paragraph was lifted practically verbatim from Stamm's September 1965 essay, but was not credited to him. It was presented as the original written work of the article's authors. Here is the relevant passage from Stamm's original essay:

The violent backward thrust of President Kennedy occurs, to the eye, at the instant of impact of the fatal shot. The two events appear to be simultaneous and to have the obvious relationship of cause and effect. The service of truth requires no other explanation.

That President Kennedy could have been thrust back violently against the rear seat in consequence of a bullet fired from above and behind him seems a manifest impossibility ...

I knew Tom Stamm during the last five years of his life. To the best of my knowledge, Tom shared his work generously with his colleagues throughout his study of the assassination. I never knew him to request or receive money for his incisive work. I never knew him to court the admiration and respect that he surely deserved. At the very least, people should know who, and how talented, he was.

Chapter 8

Assassination in the Fourth Dimension

(Wherein Lifton suddenly recovers from his selective amnesia to revise an alleged self-revelation in *Best Evidence* [“And then I thought, and then I knew, and then I had an insight, and then it hit me, but I couldn’t be sure, so I thought about it some more, but my head began to hurt, and then I couldn’t remember when I thought about it the first time, et cetera, et cetera, ad infinitum.”])

A subtle thread that runs throughout *Best Evidence* is its author’s consideration of theories which he ultimately rejects. Usually, these theories are presented as Mr. Lifton’s original thoughts. In any event, it is generally not made clear to his readers whether he is jettisoning his own ideas, or ideas that he picked up from other researchers. I have devoted this chapter to a specific case study of Mr. Lifton’s method.

One of the very few correct statements that Mr. Lifton makes in his Compuserve essays pertains to our discussions in the late Seventies: “Feinman’s focus was on Dr. Burkley, and his posture at the autopsy.” Lifton says about him:

[B]oth at the autopsy and in the report he wrote the next day, Burkley apparently treated that hole on the body (i.e., the wound at the front of the throat) as nothing more than a tracheotomy [sic]. (Note: In *Best Evidence*, I explain this in terms of Burkley’s honestly not knowing about the throat wound, because he arrived several minutes late in the Emergency room and the wound was hidden by the trach tube. See Chapter 14, “The ‘Low’ Back wound question ...”, p. 375 in hardcover. [Sic])

Because Dr. Burkley supposedly possessed this knowledge, yet hid it from the autopsy doctors, in my conversations with Feinman, I (or he, I don’t remember who) dubbed this the “I’ve-got-a-secret” hypothesis.

It was Feinman, and it was then a working hypothesis. For reasons that I explained at the Midwest Symposium, I now regard it as a virtual certainty. Mr. Lifton discussed his understanding of the “I’ve-got-a-secret” hypothesis in *Best Evidence* as though it were another idea that had simply popped into his head — an original conception — without ever mentioning my name. In the process, he exaggerated the hypothesis far beyond what I was prepared at the time to state publicly. I raise that point so readers may judge his protestations that he wanted to credit me for the [Perry transcript](#), and that he would have credited me with any other research that I might agree to give him.

Here is how Mr. Lifton’s book dealt with the hypothesis:

If to avoid altering the body, the doctors were recruited into a plot, then, to deceive the bystander witnesses, the doctors would also have to sham the autopsy — for example, bend over a body which showed frontal entry and pretend not to see what was really there. Indeed, they would have to make false oral statements, at least for the benefit of the FBI, as they performed the examination.

If the body was unaltered, and the autopsy doctors both shammed the examination and then falsified their report, still another problem would remain: the X-rays and photographs.

In any homicide investigation, the autopsy X-rays and photographs are an integral part of the autopsy protocol. In this case, Chief Justice Earl Warren declined to make them a part of the Warren Commission’s evidence, but that was purely his option. He could have decided otherwise. Indeed, one reason the Warren Commission attorneys said they felt confident the autopsy doctors could not have lied was that they could not have known whether the Commission would ultimately demand to see that evidence.

It was easy to say such evidence could be faked, but in practice the technical problems were anything but trivial. X-rays of the head might be tested for authenticity through dental identification, and photographs of the head wounds would have to be convincingly faked from

several angles — a near impossibility.

From a technical standpoint alone, it made no sense to attempt such a feat — in effect, to leave the most important evidence, the body, unaltered, buried in a cemetery, where an exhumation would readily reveal the lie — when to avoid these problems it was only necessary to recognize that the body was evidence and make plans to alter it prior to autopsy.

(BE, p. 458)

Maybe not, if they didn't know of the throat wound until later during the autopsy, or believed the wounds were unrelated.

What is even more irritating, however, is Mr. Lifton's invention of facts and *post hoc* revision of his book. First, there is not a scintilla of evidence to support Mr. Lifton's current assertion that, at the autopsy, "Burkley apparently treated that hole on the body ... as nothing more than a tracheotomy," and so far as we know, Dr. Burkley did not write a report the next day. If Lifton is aware of such a report, let him produce it. Second, but far more crucial, Mr. Lifton did not write in *Best Evidence* that Dr. Burkley arrived "several minutes late in the Emergency room." He asserted that Burkley arrived at 12:53 p.m., some 15–20 minutes after the President's arrival, and too late to observe the throat wound.

Dr. George G. Burkley, the President's official White House physician and a Navy Admiral, was doubly distinguished as the one medical doctor who was with John F. Kennedy throughout the day and night of November 22–23, 1963. Burkley was the only physician who was close to both the pre- and post-mortem treatment of the President, but he was never called to testify before the Warren Commission. It does not appear that he was ever interviewed by representatives of the Secret Service or the FBI. Although he was interviewed by the HSCA, those interviews have been sequestered.

Burkley, formerly portrayed as a passive bystander in the events immediately following the assassination, was in fact an active participant. Moreover, Burkley seems to have been an important, busy and knowledgeable figure in the events immediately following the assassination: Of prime significance to our discussion of Mr. Lifton's *Best Evidence*, Burkley was the link between Parkland and Bethesda that has never been officially acknowledged; he was present in the emergency room at Parkland Hospital, where he witnessed and assisted his medical colleagues' efforts to revive the President; and, he was present during the autopsy at Bethesda Naval Hospital that evening.

In this chapter, I shall examine the evidence to support the proposition that Burkley had the opportunity to see, learn or know about the wound in the President's anterior neck during the emergency treatment at Parkland hospital. The significance of this issue is cataclysmic: The autopsy pathologists have claimed ignorance of that wound at the time they performed their examinations as their excuse for having failed to trace the alleged course of a missile from the presumed entrance wound in Kennedy's upper back, through the upper thoracic region, and out the throat. After surveying the evidence, I shall then discuss the manner in which Mr. Lifton chose to deal with this subject.

Overview

Burkley rode in the rear of the Dallas motorcade in the "VIP bus." (CE 1126) The *Warren Report* tells us that "Admiral Burkley, the President's physician, arrived at the hospital between 3 and 5 minutes following the arrival of the President," since the riders in his car "were not exactly aware what had happened" and the car went on to the Trade Mart first. (WR 53) Burkley later confirmed this statement (George G. Burkley, recorded interview by William McHugh, October 17, 1967, page 16, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program)

In their testimony, several of the Parkland Hospital doctors recalled Burkley being in the Emergency Room. For example, Dr. Charles Carrico testified: "Admiral Burkley, I believe was his name, the President's personal physician, was there as soon as he got to the hospital." (3H 363) Several nurses also reported seeing Burkley in the Emergency Room.

Admiral Burkley actually participated in the President's treatment. He supplied the treating doctors with hydrocortisone because of JFK's adrenal condition. "Burkley produced three 100-mg vials of Solu-Cortef from his bag, murmuring, 'Either intravenously or intramuscularly.'" (Manchester, William. *The Death of a President*. Harper & Row, New York: 1967, page 184.)

Admiral Burkley arrived in Trauma Room One before Dr. Perry arrived. Dr. Perry performed the tracheostomy. Therefore, Admiral Burkley arrived in time to see the undisturbed throat wound. The analysis breaks down to two simple questions:

- What were Burkley's movements immediately following the shooting?
- Did Burkley actually arrive at Parkland too late to render any assistance to the dying President, as Mr. Lifton states as fact?

The Time Factor in Trauma Room One

The presidential limousine arrived at the Emergency Room loading dock at 12:34 p.m. (Report of Secret Service Agent Emory Roberts [[CE 1024 at 18 H735](#)]; Rowley's report [[CE 1026 at 18H 810](#)])

There was a delay in getting treatment for the President. The delay in removing JFK from his car probably consumed much of the concomitant "delay" in Burkley's arrival.

Consider the testimony of Secret Service Agent Forrest V. Sorrels:

"We went around to the emergency entrance. I jumped out of the car, and I expected to see stretchers there, out waiting, but they were not. And I ran to the entrance door there, and at that time they began to bring stretchers out, and I said, 'Hurry up and get those stretchers out,' and someone else, probably one of the police officers, also said to hurry up and get the stretchers out.

"There was a lot of confusion around at that time."

([7H 347](#))

On November 29, 1963, Secret Service Agent Roy Kellerman, who rode in the front seat of the presidential limousine, filed a report on his activities, which the Warren Commission reprinted as Exhibit 1024. On page two of this statement, he reported that Secret Service agents ran into the hospital to get a stretcher. ([Commission Exhibit 1024 at 18H 725](#))

Here is Roy Kellerman's testimony on this matter:

Mr Specter With respect to the state of readiness of Parkland Hospital at your arrival, how long after you got there were stretcher bearers at the front door?

Mr Kellerman To the best of my knowledge, there were no stretcher bearers at the car — none.

Mr Specter At your arrival?

Mr Kellerman Yes, sir.

Mr Specter Did some come shortly after you arrived?

Mr Kellerman No, sir.

Mr Specter Well, what sequence did follow with respect to the arrival of the stretchers?

Mr Kellerman When we arrived at the hospital I had called to the agents to go inside and get two stretchers on wheels. Between those people and police officers who also entered the emergency room, they brought the stretchers out. I did not at any time see a man in a white uniform outside, indicating a medical person.

Mr Specter When did you first see the first indication of a doctor?

Mr Kellerman When we got in the emergency room itself proper.

Mr Specter And do you know which doctor that was?

Mr Kellerman Not by name or sight; no, sir.

Mr Specter How many doctors did you see at that time?

Mr Kellerman The room was full.

Mr Specter Who were the individuals who brought the stretchers on wheels, if you know?

Mr Kellerman Agents who were in the follow-up car, police officers who were ahead of us on motorcycles.

([2H 102](#))

White House Correspondent Merriman Smith was in the press pool car, the sixth and final vehicle in motorcade. (Manchester, op. cit., p. 167) Smith provided this eyewitness account in a memoir published on the third anniversary of the assassination:

Not until we pulled up at the Parkland Hospital emergency entrance in a screaming skid and I ran to the side of the Kennedy car did I know for certain that he was badly hurt.

When I saw Mr. Kennedy pitched over on the rear seat and blood darkening his coat, and Gov. John Connally of Texas slumped face up on the floor with brownish red foam seeping from his chest wound, not one hospital orderly, doctor or nurse had reached the vehicle. Several careless authors would have their readers believe that medical attendants were on the scene at this point. They were not. I was there.

(*Washington Post*, November 20, 1966, pp. E1, E5.)

William Manchester wrote, “There wasn’t an attendant in sight.” (Manchester, op. cit., p. 169)

Dave Powers, Clint Hill and Roy Kellerman attempted to remove Kennedy from the car, but Jackie refused to let him be moved. (O’Donnell, Kenneth and Powers, David, *Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye*, Little Brown and Co., Boston: 1972, p. 31; Manchester, William. *The Death of a President*, Harper & Row, New York: 1967, [Hard cover] p. 170) Moreover, they could not have removed him without first removing Connally from the jump seat. The braking of the limousine upon arrival at the emergency room loading dock jarred Connally into consciousness. He was removed from the jump seat of the limousine first. ([CE 1024, id.](#))

Jackie held on, conversing with Secret Service Agent Clint Hill. (Manchester, op. cit., p. 171) Hill put his coat over JFK’s head and coaxed Jackie out of the limousine.

Manchester discusses the “second wave” of arrivals at Parkland

Parkland was still recoiling from this first invasion when the second, denser wave arrived from the Trade Mart. The interval was bound to be brief because the buildings were so close, and two circumstances virtually eliminated it. The first was the motorcade schedule. Drivers had been told that the procession would pick up speed after leaving Main Street, and in the excitement which followed the shots they accelerated so rapidly that during the twelve seconds of Officer Clyde Haygood’s pistol-in-hand ascent of the overpass embankment every vehicle in the caravan, including the Signals car, swept past him. The second factor was communications. Curry’s alarm had been intercepted by all Dallas police radios at the Mart. The men there who had heard it were preparing to escort any member of the Presidential party who could establish his credentials.

(*Manchester, op. cit.*, page 173.)

The route from Dealey Plaza to the Trade Mart was cleared (Sorrels testimony, [7H 347](#)). Manchester’s narrative continues:

There were some stragglers ...

Among the last to learn that anything had gone awry were the passengers of the hapless VIP bus. They had been instructed to go directly to the rear of the Trade Mart. But there were no Dallas policemen at the rear entrance. The guards were Texas state policemen who weren’t tied into the radio network and didn’t know what had happened. None of them, moreover, had seen a White House pass. They had been told that Secret Service agents would vouch for bona fide Kennedy people. But most of the agents had left for Parkland after picking up Kellerman’s distress signal over the Charlie network. The result was an icy reception for Dr. Burkley ...

Suddenly Dr. Burkley vanished. Burkley had never deserted Evelyn [Lincoln] before but he sensed that something terrible had happened. The atmosphere was ominous. Strangers were reeling around in circles.... With his chief pharmacist's mate in tow, the doctor flagged Agent Andy Berger, who was about to leave in a police cruiser. The physician had just tossed his black bag on the floorboard when Chuck Roberts of *Newsweek* ran up. "Let me go with you," Chuck begged. Burkley, usually gentle, slammed the door in his face; the cruiser skirred into Harry Hines Boulevard and dropped the doctor outside Parkland's emergency entrance minutes after the President's disappearance within.

(*Manchester, op. cit, page 174*)

In the meantime, Parkland nurse Diana Bowron went out to the Emergency Room loading dock to meet the presidential limousine. She helped take the stretcher carriage bearing JFK back inside to Trauma Room 1. Carrico was there. Nurse Henchcliffe was already setting up. So, it was just the three of them there at first, when Kennedy was wheeled into the room for treatment:

Mr Specter And who was in the trauma room when you arrived there?

Miss Bowron Dr. Carrico.

Mr Specter Where did Dr. Carrico join you?

Miss Bowron At the — I couldn't really tell you exactly, but it was inside major surgery. Miss Henchcliffe, the other nurse who is assigned to major surgery, was in the trauma room already setting the I.V.s — the intravenous bottles up.

Mr Specter And were there any other nurses present at that time when the President arrived in the trauma area?

Miss Bowron I don't think so, sir.

Mr Specter Were there any doctors present besides Dr. Carrico?

Miss Bowron I didn't notice anybody — there may have been.

([6H 136](#))

Dr. Charles Carrico was the first doctor to reach Kennedy.

Mr Specter Who was the first doctor to reach President Kennedy on his arrival at Parkland Hospital?

Dr Carrico I was.

Mr Specter And who else was with President Kennedy on his arrival, as best you can recollect it?

Dr Carrico Mrs. Kennedy was there, and there were some men in the room, who I assumed were Secret Service men; I don't know.

([6H 2](#))

The *Warren Report* concluded: "The first physician to see the President at Parkland Hospital was Dr. Charles J. Carrico, a resident in general surgery." ([WR 53](#)) There were also two nurses in attendance. ([ibid.](#)) This is corroborated by Perry's testimony. ([3H 367](#))

The President was being wheeled into when Carrico first saw him. ([3H 359](#)). Drs. Don Curtis and Martin White were also present (*ibid.*) Because of the President's inadequate respirations and the apparent airway injury, Carrico inserted a cuffed endotracheal tube into the mouth and down the trachea past the injury. The cuff was inflated and the tube was connected to a respirator. This was the Bennett machine — also known as the [Bird](#) machine (an acronym). ([6H 3](#)) After this procedure, Carrico listened to the chest: "Breath sounds were diminished, especially on the right, despite the fact that the endotracheal tube was in place and the cuff inflated, there continued to be some leakage around the tracheal wound. For this reason, Dr. Perry elected to perform a tracheotomy, and instructed some of the other physicians in the room to insert chest tubes, thoracotomy tubes."

(6H 3)

Dr. Perry went to Trauma Room 1 from the dining room accompanied by Dr. Ronald Jones. (6H 8; 3H 367) When they arrived, Carrico had just inserted the endotracheal tube. (6H 8) Carrico was attaching the Bird respirator. (6H 9; 3H 368)

Interim Assessment:

The delay in getting treatment for President Kennedy obviously consumed several precious minutes. The initial resuscitative attempts performed by Dr. Carrico before the arrival of Dr. Perry must have consumed several more minutes. No one was keeping a record of the time that had transpired, but it is reasonable to conclude that Dr. Burkley's detour to the Dallas Trade Mart did not prevent him from arriving in the Parkland Emergency Room at an early point in the President's emergency treatment. Despite the lack of "a clock," by reconstructing the sequence of the President's treatment it is nevertheless possible to identify a specific event upon which we can more precisely peg Burkley's arrival at his patient's side. The key to this analysis is the hydrocortisone.

The Administration of Hydrocortisone

Initially, Dr. Charles Carrico received credit for the administration of the drug as "quick thinking" under pressure. Carrico somewhat ambiguously accepted the credit:

Mr Specter Dr. Carrico, was any action taken with respect to the adrenalin insufficiency of President Kennedy?

Dr Carrico Yes, sir; he was given 300 milligrams of hydrocortisone which is an adrenal hormone.

Mr Specter And what was the reason for the administration of that drug?

Dr Carrico It was recalled that the President had been said to have adrenal insufficiency.

(3H 361)

Perry clearly assumed the Carrico was responsible for the decision. He told the Warren Commission:

"It is to Dr. Carrico's credit, I think he ordered the hydrocortisone for the President having known he suffered from adrenal insufficiency and in this particular instance being quite busy he had the presence of mind to recall this and order what could have been a lifesaving measure, I think."

(3H 370)

Mr McCloy You said something to the effect that, of knowing the President had an adrenalin insufficiency, is that something you could observe?

Dr Perry This is common medical knowledge, sir, that he had in the past necessarily taken adrenalin steroids to support this insufficiency. Dr. Carrico, at this moment of great stress, recalled this, and requested this be given to him at that time, this is extremely important because people who have adrenalin insufficiency are unable to mobilize this hormone at the time of any great stress and it may be fatal without support from exogenous drugs.

(3H 377)

And see Perry's interview with the staff of the HSCA (from the staff summary):

Dr. Perry stated that Dr. James Carrico, then a first-year resident, recalled that the President may have had Addison's Disease and therefore administered steroids to combat any possible shock that may have occurred.... Dr. Perry could not recall if Dr. Burkley, the President's physician, had also given the Parkland doctor steroids to administer to JFK.

(7 HSCA 295)

Burkley has disputed this, however, claiming credit for himself in his oral history interview:

I gave them some hydrocortisone, to put in the intravenous which was being given, and also told

them his blood type.

(George G. Burkley, recorded interview by William McHugh, October 17, 1967, page 16, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.)

McHugh Doctor, were the doctors in Dallas familiar with the illnesses that the President had?

Burkley The doctors in Dallas would have no reason to have any knowledge of that, and they had no need to have any knowledge of that, because the question was one of assassination by gunshot and his previous history, other than the fact, that I gave them the neo-cortef to put in the solution, which also would be used in anyone, possibly, who had such a wound, to give them additional support. But as far as any knowledge, their need to have any previous knowledge, it was not indicated and therefore, in addition to that the inquiries concerning the medical background of the President by people who were dealing with the Warren Commission and the assassination are absolutely unfounded, because they have nothing to do with the assassination.

McHugh I see. They did make an attempt to find out though, did they not?

Burkley They had no time to find out. I told them, they didn't — I went in and told them that this I wanted to put in the intravenous that was being given ...

McHugh Surely.

Burkley And they made no questions at all. There's a statement in one of them, that one of them ought to do this, but that is not true, because I was the one who came in and gave it to them, and the doctors in Dallas never even mentioned that I was present. As far as I'm concerned it doesn't matter to me, because there was no reason to interject myself in a procedure which at that time was hopeless. In addition, I was not part of their team, and it would have interfered.

Dr. Paul Conrad Peters' testimony corroborated Burkley's version. Dr. Peters was at Parkland preparing a lecture he planned to deliver to a group of medical students and residents when he learned that President Kennedy had been shot. He went to the emergency room to offer assistance. When he entered Trauma Room 1, "Mrs. Kennedy was in the corner with someone who identified himself as the personal physician of the President — I don't remember his name." Assistant Warren Commission counsel Arlen Specter questioned him about this recollection:

Mr Specter Dr. Burkley?

Dr Peters I don't know his name. That's just who he said he was, because he was asking that the President be given some steroids, which was done.

Mr Specter He requested that.

Dr Peters That's right, he said he should have some steroids because he was an Addisonian.

Mr Specter What do you mean by that in lay language?

Dr Peters Well, Addison's disease is a disease of the adrenal cortex which is characterized by a deficiency in the elaboration of certain hormones that allow an individual to respond to stress and these hormones are necessary for life, and if they cannot be replaced, the individual may succumb.

Mr Specter And Dr. Burkley, or whoever was the President's personal physician, made a request that you treat him as an Addisonian?

Dr Peters That's right — he recommended that he be given steroids because he was an Addisonian — that's what he said.

[*\(6H 69\)*](#)

[Note: The testimony of Dr. Peters implied that, when he arrived in TR-1 the tracheostomy was in progress, suggesting perhaps that Burkley arrived after Perry made the incision. This was the only such reference I found in a search of both the official and unofficial record. In his 1992 reconstruction of the clinical details of the

President's treatment, however, Dr. Charles Crenshaw indicated that Peters arrived before the tracheostomy (Crenshaw, Charles, et. al., *Conspiracy of Silence*, Signet. New York: 1992, p. 79) Dr. Crenshaw saw Burkley's open kit bag containing the steroid vials, and saw him give three 100 mm. vials of Solu-Cortef to Carrico. (Ibid., p. 82; Remarks of Dr. Crenshaw at Symposium, Dallas, October 1992) "He gave the cortisone to Jim Carrico to give to him in the emergency ward." (Livingstone, Harrison E., *High Treason 2*. Carroll & Graf, New York: 1991, p. 111) Crenshaw was not called to testify during the Warren Commission investigation. In view of the weight of the other evidence presented here, I have concluded that Peters was mistaken in his testimony on this point.]

Manchester also agrees that it was Burkley who provided the hydrocortisone:

Burkley, because he was acquainted with the patient's medical history, carried his special drugs in his black bag, and knew the proper dosage levels.

(Manchester, William. *The Death of a President*. Harper & Row, New York: 1967, page 183.)

Carrico told the HSCA staff that Burkley gave him steroids.

Purdy/Flanagan Why was President Kennedy given steroids?

Dr Carrico Because we had, there had been an argument in the local papers a few weeks previously that raised the question of whether or not he had adrenal insufficiency. If one does have adrenal insufficiency and is injured, then you need extra steroids.

Purdy/Flanagan Is there any risk to giving the person extra steroids if they don't need it?

Dr Carrico Very little. Virtually none. Matter of fact, the amount he was given is the amount that your or my adrenals would excrete in time of maximum stress.

Purdy/Flanagan How harmful would it be for a person with adrenal insufficiency not to get steroids at a time like this?

Dr Carrico No one really knows. The current medical opinion is that you need that adrenal support to respond to the stress. And without that kind of support, one could go into shock. If one really wants to get esoteric, you can argue about whether that's really true or not. But in general, the current medical practice would be to give them. And if one were going to do an operation on someone with adrenal insufficiency, you would give steroids prior to enduring the operation.

Purdy/Flanagan Did Dr. Berkeley [sic] give you any advice as to whether or not steroids should be given?

Dr Carrico Sometime during the course of resuscitation, and I've honestly forgotten how far along, he came in, asked if the President had steroids or not, I answered something like — I've forgotten what. He handed me some vials and said, "give him these."

Purdy/Flanagan Did you give him those?

Dr Carrico I handed those to the nurse, and said "go ahead and give them."

Purdy/Flanagan Did Dr. Berkeley say that President Kennedy was an Addisonian?

Dr Carrico I don't recall him saying that. He just asked if he'd had them or not and I answered in the affirmative.

([7 HSCA 274-276](#))

Conceivably, both physicians directed the administration of hydrocortisone, but the more reasonable answer is that Burkley directed it be done. If the available testimony and secondary sources did not force this conclusion, common sense might nevertheless impose it. It is doubtful that a second-year resident physician such as Carrico would have taken the responsibility for the administration of this drug in its specific dosage on the basis of some vague recollection of hearing or reading about the President's adrenal insufficiency, which had been a secret generally well-kept from the public. Three hundred milligrams of Solu-Cortef (Hydrocortisone sodium succinate) was a massive dosage. A total dose of 300 mg of hydrocortisone over 24 hours is regarded as adequate

to treat any type of stressful situation that precipitated the acute adrenal insufficiency crisis. (Himathongkam, et al., "Acute Adrenal Insufficiency", *Journal of the American Medical Association*, December 2, 1974, Vol. 230, No. 9, page 1317) Consider the contemporary wisdom of the medical profession in this regard: In an adrenal crisis 200 mg. in 5% glucose solution intravenously. If intramuscularly, a total initial dose of 200 mg. (Beison & McDermott, eds., *Textbook of Medicine*, W. B. Saunders Company, Philadelphia: 1963, page 1393)

The public record sheds only a dim light on Burkley's activities. In 1975, Harold Weisberg published copies of the Secret Service's original versions of Warren Commission exhibits related to the autopsy. Burkley verified those originals with handwritten notations. (Weisberg, Harold. *Post Mortem*. Privately published. Frederick, MD.: 1975) Burkley's notations were redacted from the exhibits admitted and published by the Commission. Upon what or whose authority, and on what basis did he certify the original records, and why were his verifications redacted from the printed exhibits? Lifton does not bother to ask. On the theory that someone was interested in suppressing Burkley's role in the events of that day, it would be interesting to know whether Carrico was requested by officials to assume public responsibility for the administration of hydrocortisone to the President. This is only, however, a theory.

Regardless of whether Burkley or Carrico was responsible, however, the hydrocortisone was administered at the beginning of the emergency treatment, before Perry arrived. Carrico's testimony:

"At the beginning of the resuscitation attempt intravenous infusions had been started using polyethylene catheters by venesection, lactated ringer solution, and uncross-matched type O RH negative bloods were administered and 300 mg. of hydrocortisone were administered."

([6H 4](#))

Dr Carrico At the same time we had been getting the airway inserted Dr. Curtis and Dr. White were doing a cutdown, venous section using polyethylene catheters through which fluid, medicine and blood could be administered.

Mr Specter Will you describe in lay language what you mean by a cutdown in relationship to what they did in this case?

Dr Carrico This was a small incision over his ankle and a tube was inserted into one of his veins through which blood could be given, fluid.

([3H 360](#))

Perry asserted this shortly after the weekend of the assassination. In his interview with United Press International at his home in McAllen, Texas on November 27, 1963, he confirmed his belief that Carrico had given hydrocortisone before he arrived. (*New York Times*, November 28, 1963). He implied as much to the Warren Commission. Describing the scene he confronted upon his arrival in TR 1, Perry testified:

"Blood transfusions and fluid transfusions were being given at this time, and through the previous venesections that had been done by Dr. Jones and Dr. Carrico.

"Also, the President had received 300 mg of Solu-cortef [sic] in order to support his adrenal glands, since it was common medical knowledge that he suffered from adrenal insufficiency."

([6H 10-11](#))

[In fact, it was not common medical knowledge, and Perry's Warren Commission testimony reveals no personal knowledge.]

He confirmed this three years later in an interview with CBS News:

"He had been previously started on intravenous fluids and blood, and given hydrocortisone by Dr. Carrico; and assisted respiration was in progress."

(*CBS News, Eddie Barker Interview with Dr. Malcolm Perry, 1967, page 2.*)

In a written report on the resuscitative efforts for President Kennedy written on the day of the assassination, one of the treating physicians, Dr. Marion T. Jenkins, wrote: "the patient received 300 mg. hydrocortisone intravenously in the first few minutes." ([20H 252; Exhibit No. 36](#))

Appraisal of the Facts:

Burkley arrived at the President's side earlier than is commonly understood. He arrived before Dr. Perry entered TR 1. It was Dr. Perry who performed the tracheotomy incision across the wound. Therefore, the wound was undisturbed when Burkley arrived. He had an opportunity to personally observe the wound.

Further Thoughts on Burkley at Parkland

Burkley also had the opportunity to observe the wound in the President's back. Manchester tells us that Burkley supervised the transfer of the body from carriage stretcher to casket. He was in the room with only the nurses and an orderly at the time. Furthermore, there are tantalizing hints in the record that Dr. Burkley, complying with Assistant Press Secretary Malcolm Kilduff's suggestion that a treating physician brief the news media, personally conferred with Malcolm Perry after the President's death, and also reconnoitered Governor John Connally's situation, perhaps even visiting the second-floor operating room where the Governor was treated. Burkley later spoke to Kellerman as though he had knowledge of Connally's medical condition, telling Kellerman that Connally still had a bullet in his body. Kellerman, in his Warren Commission testimony, said Burkley referred to "the missile that hasn't been removed from Governor Connally." ([2H 90](#))

Mr Specter You mentioned a missile which was not removed from Governor Connally. Specifically, what did you refer to there?

Mr Kellerman There was in the early — this was on the day in Parkland Memorial Hospital, and this information comes from Dr. George Burkley, the President's physician, when, I believe, I asked him the condition of Governor Connally, and have they removed the bullet from him.

Mr Specter What did Dr. Burkley say?

Mr Kellerman Dr. Burkley said that to his knowledge he still has the bullet in him.

Mr Specter And what time on November 22 was that?

Mr Kellerman This was after we got into the hospital after the shooting, sir, between then and 2 o'clock.

Mr Specter So that the operation on Governor Connally had not been completed at that point?

Mr Kellerman That is correct, sir.

([2H 91](#))

In the immediate aftermath of Kennedy death, Dr. Perry's movements appear murky. He has said that he sat down in the emergency room for about ten or fifteen minutes, then went to the second-floor operating suite to assist briefly with Governor Connally. ([6H 10](#)) Presumably that was around 1:15 or 1:20 p.m. Burkley remained busy in the emergency room, making arrangements for the removal of the President's body to Washington. Dr. Kemp Clark completed and signed a death certificate for Kennedy in Dr. Burkley's presence. ([6H 20, 25](#))

Perry testified that he arrived in the second-floor operating suite just before Dr. Thomas Shires began operating on the Governor's left leg. He indicated that while he was in the Connally operating suite, he was called and asked to participate in a press conference. He testified this request came at "around 2 o'clock" ([3H 374](#)), and that he left the operating suite shortly after Shires incised Connally's thigh wound. ([3H 390](#)).

Perry's testimony did not, however, jibe with the facts. According to the operative record of Governor Connally ([CE 392](#)), Dr. Robert Shaw presided over the thoracic surgery to repair Connally's chest. Anesthesia began at 1:00 p.m. and the actual surgery started at 1:35 p.m. While the 1:00 p.m. operative record lists three assisting physicians, Perry is not among those named. Later in the day, beginning at 3:20 p.m., Dr. Shires and Dr. Charles Gregory operated on the Governor's left leg and right wrist. In questioning Dr. Perry, Arlen Specter caught this error in his testimony, but failed to pursue it. ([3H 383](#)) The questions that remain are, where was Dr. Perry and with whom did he speak between the time of Kennedy's death and the time he began his news conference?

How Lifton Murdered the Truth

Except for the oral history interview of Burkley, the CBS interview with Perry, and Crenshaw's book (all of which are merely corroborative of what was long ago in the public record), each resource that I have cited in this analysis was readily available to David Lifton during the 15 years that he says he researched and wrote his book, and he also worked with each of those resources. He acknowledges that I tipped him off during our discussions in the late-Seventies. Nevertheless, he discusses none of the above primary or secondary source material in his book.

Other than by vacuous ridicule, how does he refute this reconstruction? By throwing dust in his reader's eyes.

Lifton and Burkley — The UPI copy

Lifton absolves Burkley of knowledge of the throat wound on the specious basis that his death certificate does not mention it. This is evidence for nothing more than Burkley's failure, for whatever reason, to record the throat wound on the certificate. The death certificate's purpose, however, is not to detail the wounds but to state the cause of death. (See *Best Evidence*, Chap 14, p. 478)

[Note: There are undoubtedly more substantial issues relating to Burkley's death certificate for Kennedy that Lifton never addressed. E.g., Why did Burkley prepare his own death certificate for the President when he already had received a death certificate from Dr. Kemp Clark of Parkland Hospital? Why was Burkley's death certificate never filed with any probate court or health agency? Why did Burkley include in his death certificate material that reached beyond the mere cause of death? What was the source for the statement in the Burkley death certificate that there was a wound in the President's back at about the level of the third thoracic vertebra?]

Lifton also cites a teletype dispatch by UPI's Merriman Smith. "Since each UPI transmission had a time stamp, the UPI ticker tape is an accurate source of chronological data." (*Best Evidence*, p. 479) Under Lifton's interpretation, a UPI dispatch timed at 12:53 PM reporting Burkley's arrival at Parkland means that Burkley arrived at the door of the emergency room about fifteen minutes after Kennedy's logged-in arrival at 12:38 PM. Lifton states:

At 12:53 pm, UPI reported: "A few minutes later [referring to '12:50' mentioned in the previous sentence] Rear Admiral George Burkley, , the White House Physician, rushed into the hospital. He headed for the emergency room ..."

A single piece of UPI wire copy, dictated by a man whom Lifton did not even interview (Merriman Smith is now dead), a piece of evidence that Lifton either doesn't understand or has deliberately thrown up as a smoke screen to protect his precious theory and murder the truth — this is what he proclaims as scholarly precision in his work. The facts, however, reveal the shoddiness of this device.

First, Manchester tells us that, when Smith entered the Parkland Emergency Room, he commandeered a telephone in the cashier's cage. (Manchester, William. *The Death of a President*, Harper & Row, New York: 1967, p. 168) This stakeout was 25 yards removed from the entrance to the Emergency Room. In the crush of officials, newsmen and others, Smith could not abandon his line for fear of being unable to find another. Therefore, while keeping his phone connection, he had to rely upon the advices he received from random passersby for the news that he dictated to the teletype operator at the other end of the line. In other words, he was relying on hearsay rather than personal observation. (Manchester, op. cit., p. 191)

Second, contrary to Mr. Lifton's assertions, the time stamp on a wire service story does not indicate the time that an event occurred. Rather, it represents the time that the teletype operator transmits the story to subscribers of the service (e.g., newspapers, radio and television stations). Moreover, wire services do not transmit stories in the order that they occurred. Therefore, the tape is not an accurate source of chronological data.

Finally, I have examined a complete set of the wire copy to which Mr. Lifton refers. His statement, "A few minutes later [referring to '12:50' mentioned in the previous sentence]..." is one of the most artful fabrications in the entire book. There is no "previous sentence" in the transmission that he cites. That transmission is a single sentence. The wire copy consists of a number of separate, short transmissions containing fragments of information that would later be combined and edited by a rewrite man into a coherent story, and there is no clear reference in the sentence Mr. Lifton quotes to what comes before or after on the tape.

Impeaching His Own Witness

Some might wish to excuse Lifton's UPI gaffe as merely sloppy research were it not for his treatment of George A. Barnum. Barnum was a Coast Guard Yeoman and a member of the casket honor guard at Bethesda on the night of the assassination. After his participation in the events of the weekend, his superior at Coast Guard Headquarters directed him to write a report for the historical record of his unit. Barnum saved a copy of his November 29, 1963 personal file memorandum-report for his children.

Because Lifton tries to use Barnum in support of his "ambulance chase" scenario, he cannot comfortably ignore a much more significant aspect of Barnum's memo. In Chapter 30 of *Best Evidence*, Lifton reports that, sometime after midnight, Barnum had an encounter with Dr. Burkley in the hospital cafeteria. During their conversation, Burkley spoke about the President's wounds and evidenced a knowledge of the throat wound that, if Dr. Humes' repeated statements are to be believed, Burkley should not have had. Lifton attempts to discredit Barnum on the ground that he reported Burkley as describing a shot "striking him above and to the rear of the right ear, this shot not coming out ...," a statement in conflict with the official autopsy report, wherein the head shot exited the skull.

Once more, however, Lifton misleads his readers, a feat made possible only by his omission to print the entire [Sibert and O'Neill report](#). The head shot conclusion that Burkley imparted to Barnum was the same conclusion reported by Sibert & O'Neill in their "real-time" narrative of the autopsy. Barnum's report of Burkley's remarks on the head wound accurately mirrored the autopsy pathologists' tentative conclusion regarding the head wound, as reported by Sibert and O'Neill, before a skull fragment was delivered to the morgue late in the evening.

As we have seen, and others have noted, Mr. Lifton is highly selective in his use of evidence, emphasizing what supports his case and discounting conflicting facts and possibilities. ("Television" (column), *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 18, 1988, p. E1) Whereas a genuine scholar accepts his obligation to deal as honestly with the facts as he knows how, Mr. Lifton displays the same ability to disregard facts without feeling any sense of inconsistency that allows a devout religious mind to believe in miracles or a child to believe in fairy tales. Mr. Lifton, however is no monk, and he is no child.

Chapter 9

“I Had to Have That Document”

(Wherein Lifton trips himself up in a serious contradiction about how he obtained the Malcolm Perry news conference transcript)

I obtained a copy of the [Perry news conference transcript](#) during the period that I worked for CBS News. Since no audio recording of the event has survived, from a research standpoint I regarded it as an unverified document in that it had no official markings, and I had not received it from an official source. So, I had to authenticate it. I sent copies to Tom Wicker of the *New York Times*, and Robert MacNeil of public television, both of whom had attended the news conference. Wicker checked his notes and confirmed the transcript's validity. MacNeill did not reply.

I was still unsure. The transcript contained the time notation “3:16 p.m. .” I decided that this was a simple clerical error, since the press conference is known to have occurred earlier: Both NBC and CBS reported Perry's statements at about 2:35 p.m. (CST) (NBC, op. cit., p. 11). Dr. Clark testified that it occurred at approximately 2:30 p.m. (6H 21). Dr. Perry recalled that it was around 2 o'clock (3H 374). The most likely answer, then, is that the press conference started at 2:16 p.m. (CST).

At the top of each page of the transcript was the number “1327-C”, signifying that this was the 1327th news conference of the Kennedy White House. An inquiry to the John F. Kennedy Library in Waltham, Massachusetts brought the reply that the transcript was not part of the Kennedy papers. (Letter to the author from Sylvie Turner, Research Archivist, May 6, 1976) Immediately, I received a copy from the Lyndon B. Johnson Library in Austin, Texas. At the top of the first page of the Austin transcript, the number “1327-C” had been crossed out and replaced by the number “1”. The 1327th news conference of the Kennedy White House had been re-designated the first news conference of the Johnson White House. Efforts to learn who authorized the re-designation were unsuccessful. Former White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger, then living and working in Paris, did not respond to my questions. Wayne Hawks was dead. David Lifton completely overlooked this troublesome issue in his book.

The transcript remained on file in the White House Press Office, available to anyone with press or Secret Service credentials, until 1969, when it became part of Johnson's presidential papers.

I gave copies of the document to Harold Weisberg, the late Thomas Stamm, and the late Sylvia Meagher, my closest associates at the time, as well as a handful of other critics. It was Stamm who, through a combination of excitement and a simple misunderstanding of the “ground rules” of our relations, informed Mr. Lifton that I had the Perry transcript.

With an unrestrained desire to impugn my character (as though to do so would answer any of the questions I raised about his book) through endless non-sequiturs, Mr. Lifton picks up the story from his end; he says he telephoned me for a copy of the Perry transcript during the summer of 1976. I choose not to dispute his timing of this call, for it will presently serve to illustrate a point.

Mr. Lifton admits he told me that the transcript was vital to his work and that he had to have that document. I do recall this very clearly. It is also true that I initially refused to make it available to him, and that, at first, I did not explain to him where he could obtain it. Indeed, I did not tell him how I obtained the transcript.

Mr. Lifton also admits that he told me, “I was more than willing to protect a source.” In fact, it was only under his assurance of confidentiality that I confirmed to him what was already public knowledge anyway, i.e., that CBS had the transcript and had obtained it from the White House press office. This much is reported by Mr. Lifton in Chapter 3 of *Best Evidence*.

Mr. Lifton says, “After some bickering, Roger revealed that the document was publicly available at the JFK library” The “bickering” that Mr. Lifton mentions consisted of the following: he said to me that, unless I agreed to give him the transcript, he would call the senior management of CBS News and tell them that I was passing a CBS News document to other critics. Now, Mr. Lifton had no way of knowing the source and origin of what I had

shared with Weisberg, Meagher, Stamm and others, i.e., whether it came from CBS's files or elsewhere, but the fact remains that CBS did have a transcript, and were Mr. Lifton to have carried out his stated intent, I would most likely have been fired immediately by CBS News because of its policy against making internal documents available to outsiders. Under the circumstances, I agreed to send him a copy of the LBJ Library transcript.

It is here that we stumble over Mr. Lifton's major, self-defeating error. Mr. Lifton alleges that I directed him to the JFK Library, but that he decided instead to send off to the LBJ Library for his own copy of the transcript. He implies that the LBJ copy I sent him was merely duplicative of what he already obtained as a result of the type of far-reaching deduction that pervades his book.

Mr. Lifton accuses me of attempting to suppress the truth about the Malcolm Perry news conference transcript. Let's consider the iron facts: As Mr. Lifton himself notes, Walter Cronkite referred to the transcript on the air during the June 1967 documentary. As Mr. Lifton is probably aware, a CBS flack mentioned it again in a book based on the series. (White, Stephen. *Should We Now Believe the Warren Report?* Macmillan Company, New York: 1968) Mark Lane discussed CBS's refusal to disclose the transcript in his 1968 book, *A Citizen's Dissent* (Lane, Mark. *A Citizen's Dissent*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York: 1968), as did Harold Weisberg in *Post Mortem* (1975). Numerous magazine articles published before 1978 dealing with the CBS series also mentioned it.

[Note: It should not escape the attention of serious students of the assassination that Macmillan, the company that brought us *Best Evidence* also published Stephen White's equally glib apologia for CBS News and the *Warren Report*. In many subtle ways, Mr. White's denigration of the critics of the Warren Commission echoes resoundingly through Mr. Lifton's tome.]

I even provided Mr. Lifton with a copy of the transcript, albeit unwillingly. Therefore, what, in Lifton's twisted view, was I trying to suppress? What does he insist I tried to conceal? Here is clear and irrefutable evidence, provided by David Lifton himself, that he finds deeper meanings and hidden motives in nearly everything — the key to his book, *Best Evidence*.

He called me while he was working on the final draft of his book. He said that he wanted to write that I had provided him with a copy of the transcript that I had discovered in the files of CBS News. As previously discussed, this was an erroneous statement. Moreover, in view of certain legal entanglements that I had with CBS at the time, it might also have been prejudicial to my posture. It is simply a wholesale invention on Mr. Lifton's part that I refused to cooperate with him for any competitive reason, neither was there any way that I could prevent him (or anyone else) from writing about a public document.

Mr. Lifton says I wrote a several-page letter, another of his inaccuracies. It was two pages, dated September 22, 1978. I said:

From time to time during the past two years you have called and expressed an interest in crediting me with the discovery of the transcript, and you have asked me how it would be appropriate to do so. I have told you that you could properly and accurately say that, "Roger Feinman, a researcher (or Roger Feinman, while working at CBS News in 1976), discovered the transcript at the Johnson Library in Austin, Texas."

But the excerpt of your manuscript which you read to me is totally at variance with my understanding of what you intended to write, and with my recollection of what I told you would be both proper and accurate to write.... [Y]ou would be seriously misguided, and also in breach of the privacy of our communications, if you quoted me as the authority for a fact that I cannot attest to, when I have asked you not to so quote me.

It is very important to all of us who are concerned with the assassination problem that your book reflect the highest standards of investigative reporting. I have learned in my own researches that part of the task is learning how to cope with off-the-record discussions and communications with discretion.

Writing his Compuserve essays for an audience he evidently detests as feeble-minded, Mr. Lifton leaves his readers with a loaded impression that I have something to hide. This is not the style of a scholar who knows his duty to state plainly and not to evade the serious implications of what Lifton will only insinuate. Unlike Mr. Lifton, I do not consider myself free to select when I might divulge the confidence of a source according to situational ethics, exigent need, personal pique or an urge to vengeance. Rather, I have no choice: I cannot

divulge the identities of those who afforded me access to information, partly because to do so might inflict great harm upon them, partly because it is my First Amendment right, and partly because it is simply the way I was taught.

There was nothing to prevent Mr. Lifton from giving proper credit for the discovery of the transcript. I never asked him for protection, and I did not ask him to hide anything. I merely asked him to tell the truth. He continually insisted upon writing that I had provided him with internal CBS materials, which was not the case. Instead, he told the story his way, regardless of the facts.

Interestingly, Mr. Lifton contacted me about the passage in his book regarding the Perry transcript several months before he permitted Macmillan Company to see the first 10 chapters of his book (the transcript is discussed in Chapter 3 of *Best Evidence*). Thus, he represented to his publisher that he had independently unearthed the document at the LBJ library rather than that he first received it from me.

Mr. Lifton then asks our credence for the statement that he called again to ask if he could say that I gave him a copy of the CBS transcript. This allegation is both highly unlikely and contrary to my recollection. He did call me again during his preparation of the later chapters of his book to request one last time that I show him a manuscript. As Mr. Lifton himself recounts, he would not permit me to conclude the conversation. It is fair to conclude, therefore, that he was desperate for competent assistance as he struggled to find a conclusion to his book.

While thinking about our very limited personal dealings and my relationship with Sylvia Meagher and other first-generation critics of the Warren Commission, Mr. Lifton has surely wondered, "Why did they trust this guy from CBS?" The answer apparently having eluded him, Mr. Lifton has clearly focused his hostility on one who played no part in his ostracism. But it is simply this: I was forthright and honest and withheld nothing from those few with whom I chose to associate, sharing whatever I knew and striving to earn their trust and friendship, which they returned in kind. Ultimately, I knew that I could not maintain two different relationships with hostile camps and remain true to my principles. Mr. Lifton seems to have had difficulty balancing his own priorities.

A few words about Lifton's comments on my article for *The Third Decade*, "[The Greatest Secret I Ever Learned About The Kennedy Assassination](#)." It had to do with the publication of material that I submitted to the House Select Committee on Assassinations. Mr. Lifton read the article. He purports to analyze it, mangling quotes as is his wont, but even after he finished writing his essays for Compuserve, Lifton had still not seen the *Village Voice* piece to which my article referred. Somewhat like a child trying to conceal its folly, after he posted his essay on Compuserve and sent copies through the mail to various critics, he frantically called researcher and writer Jerry Policoff (whom he had tried in vain to plumb for derogatory information about me) and asked for a copy of the *Voice* article.

My *Third Decade* essay is available from its publisher, Professor Jerry Rose, Department of Sociology, State University College at Fredonia, New York. I wrote it because I believed that a friend of mine made an uncharacteristically serious mistake in judgment during the haste and excitement of answering the news media's attacks on Oliver Stone's film, and in the process jeopardized the reputation and privacy of a party innocent of any personal wrongdoing by making use of the documents that I had submitted to the House Select Committee on Assassinations for investigation. My name was on some of those documents. Knowing beforehand what the *Voice* planned to print (the galleys were read to me) and what they did print, and being unsuccessful in my attempts to reason with the *Voice*'s principal reporter, and its editor (who, according to a source close to the development of the article, was blinded by a rabid urge to get even with his father, a former *Life Magazine* official), I could not permit a woman to be needlessly hurt by something that I had set into motion years earlier in the expectation that discretion would be used. So, I warned those involved of what was about to happen. This is something I guess Lifton will never understand. He stands in pompous judgment, but the co-author of the *Village Voice* piece and I are still friends.

Finally, Lifton hides from his readers his rich hypocrisy about the subject of the news media's treatment of the assassination controversy. What is Lifton's take on the news media? Lifton has been reported as telling his college audiences that the news media were "duped" into believing official reports and the Warren Commission's ruling that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone when he shot Kennedy. ("Media 'Blew It' On Assassination," *Columbus Dispatch*, November 22, 1988, p. 05B.) Only in his recent Compuserve essays does he deride this writer for modifying his views on the nature of CBS's role. When will Mr. Lifton admit to his true views about the Warren Commission? Even if he were to do so now, who could believe him?

Lifton's exoneration of the news media for any responsibility in allowing the Kennedy assassination cover-up to perpetuate may be due in no small measure to the unusual reception his book received from one of the most stalwart defenders of the official line, Time Inc. After years of lambasting assassination researchers and writers, *Time Magazine* greeted the publication of Lifton's book with a slightly wary but highly respectful two-page spread, calling the book "meticulously researched" and "both grim and fascinating as a mystery story." Jerry Policoff, a leading expert on the news media's coverage of the assassination controversy, says: "In the thirty years since the assassination, it's the only conspiracy treatise that Time, Inc. regarded as serious and credible. In my opinion, that's probably because it was the least credible." (Author's interview with Jerry Policoff, June 14, 1993)

Chapter 10

I Can't Stop Dreaming About Roger Feinman, Yet He Rebuffs Me

("Play Misty For Me")

By Lifton's own admission, our personal contacts were minimal, although I remember receiving during the mid- to late-Seventies somewhat more than just the three telephone calls from him that he indicates. Nevertheless, he evidently devoted a great deal of thought to me while he was working on his book. Who is Roger Feinman? What is he doing? What is he thinking? Why won't he tell me? In his Compuserve essay, he goes so far as to construct an imaginary theory that he attributes to me, even purporting to give it a name: the "method actor" hypothesis. Likening himself to some worldly-wise mentor challenging a laggard pupil, he also confesses that he used to wait for me to call him ("I wondered whether the phone would ring one day, whether it would be Roger Feinman, etc."). Why didn't it ever dawn on Feinman that the body was altered?

Well, I had read Newcomb and Adams' article in *Skeptic* in 1975. Why would I believe such a nutty idea? I'm an intelligent human being.

It seems to me as strange now as it did back in the late Seventies that Lifton, after years of diddling with his notes and memos and a failed manuscript, would fasten upon an obscure critic who, as he clearly implies, wanted nothing more than to avoid him, and whose views Mr. Lifton now so easily distorts and then dismisses. One of the keys to this mystery may lie in the subjects I was exploring: the role of Dr. Burkley (which seems to have eluded Lifton [see Chapter 7]), and the possibility of post-autopsy manipulation for the purposes of the photos and X-rays.

He incessantly requested, both over the phone and in person, access to whatever research files and whatever draft manuscript I had on the case. He insisted on coming to my apartment. I refused to allow it. We met in a student lounge at the New School for Social Research in Greenwich Village, and then went to a nearby coffee shop, both well-populated areas where I would feel safe. It will not escape the attention of alert readers of Mr. Lifton's Compuserve essays that virtually all of our contacts were initiated by him, not by me. What may not be quite so obvious (but nonetheless evident from his essays) is that, while Mr. Lifton was writing his book — after a dozen years of researching, interviewing, thinking, and even drafting a first, albeit unpublishable, version of his manuscript — he seems to have obsessed over what I was thinking and doing, imagining conversations between us that never did and never would occur.

Lifton says that, if I had showed him my work, he would have given me full credit in the text of his book for anything he had not found, and list it in the bibliography. (Just ask Newcomb and Adams, or Harold Weisberg.) Lifton admits to his refusal to share his research with me. It seems he expected others to disclose their analyses to him, but he would not reciprocate in kind unless they spoke his language. I did not regard that as a suitable basis for collaboration.

He supposes that everyone envies him, from Sylvia Meagher, who was widely acknowledged to be the preeminent critic of the Warren Commission and the arbiter of factual disputes concerning its work, to Roger Feinman, a practicing attorney and virtually unknown critic, who insisted upon meeting him in a public place instead of inviting him home, and presumably others.

[Note: I do not recall asking Lifton to mention my name to anyone at the , unless it was some casual remark I made in response to Lifton telling me he was speaking to the staff about the medical evidence. I had my own contacts with them during the Gonzales-Downing-Sprague days, and later sent Chief Counsel Blakey some materials relating to John J. McCloy that I thought ought to be explored. Sylvia Meagher and Jerry Policoff, both friends of mine who had good relations with members of the committee staff, would have been more likely choices than David Lifton to ask, but it might have happened as he says.]

Chapter 11

Hooray for Hollywood!

(Wherein we ask whether having breakfast with David Lifton pushed Greg Stone over the edge, and how David's name became associated with Oliver Stone's film *JFK*)

In his Compuserve essays, Mr. Lifton has issued an account of our dealings that is replete with factual errors, distortions, wild assumptions and innuendo, hardly hesitating to drag into his broad firing range the memory of a very tragic young man, Greg Stone, about whose life and death, including his relationship with Sylvia Meagher, David Lifton knows next-to-nothing.

Greg was a close associate of the late Allard Lowenstein. Sylvia held Al Lowenstein in great affection and esteem. A lifelong political activist who also served as a Congressman from New York, he was known toward the end of his life for his crusade to reopen the Robert F. Kennedy assassination. It is not nearly as well known that Al Lowenstein also developed an interest in the JFK case toward the end of his life, and was interested in keeping the momentum of the investigation going. He came to Sylvia several times to educate himself about the case. (That's how she met Greg Stone.) She naturally saw in Al a potential leader and spokesman for the interests of the critics. His murder devastated Sylvia, especially since it came on the heels of the death of another of her close friends.

Greg Stone was also shaken by Lowenstein's death, and he resolved to pay tribute to his mentor by continuing the effort to reopen the RFK case. Greg had no deep commitment to assassination research, and never expressed any interest in Sylvia's work on JFK. He wanted only to finish Al's work. To this end, he accomplished much, most notably the release of the Los Angeles Police files.

Greg and Sylvia kept in touch from time to time. Reporting those contacts to me, she often expressed her concern that Greg was pursuing the RFK case to the exclusion of developing a career for himself. Both Sylvia and I shared the view that the RFK case did not hold the same potential for a breakthrough as the JFK assassination. She worried that if Greg were to reach a dead end in his research, he would have nothing left to keep him going. Therefore, she gave him "a project" to work on, just in case. She left him in charge of her files and her book in the hope that, if he would only look through her materials, he would become interested in her work.

Greg Stone last contacted me by phone on the evening of January 7, 1991, to say that Oliver Stone's research assistant, Jane Rusconi, had approached him earlier that day about buying the film rights to Sylvia Meagher's book. A certain sum of money was mentioned. He wanted to know what Sylvia would do. At the time, few people outside Oliver Stone's inner circle knew that his planned film centered on Jim Garrison; indeed, we knew virtually nothing. Stone's people weren't talking. I told Greg that unless Stone's people agreed to disclose the nature of their project, he could not agree to lend Sylvia's book and her name to a film that might run counter to her views, and if they refused to disclose the script or a synopsis to him, he would have to decline the offer. I asked my friend and colleague, Jerry Policoff (another of Sylvia's close associates), to follow-up with Greg during a business trip he took to L.A. a few days later, and Jerry met with Greg to convey our thoughts. I never heard from Greg again. He died on January 21.

David Lifton met Greg Stone for the first and last time over breakfast less than three weeks before Greg committed suicide (After Greg's suicide, Lifton told a newspaper they had met about a week before. *Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 1991, View Section, Part E, p.1, col. 2). Yet, Lifton apparently believes himself capable of judging Greg and his needs:

I always wished that had I met Greg earlier [sic], because I might have prevented this, because mucking around in assassination research is a highly charged affair, and Greg needed someone who knew how to handle it, and still lead a decent life. I had been doing that for years. (If any reader of this thinks he is getting obsessed, come to me. I'll tell you my secrets. I don't charge very much.)

What, one might reasonably ask, would David Lifton possibly have in common with the late Greg Stone that they should have ever crossed paths? Greg never manifested any interest either in the JFK assassination in

general or Mr. Lifton's work in particular, and Mr. Lifton has never manifested any interest in the RFK assassination. Mr. Lifton implies that Greg came to him out of the blue for advice about whether to sell the rights to Sylvia Meagher's book to Oliver Stone. He claims that he tutored Greg in Sylvia's views about Jim Garrison. From this, Mr. Lifton asks us to infer that he was sincerely interested in safeguarding the integrity of Sylvia's work, and in ensuring that Greg did not make any misstep. In his middle-age, Mr. Lifton now offers himself as mentor to the inexperienced and naive.

As with Mr. Lifton's other fictions, this fanciful scenario abruptly clashes with his invectives about Sylvia Meagher, the record of life in the real world, and the truism that a zebra cannot change its stripes.

Mr. Lifton says he called me after Greg Stone's death because he thought I "might have some say in the disposition of [Sylvia Meagher's] estate." Why the disposition of her estate would be of the least concern to him, he fails to disclose in his essay. But I will tell you, only because Mr. Lifton has recast our conversation out of snippets of what was actually said, adding phony inventions of his own.

He was fishing for whatever he could glean about Oliver Stone's plans, what kind of movie he was making, how much he had offered Greg and others for the rights to books about the assassination. Lifton told me he had written a screenplay and was shopping it around Hollywood. He had submitted it to Warner Brothers (Stone's studio), but Oliver Stone was refusing to take his calls. The essential facts were reported in a later newspaper account:

Lifton wrote a screenplay based on his book which Stone eventually read and turned down. "I was shunned, I was definitely shunned," Lifton says.

("Taking Potshots at JFK; Conspiracy Theorists Voice Loud Objections to Stone Film," Allentown Morning Call, December 21, 1991, p. A54)

Lifton spoke to me at what seemed interminable length about how a producer might buy the rights to a book merely to avoid lawsuits over misappropriation. He wanted to know how much Oliver Stone had offered Greg. I knew, but did not wish to tell him. Greg had given me one figure, but he had also given Harold Weisberg a different figure. So I asked Lifton how much he thought the offer was.

It is odd, as well as deplorable, that Lifton has chosen the Oliver Stone/Greg Stone matter as a basis for attack, since a number of researchers, including me, recall Lifton spreading his theory during the Winter of 1991 that Oliver Stone was the cause of Greg's death for tempting him with what Lifton assumed was a large sum of money for the rights to Sylvia's book that he had to turn down, a crass insinuation that belies Lifton's ignorance. Mr. Lifton explained his theory to me during the telephone conversation he mentions in his Compuserve essays. At that point, I told Lifton that I thought his theory of Oliver Stone's culpability in Greg Stone's suicide was unfounded, that Greg had acted wisely in refusing to sell Sylvia's work notwithstanding the temptation that the offer posed. From this portion of our discussion, Mr. Lifton quotes me, but only partially, as saying that, "Greg probably had to think twice about it, etc."

At the time of our conversation, no one knew what arrangements — if any — Greg may have made for the disposition of Sylvia's work upon his death. There had been a written agreement made between Greg and Sylvia regarding its disposition. One of the things that Greg was supposed to do was to review her papers to ensure that anything potentially harmful to third parties was sequestered for an appropriate time. Greg never got around to it. I wanted to be able to intelligently advise the executrix of Sylvia's estate in the event any action on her part seemed necessary to safeguard my friend's life work and reputation. Sylvia was not only a friend, but at times a client. Sometimes, it may seem to lay people that lawyers are too dispassionate at sorrowful times. The plain fact is that I knew Sylvia much longer and better than I knew Greg Stone. As shocked and sorry and as I felt for his tragedy, I was more concerned about seeing to it that what I knew were Sylvia's basic wishes were carried out, especially since Oliver Stone was trying to co-opt her work for — as it turned out — a project that she surely would have opposed.

In emphasizing my distaste for Stone's glorification of Jim Garrison, Lifton seems to imply that he defends it, as well as the book upon which it was mainly based. Here again, reality defeats him. He struggled to distance himself from *JFK* in the press:

I always thought Garrison was off the wall. His case was fraudulent.

("Taking Potshots at JFK; Conspiracy Theorists Voice Loud Objections to Stone Film," Allentown

Morning Call, December 21, 1991, p. A54)

Stone is in the position to say, "When I'm right, I'm right, and when I'm wrong, I'm an artist."

(*"Another Angle on JFK: 'Cosmetic' Surgery?"*, *Arizona Republic*, February 7, 1992, p. E4)

My attitude is: right message, wrong messenger. I think (former New Orleans District Attorney) Jim Garrison was a poor choice of a hero for Oliver Stone. But it was his \$40 million.

(*"Another Angle on JFK: 'Cosmetic' Surgery?"*, *Arizona Republic*, February 7, 1992, p. E4)

If, as Lifton has said, Garrison was a poor choice for a hero, what was there about Oliver Stone's "message" that Lifton found right? Could it then be Stone's depiction of a triangulated crossfire, which Lifton's book argues never occurred? If not, what else about *JFK* did he find "right"?

These public statements were tame, compared to what Lifton had to say about Garrison at the time of the New Orleans prosecution:

I am now convinced that Garrison's total investigation is a hoax and a fraud, based on nothing more than meaningless threads he is attempting to weave together which in fact have no meaning whatsoever when viewed in their proper context.

(*Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, May 15, 1968*)

The real mystery in all of Lifton's gibberish about Greg Stone and Oliver Stone, however, is how David Lifton got his name on the closing credits of *JFK* as an adviser to the film.

Lifton has claimed that Oliver Stone offered him a consulting contract worth "several thousand dollars", but that he turned it down. "I wanted to remain neutral," he reportedly said to one reporter. ("Taking Potshots at *JFK*; Conspiracy Theorists Voice Loud Objections to Stone Film", *Allentown Morning Call*, December 21, 1991, p. A54)

In fact, according to a source close to the *JFK* film project, Mr. Lifton was paid \$50,000 as a consultant. At the Midwest Symposium, I told Oliver Stone's assistant, Jane Rusconi, that I had this information and asked her why he would have done such a thing, as I could find no evidence in either the *JFK* script or the film that Lifton had contributed anything. She told me, "Because he was making a pest of himself."

Lifton invents out of whole cloth comments he alleges I made about Sylvia Meagher's knowledge of the case. He purports to divine my feelings and reactions to the death of Sylvia Meagher. She never designated me as either an executor or a co-executor of her estate, nor was I ever supposed to act in those capacities, as Lifton claims, another of the numerous blunders in his blind quest for a fact about matters of which he knows nothing.

It is Lifton who hardly conceals his deep and abiding animus toward one who can no longer reply to his loathsome, frenzied and hate-filled derision of her stature as the preeminent scholar in this subject area, which he can never hope to match. After her initial reading of *Best Evidence*, which was frequently interrupted by gales of laughter, Sylvia soon came to regard Mr. Lifton's book as nothing more than "junk", an opinion in which I concurred then and still do. From the earliest days of the case, Lifton — and, much later, his book — were little more than chicken feed to this woman. To imagine, as Lifton does, that she was somehow jealous of him and his book is so pitiable a delusion of grandeur that one easily discerns in Mr. Lifton's plain words a desperate unhappiness from which decent and self-possessed people can only recoil.

With 20–20 hindsight, Mr. Lifton insinuates it was just as well that Sylvia Meagher had no part in a pre-publication review of his manuscript, since she allegedly "killed" two books during the late 1980's. Again, he writes without knowledge of the facts and misleads his readers. Prentice Hall/Simon & Schuster asked her to read the manuscripts for both Jim Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins* and Jim Marrs' *Crossfire*. Prentice Hall was reluctant to get involved with the subject of the Kennedy assassination, but was willing to consider these books in anticipation of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the assassination. The responsible editor respected Sylvia Meagher's experience, reputation, and credibility. He trusted her, notwithstanding her status as a critic of the Warren Commission, to provide honest and objective appraisals. In the case of Garrison's manuscript, she pointed out several significant factual errors, but gave high praise to a concluding chapter that he wrote on the history of the Central Intelligence Agency. (Oddly enough, that chapter never made it into print when the book was finally published.) She believed that Marrs' manuscript was a good survey of the case but added little new of substance, and suffered from the lack of footnotes to sources. (Sylvia was a stickler for citations and indices.) In

neither case did she recommend against publication. Prentice Hall made its own judgments in passing on the two books.

Mr. Lifton also gives an inaccurate account of my behavior toward Oliver Stone (no relation to Greg) at a dinner in Chicago, something of which he could not possibly have first-hand knowledge, since no one invited him to come. I have spoken to three other members of the dinner party. Two of them specifically recalled that, as soon as Stone and I were introduced, I looked him in the eye and told him that I was the man responsible for seeing to it that he did not get the rights to use Sylvia Meagher's book or her name in his film. After that, we had a very pleasant dinner conversation. (The third member with whom I spoke had no independent recollection of any of the greetings.) By the way, Mr. Lifton's name was never mentioned.

Chapter 12

Come to Me with Your Problems. Bring Your Manuscript

[M]ucking around in assassination research is a highly charged affair ... If any reader ... thinks he is getting obsessed, come to me. I'll tell you my secrets. I don't charge very much.

David Lifton (1993)

In *Best Evidence*, my own experiences during this extraordinary period of my life are faithfully recorded.

David Lifton (1993)

In a January 26, 1981, televised interview on NBC's *Tomorrow Show*, host Tom Snyder asked Lifton whether he did not take a conclusion and set out to support it. Lifton replied, "No, I looked for evidence to support the FBI report. If I hadn't found it, there'd be no book." (Author's notes) Mr. Lifton, whom Macmillan sent for tutoring in how to handle such public appearances, evaded Snyder's question and was less than candid with his audience.

The personalization of Mr. Lifton's book may ultimately prove to have been one major cause of its downfall. It requires scant reflection to realize that, no matter how honest one's intentions might be at the outset, the natural desire and inclination to present oneself and one's work on such a serious subject as the Kennedy assassination in the most favorable light can yield to a compulsion toward self-justification and compromises with fact, threatening the integrity of the whole. Moreover, a work that purports to lead its readers through the labyrinthine thoughts and associations of its author as a device used to validate both its biographical motif and its conclusions, necessarily loses a great deal of its force in argument when all or some of the "connective tissue" that both anchors and impels the train of thought turns out to be wholly missing, or significantly disrupted in continuity.

Such a book poses a dilemma to the critic and historian: When the alleged journey is interwoven with its destination, i.e., when the line of demarcation is blurred — and willfully so — for alleged commercial considerations, is anything about the author's detours, e.g., his collateral research activities and theories, that he has failed to disclose "off limits" to scrutiny, evaluation and comparison with the final work so as to determine its precision and fidelity to the facts? Since selectivity is the prerogative — and some might argue the duty — of an author, I think not, for the reason that such undisclosed information is relevant to assessing bias, maturity of judgment, motive and method.

As Lifton himself told radio announcer Ben Baldwin, substituting for Larry King during a Mutual Radio interview on January 30, 1981, "[There's] some point where there's a line between the deceivers and the deceived." (Author's notes from radio program.) The purpose of this section is to demarcate that line.

There are several revealing aspects of Mr. Lifton's experiences, insights, and theories in the course of his research that he neglected to include in *Best Evidence*, which considered, illuminate its direction, structure and substance so as to afford a more cohesive picture of Mr. Lifton's systematic approach to the Kennedy assassination. Instead, he seeks to persuade his readers that he is almost apologetic for having to offer up the shocking theory of the book by portraying his early motivations as benign:

When I began my research, I found it difficult to believe the authorities would lie, and my initial interest stemmed more from being intrigued with the event as an unsolved crime, and my somewhat naïve and abstract interest in seeing that "justice" was done, than from any political or ideological motivation.

(Chapter 4)

Lifton moreover implies that it was not until late October 1966, when he appreciated the "head surgery" statement in the [Sibert and O'Neill report](#), that he became convinced of a high-level plot. (End of Chapter 7)

A Band of Little Men in the Woods

David Lifton called Sylvia Meagher late on the night of October 30, 1965, explaining that he wanted to show her that he was “not far out and not a kook.” (Meagher, Sylvia. Memo of Telephone Conversation with Dave Lipton [sic], Saturday night, 30 October 1965) Dutifully, Sylvia recorded for posterity the early manifestations of Mr. Lifton’s propensity to explain all things in the assassination in terms of disguise.

Dave is certain that the [Moorman] photo was doctored — probably by someone high-up in the *Times-Herald*, on instructions from , before it was ever released, so as to conceal the betraying details on the original.

(Meagher, Sylvia. Memo of Telephone Conversation with Dave Lipton [sic], Saturday night, 30 October 1965)

Dave believes that there was a massive camouflage-and-guerrilla operation, involving perhaps 100 men, and that the assassination was a “high Texas” and “Army-military” attempted coup, and that LBJ was forced to cover it up, because if the high Texans were exposed, no one would believe that LBJ was not involved, even if he really was not.

He believes that the trees on the grassy knoll were camouflage; men were concealed in capsules; they may have remained there until dark and then made their escape. He believes there was a trench in front of the concrete structure, with phony hedges; and a trench also on the other side of Elm Street, where gray and black shadows and swatches appear on the Zapruders [sic] without any natural explanation ... I asked him also if it is possible that the elaborate engineering job (which he thinks was in progress for several days before 11/22/63) and the camouflage-and-guerrillas could have escaped penetration by all of the numerous witnesses who were present. ... He believes ... that they all saw what was really going on the grassy knoll; and that they are maintaining silence for the same reason that no one helped Kitty Genovese when she was being murdered under the eyes of many witnesses.

(Meagher, Sylvia. Memo of Telephone Conversation with Dave Lipton [sic], Saturday night, 30 October 1965)

Apart from the possibility of their indifference, it seems that Mr. Lifton also believed that some of the witnesses were intimidated by direct threats from the assassins. For example, In the case of Zapruder’s secretary, Marilyn Sitzman, who was steadying Mr. Zapruder as he took his film, and who told the Dallas Sheriff’s office that the shots came from the Texas School Book Depository [See, Decker Exhibit 5323, page 535-RBF], Mr. Lifton was “certain that the guerrillas were right behind Sitzman and probably spoke to her, warning her to say nothing or she would be killed — otherwise, how account for her saying that the shots came from the TSBD, while all the others including Zapruder thought the shots came from the grassy knoll area????” (Meagher, Sylvia. Memo of Telephone Conversation with Dave Lipton [sic], Saturday night, 30 October 1965)

Sylvia was so dismayed by Mr. Lifton’s call that she wrote him: “I am sorry to say that you succeeded with one phone call where the massive propaganda of the Warren Commission and the news media had failed — you made me wonder for the first time if Oswald was not the lone assassin after all.” (Meagher, Sylvia. Letter to David Lifton, November 2, 1965)

Again, this writer anticipates the charge of unfairness and ill motive in calling attention to what might at first appear the nascent follies of a young and enthusiastic assassination researcher. Some of us have momentarily toyed with theories which, in hindsight, seem appalling to us now. This, however, is emphatically not the case with Mr. Lifton, for while he downplayed his adherence to the “*papier maché* trees” theory (which he self-effacingly prefers to call “the men in trees” theory), in later correspondence and conversations with Meagher, it resurfaced time and again, after his studies had far progressed and become more sophisticated:

In a 1967 memorandum synthesizing his analysis of the JFK head snap in the Zapruder film, Mr. Lifton confronted the theorists who believed in a double-head-hit based on the forward motion of Kennedy’s head during Z-313, followed by the backward thrust. He argued that the entire motion of Kennedy’s head could be explained as the result of a forward-originating high-angle shot from the grassy knoll area. A portion of this memorandum is adapted as narrative in *Best Evidence*, although significant portions are omitted. For example, Mr. Lifton’s memo recalled that he had concluded in August 1965 that the hedge rows in front of the concrete

wall on the knoll, as well as whole trees, were fake devices constructed to house men and equipment, and that the knoll had been excavated to install a proper foundation. Beneath the surface of the knoll were “bunker-like” structures with men and material in them. Lifton now argued, “The 312–313 [forward] motion means one of two things: either camouflage was used, or the double-head-hit theorists are correct.” (Lifton, David. Memorandum Re: Head Snap Phenomenon and Zapruder Film Frame Sequence, March 20, 1967)

As will be discussed in a later chapter of this work, Mrs. Meagher attempted to dissuade Lifton from promulgating his theory, lest it subject the critics to ridicule. Her worst fears were realized, however, when Lifton was interviewed on June 7, 1967, by an associate producer involved in the preparation of CBS News’ four-part documentary on the *Warren Report*. Robert Richter reported that,

Lifton has been specializing his interest in the photographic evidence. He plans to write a book over the next couple of months on this and other matters he was reluctant to discuss. But he intimated he would have proof in his book of the involvement of people “very high up” in the federal government.

He suggests that camouflage may have been used in Dealey Plaza and left there, at least for a few days. He suggests that this may have been arranged with cooperation from the Dallas Mayor, Earle Cabell, because his brother Richard Cabell was one of the leaders in the CIA Bay of Pigs operation.

The camouflage may be, according to Lifton, in the form of additions to trees on the knoll. He concedes this is a “radical approach” but he believes it could make sense for the basic reason that in frames 313 and following in the Zapruder film, Kennedy’s head snaps back and to the left, strongly suggesting a shot came from the knoll area ...

Another claim for possible camouflage is a report Lifton got from Liebler from the FBI of a big crane being moved thru [sic] Dealey Plaza late in the evening of Nov. 22. The men who had been running the crane thru the plaza had a large piece of concrete in tow, which they told police officers on the scene was for their plan to build a monument for Kennedy. When the police insisted they move on, the men got out of the crane cabin and fled. It turned out to have been a stolen crane. Lifton wildly speculates that the crane may also have been designed for use to remove the camouflage that night, and he says the peculiar incident was never checked out ...

At this time, and perhaps at all times, he cannot be taken seriously.

(Richter, Robert. Memorandum re David Lifton, June 7, 1967)

Exactly two years after his last letter to her mentioning the camouflage theory, Mr. Lifton wrote Sylvia Meagher: “About trees. You know, I haven’t pushed that, but in my heart I think thats [sic] how it was done.... The concept is so outlandish and ridiculous sounding that, even if it were done, the only way it will ever be proven is through direct evidence of its installation at a previous hour.” (Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, March 21, 1969)

The Impersonations of Kellerman and Greer

Lifton’s association with Wesley Liebler, and his penchant for secrecy strained the Lifton–Meagher relationship to a nearly complete breaking point. The breach began to heal, and relations between them improved, as Lifton demonstrated his ostensibly sincere interest in researching the Warren Commission’s unpublished documents. By the early summer of 1970, however, the relationship between Meagher and Lifton finally collapsed under the crushing weight of her efficient demolition of his newest insights.

Late April or early May 1970, Lifton revealed to Sylvia Meagher that he believed there had been a switch of Secret Service Agents in the presidential limousine at some point along the motorcade route through downtown Dallas, and that neither Secret Service Agents Kellerman or Greer were actually in the presidential limousine at the time of the assassination. (David Lifton Letters to Sylvia Meagher, May 16 and 27, 1970) In fact, he said, he had called both men to ask them if it really was them in the limousine. (Ibid., May 16, 1970) Of course, this fantasy tempts us to ask: How could David be sure that he was actually speaking to Kellerman and Greer? Conversely, were they sure it was him? Why could there not have been an agent switch at the other end of the telephone line (much easier than executing such a maneuver in full view of thousands of spectators lining the streets of Dallas) or an alter ego substituting at Lifton’s end? Or both? He could have gone to the beach, they could have watched a ball game, and the substitutes could have had an interesting conversation.

Even at this late stage in his work on the case, Mr. Lifton returned to his theory of camouflage on the knoll:

I still suspect that camouflage was employed, to some extent, on the plaza, to conceal shooters. None of this will appear in my work.... I feel it is more important to ... let what one suspects play the role of directing ones [sic] investigation, as time permits.

I am well aware of the public relations blunder it would be to voice my suspicions in the absence of definitive proof, in a manuscript.

(Lifton, David. *Letter to Sylvia Meagher, July 19, 1970*)

Mr. Lifton's theory of the Kellerman and Greer "switch" was tied to his theory pertaining to the Zapruder film, i.e., that it had been altered to conceal a stop by the driver of the presidential limousine during the assassination sequence, as reportedly seen by a few witnesses to the crime. Mr. Lifton believed those witnesses. "[T]he film shows every indication that both men up front [Kellerman and Greer] are waiting, aware of, the next shot about to come." (Lifton, David. *Letter to Sylvia Meagher, June 27, 1970*) Furthermore, according to this theory, the film had been spliced to conceal the car stop (ibid.), and faked to conceal the rear (Parkland) head wound after Z-313. (Lifton, David. *Memorandum re: Head Snap Phenomenon and Zapruder Film Frame Sequence, March 20, 1967*) But how? Lifton theorized that the film had been intercepted before reaching *Life Magazine* at the local F.B.I. and Secret Service level in Dallas. "Doing the alterations is merely a technical problem." (Lifton, David. *Letter to Sylvia Meagher, June 27, 1970*) He pointed to Secret Service agent Forrest V. Sorrel's shepherding of the Zapruder film through processing and printing, as well as the F.B.I.'s alleged complicity in its canvassing of the Dallas area for spectators' films during the weeks following the assassination.

Of necessity, the theory required that the surviving occupants of the limousine (including Kellerman, Greer, and the Connallys) were liars and perjurers, except for Jackie Kennedy; she "was so panicked and frightened that she would not possibly be able to remember." (Lifton, David. *Letter to Sylvia Meagher, June 27, 1970*) (Compare this with his reliance upon Jackie's Warren Commission testimony to corroborate the location of Kennedy's head wound in *Best Evidence*)

Sylvia Meagher pierced this nonsense with ease. I will simply summarize here the questions that Mr. Lifton was obviously unprepared to answer:

- First, Did anyone know on the afternoon or evening of the assassination just how the Zapruder film ought to be doctored? Who would have done it? (Lifton's interception theory assumed that the Army, or , or some Hollywood-type facilities and accomplices would have to be involved.)
- What motive did the Secret Service have to participate in the assassination?
- Was the F.B.I. so thorough in its investigation of the case that it could be relied upon to gather all the assassination film available? What if some bystanders were to take their film directly to the media and reveal footage irreconcilable with the doctored Zapruder film?
- And, why go to all this trouble to distract attention from the grassy knoll, when dozens of still available witnesses thought the shots came from the knoll, and hundreds rushed there in the immediate wake of the shooting?

Meagher suggested that, if Lifton were the Captain on the sinking Titanic he would ask the ship's carpenter to fix a broken chair.

Mr. Lifton went to extraordinary lengths during his early career to gather evidence for his theory that the Zapruder film had been altered. In late 1968, associates of Lifton obtained a copy of the copy of the Zapruder film that Jim Garrison had subpoenaed from *Life Magazine* for the trial of Clay Shaw in New Orleans. (Lifton, David. *Letter to Sylvia Meagher, March 17, 1969*) Scratches on that copy from repeated projection, as well as petty squabbles among some of the West Coast researchers over possession of the film, impeded Mr. Lifton's research.

In June 1970, he engaged in a plan to induce LIFE to afford him access in Los Angeles to a first-generation duplicate of the original Zapruder film, as well as transparencies. An inspection of the original in New York City was also arranged, but apparently never realized. The cooperation of a Hollywood film producer was secured in trumping up a phony bid to purchase the film from LIFE. The producer gave Lifton and his cohorts access to an office and letterhead stationery. (Lifton, David. *Letter to Sylvia Meagher, June 17, 1970*)

On Monday, June 22, 1970, LIFE flew two copies of the film and many slides to Los Angeles by courier for the producer's inspection. Mr. Lifton and his associates headed for the producer's office. By pre-arrangement with

Lifton, the producer was absent from his office when the courier arrived, but he placed a phone call to his office timed to coincide with the courier's arrival, in order to excuse himself and introduce Mr. Lifton and company as his representatives in the proposed transaction.

As Mr. Lifton examined the 16 millimeter copy of the Zapruder film LIFE had sent, the courier left the room for several minutes. One of Mr. Lifton's associates then whipped out a camera and began shooting pictures of the transparencies arrayed on a light box.

When Mr. Lifton and his associates left the producer's office, a 16 millimeter reel of the Zapruder film left also, and a reel of electrical extension cord wrapped in tissue was left in its box. (Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, June 25, 1970)

It merits attention that Mr. Lifton goes to considerable lengths in *Best Evidence* to conceal his early preoccupation with the theory of Zapruder film alteration, and his 1970 stunt to find evidence for it. In a lengthy footnote in Chapter 24, he describes an examination of a 35 mm print of the film at Time-Life's Los Angeles offices in 1971, implying that he first discovered theretofore unknown splices during that inspection. He says that, only then, did he begin to explore "the possibility that the Zapruder film itself had been altered" before it went to either Time-Life or the Warren Commission, yet another example of Mr. Lifton's rewriting the history of his activities in a book marketed as non-fiction. Mr. Lifton proposes in his book a theory that the "blob" seen on the right-front of the President's head during the fatal wounding sequence of the film is fake. One of my colleagues has suggested that Lifton suffers from "selective amnesia." He suggests that Mr. Lifton and his readers take a look at the WFAA-TV interview with Zapruder on the afternoon of the assassination in the commercially sold video tape, *The Day the Nation Cried*. There, Zapruder describes what he saw while looking through his viewfinder, including the wound at the right-front of the head.

The imagery of people and objects associated with the assassination being moved around by unseen forces as pawns in a game of chess occurs several times in Lifton's correspondence with Meagher. It may well be the organizing principle of Mr. Lifton's work on the assassination. I do not emphasize this point, but mention it in passing as a possible channel to the depth of abstraction in his pattern of thought about the case. One may discern in the Marx Brothers-like reconstruction of casket movements in *Best Evidence* a degree of difficulty in reconciling neat abstractions with real-world constraints.

Understandably, while Mr. Lifton writes about the toll that his assassination research took on his personal life, educational and career development, he nonetheless omits to mention in his book that, by January 1966, as his infatuation with the theme of surreal illusion in the assassination grew, he became temporarily incapacitated from his normal and customary pursuits. (Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, March 21, 1969; Author's conversations with Sylvia Meagher; and conversation with Raymond Marcus, early 1989.) In the unexpurgated, real-life version of *Best Evidence*, the chips did not merely fall into place over time, some of them fell off the game board to the floor and had to be picked up.

The Cat Among the Pigeons

Camouflage of the President's wounds is the motif of *Best Evidence*, not the interposition of multiple disguises upon the scene of the assassination which preoccupied Mr. Lifton during the late Sixties. Still, in presenting his deconstruction of a medical forgery, it is Mr. Lifton himself who guardedly camouflages his preconceptions and political ideology. This is the second major cause of his book's downfall. The conspiracy theory in *Best Evidence* is, indeed, a hypothesis structured on a political theory of sorts that germinated during the height of the Vietnam conflict — that Lyndon Johnson was involved ["I am of the opinion and hold the theory that LBJ and Rusk were involved before the fact, heavily involved, in the plot to kill JFK." (Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, August 12, 1968); "The JFK assassination was a high level plot, possibly involving personalities such as LBJ, Rusk, and Dulles." (Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, August 7, 1969)], and that the Secret Service was intimately associated with its execution ["I believe that some of the agents on that follow-up car are involved ..."] (Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, June 27, 1970)]. It is this political theory that guided Lifton's search for evidence, notwithstanding that his publicity handlers tutored him to respond otherwise to interviewers.

[T]oday, it is more important to me to communicate correctly and optimally the theme that the motive for the assassination was to change our foreign policy (and specifically, Vietnam) and that high level hands were secretly manipulating the course of the ship of state in effecting the assassination and the subsequent policy change, than to hinge my case (or even appear to) on

proving precisely whose hands they were, or even appearing to seek personal vengeance.— Politically speaking, a high level plot is a high level plot, whether it is officials A, B, C, or D, E, F who are involved....

(Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, August 7, 1969)

If a high level conspiracy is in operation, they either have or have not foreseen [sic] the fact that they will have to be prepared to alter movie film of various type, as well as still pictures — should the disguise being perpetrated on Dealey Plaza to conceal the way the crime is happening fail in any matter. (Emphasis in the original)

Whether that disguise fails because a driver is forced to bring the car to a halt, to get in the fatal shot, or whether the disguise fails in more literal fashion because, lets [sic] say some fellow is actually picked up with head and shoulders above the fence on the grassy knoll shooting — you either are or are not prepared to deal with the problem of the cinematic eyewitness who sees too much. Unlike the recollections of a witness, you don't have to berate the cinematic witness. You just clandestinely take possession of the appropriately [sic] film can or roll of film AFTER IT HAS BEEN PROCESSED LEGITIMATELY THE FIRST TIME, do the appropriate art work, re photograph and create the appropriate duplicate, and then pawn off the duplicate on the unsuspecting owner. In the process, you have created your own false eyewitness, as a matter of fact, and some nifty evidence to support your own conclusions in all future investigations.

(Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, June 27, 1970) (Emphasis in the original)

If one addresses oneself to a study of the Report, one will tend to think in terms of a frame of reference where there are “accessories after the fact,” those responsible for the non-correlation between the *Report* and the *Hearings and Exhibits*. If, however, one addresses oneself to the crime, one cannot possibly explain it in that frame of reference. The conspiracy that killed Kennedy doesn't phoney [sic] the evidence to help the Warren Commission sell the lone assassin theory, but rather to protect itself.

Finally, — if there is a choice to be made — it is better to risk having half the world wondering whether one man could have fired all the shots in 6–8 seconds, rather than wondering whether or not Secret Service agents are involved in a plot to remove the President of the United States from office.

One casts aspersions on the conclusions of the *Warren Report*; the other ... on the legitimacy of the incumbent United States government, by demonstrating that the assassination, itself, was an “inside job.”

If “Marxist” Oswald had help, it is politically “harmless” if there is speculation as to who the “other shooter” might be, and speculation about a multiple-shooter communist plot (if O's cover holds). But if the Secret Service is involved in a plot, then the question of who the other shooter is becomes irrelevant, for the ball game is then over.

(Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, June 27, 1970)

Lifton elaborated a view that surpassed obsessive puzzlement over the mechanical details of the assassination — so impatiently humored by Meagher — in its frank effrontery to the entire structure of her dissent. Focusing on the Warren Commission cover-up, he suggested, only served to distract from the existence of a high-level plot. He insinuated that the critics had obstructed the search for truth:

[A]nti-WC literature has been so successful in projecting the image of a botched and dishonest investigation, and an EW [Earl Warren] coverup [sic], that any attempt to now argue for a massive plot involving high-level officialdom almost appears to be superfluous and unnecessary [sic].

(Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, September 18, 1970)

This not only ran against the grain of Lifton's earlier letters, which included harsh criticism of the Warren Commission, but seemed inimical to the focus of the mainstream critics. He seems to have been saying that the identity of the assassins was irrelevant, as were those who protected them in the official investigation, at the

same time demonstrating an ambivalence toward the issue of Oswald's guilt or innocence, and even towards the actual identities of the high-level conspirators. (I have concluded that this philosophy probably contributed strongly to Sylvia Meagher's impression of his duplicity and her final decision to dismiss him from her inner circle.) [Note: See, generally, Chapter 14 of *Best Evidence*, in which Lifton admits to being no longer interested in the identity of the assassins.]

Moreover, the thread that ran through his theories seemed to betray a lack of confidence in the basic evidentiary presentation of the critics' case, including the eyewitnesses to the assassination, that had been so crucial to the critics' destruction of the *Report*. Did he presume the critics' case to be somehow weak? If so, where was the deficiency? And, even more important, just what was Lifton's apparently new objective? While I cannot pretend to see it clearly, I think what he was grappling with was the inconclusiveness and frustration of the controversy over the *Warren Report*, impatience to lay the crime at the door of Lyndon Johnson, and a desire to put his personal imprint on the case by imbuing with the theme of fraud every aspect of the assassination where the evidence appeared to contradict his predetermined view of its physical and political facts. Through deconstruction of the evidence, rather than trenchant political analysis that might (or might not) have led him more straightforwardly toward his perceived objective, Mr. Lifton seems at some point to have reached the conclusion that he could perform an "end run" around the difficulties in reconciling discrepant evidence, circumvent both the official case and the critics' response, and strike a blow directly at the legitimacy of the government.

If this appraisal is correct, it portrays a theory that does not assimilate and reconcile the evidence. Quite the contrary, it demands a belief that evidence is irrelevant since its substance has been corrupted. Tainted evidence, however, can never lead to the correct solution of a crime, which is why *Best Evidence* leads us nowhere. The Warren Commission, contrary to Lifton's assertions, sought to denude the assassination of any political meaning. *Best Evidence*, which erroneously implies that the government's proffered evidence affirms the official account, similarly denudes that evidence of its meaning. Furthermore, if this appraisal is deemed meritorious, it also reveals either a dismal unwillingness or an inability on Mr. Lifton's part to weigh competing facts and make difficult value judgments, particularly as to the weight and credibility of the evidence before him, as well as to accept and expound on ambiguities in the record that cannot be rationally explained in view of its present state.

Lifton's dialogue with Meagher touched subjects not central to the concern of *Best Evidence* (a point of interest relative to the alleged development of the author's research and ideas), yet the book neatly fits the same conceptual framework of that era in Lifton's career. The figure of Oswald is peripheral to the plot he pretends to reveal. The identity of the killers is an area completely ignored. Any resemblance that his plotters may bear to all persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental; all are exonerated. Mr. Lifton neither figuratively nor literally invites his readers to join him in the search for truth. No action is recommended. No moral to the story is revealed, no lessons for the future.

Best Evidence in its published form has nothing to do with laying responsibility at Lyndon Johnson's door; in a sense, it is Lifton's admission of his inability to do so. It is simply an exercise in perverse logic gussied up with scholarly-sounding phrases (e.g., "a synthesis that was most intellectually satisfying.") It is not the body alteration per two-casket scenario that preceded Lifton's view of the physical and medico legal evidence, but vice versa. The seemingly insoluble dilemma of that evidence dictated that he invent this ghost story.

Recapitulation

- Mr. Lifton seems not primarily concerned with Oswald's guilt or innocence or (in the latter case) the undoing of a vicious injustice;
- He seems not concerned with tracing the assassination conspiracy to its source;
- Whatever may be his aspirations, the least one can say is that his work is fundamentally irrelevant to the objectives of the critics and mainly supplies diversion.

Regardless of whether these anecdotes and conceptual foundations had been included in the autobiographical thread of his book, I raise the questions: Had the reviewers and readers of *Best Evidence* the opportunity to consider this background, could they have concluded anything but that Mr. Lifton obdurately clings to theories for which he has no evidence, no matter how ridiculous they sound? That he selects the witnesses whom he wishes to believe in the interests of his system — and he believes them absolutely — whereupon all physical phenomena are then reordered and reconstituted to conform to his beliefs? Would not such revelations have impeached the credibility and immediately dampened the media hype that has surrounded this book? Would

they not have had an impact upon a good faith publisher's decision to print the book without the strictest scrutiny of its thesis?

And as for the critics, many of whom have embraced the *Best Evidence* thesis, does not the book's complete omission of its rigid political superstructure taint its purportedly objective evidentiary substructure in a manner that bespeaks moral and intellectual cowardice and dishonesty?

I ask these questions rhetorically.

Chapter 13

The Scent of a Woman, Part II

The end of Sylvia Meagher's dealings With Lifton

Sylvia Meagher last wrote to Lifton on July 19, 1970, continuing her low-key but relentless assault on his theory of Zapruder film alteration and imposters posing as Kellerman and Greer. Several weeks later, she went to Dallas for a visit with Mary Ferrell. A few days before her arrival on August 12, 1970, Lifton, apparently aware of the trip, reportedly phoned Mary Ferrell and asked her to be very guarded in discussing her own knowledge of his research activities with Meagher. (Meagher, Sylvia. Note for the record, August 25, 1970)

The two women, who had spoken by phone and corresponded, but never met before, warmed to each other and began to compare notes on their contacts with Lifton. Mary believed that Lifton was examining the mid-air turnaround of the "cabinet plane" over the Pacific Ocean after learning of the assassination. From their conversation and her own recollections of calls from Lifton, however, Meagher deduced that he was working on the autopsy and had deliberately tried to throw both of them off the track. (Meagher, Sylvia. Note for the record, August 25, 1970)

Lifton reportedly had told Ferrell that Liebler had a trunk full of copies of classified documents that he took upon leaving the Warren Commission. He allegedly also claimed to her that he and his associates plied Liebler with drink and women, copied his keys to the trunk, and gained access to the documents. (Meagher, Sylvia. Note for the record, August 25, 1970)

[Note: Today, Ferrell says she does not remember Lifton telling her the "trunk story". (Author's interview with Mary Ferrell, May 26, 1993) This rumor floated around the research community for many years, but may have been another invention to throw people off the track of what Lifton was working on. (Meagher had known that Liebler formerly kept a small archive at his Vermont farm, and that Edward J. Epstein had obtained access, as Lifton reports in Chapter 4 of his book, so it was plausible that Liebler now maintained this archive in Los Angeles.) She erroneously deduced from this "information" that Lifton had made his self-proclaimed sensational discovery regarding the autopsy among Liebler's papers. (Meagher, Sylvia. Note for the record, August 25, 1970) Noteworthy, on the other hand, is the pregnant language that Lifton uses in a footnote appearing at the beginning of Chapter 15, after his representation in the main text that Liebler allowed him to make "detailed notes" of the 17-page "Liebler Memorandum" that he kept in his office: "The Justice Department's copy of Liebler's memorandum was made available to me under the Freedom of Information Act in September 1979. It is now a public document." That is not quite the same as saying he did not obtain a different copy of the memorandum before 1979, when he was in the final stages of completing his manuscript.]

Among other early *Warren Report* critics, Sylvia Meagher, who seems to have been under the impression from the way Lifton represented himself that he was impecunious, had tried to help him by paying him for photocopies of numerous unpublished Warren Commission documents that he ordered in microfilm form from The National Archives. It bears mention that Mrs. Meagher was personally experienced in dealing with The Archives and could have ordered documents directly; in fact, she did amass an admirable collection of research materials in that manner. Lifton seemed, however, to be doing a good job, although how he managed to produce so many thousands of photocopies is unclear. Once, when Lifton sent her several Warren Commission staff memos totaling 400 pages, he wrote:

I'm throwing in filched folders and jiffy bags free; but then, everything is filched, so who knows. Anyway, its [sic] rumored that the CIA subsidizes the account of the xerox [sic] machine I use, but this is just a rumor and must not be repeated or I will soon be included with all those other agents.

Mary Ferrell was another of Lifton's customers. Comparing notes between themselves and with other critics during their August 1970 visit in Dallas on the Commission documents they had purchased from Lifton, Ferrell and Meagher inferred (rightly or wrongly) that he was systematically withholding significant information from them. They received written advice which seemed to them to support this inference from one of Lifton's disaffected associates in Los Angeles. (Meagher, Sylvia. Note for the record, August 25, 1970; Author's interview

with Mary Ferrell, May 26, 1993) Mrs. Ferrell now recalls, “Anything explosive in it he just held it out.” (Author’s interview with Mary Ferrell, May 26, 1993)

Lifton continued to write to Meagher after she returned to New York from her visit with Ferrell in Dallas (e.g., Lifton, David. Letter to Sylvia Meagher, September 18, 1970), but his letters went unanswered. He tried calling, but she hung up on him.

Chapter 14

In the Shadow of Dealey Plaza

Some final thoughts on former critic and wanna-be academic/screenwriter/documentarian David Lifton and “Second Best Evidence” (Can we take him any more seriously than we did in the Sixties?)

I am on record as disapproving of Oliver Stone’s film, *JFK*, despite (or perhaps because of) its cinematic artistry in service of a false hero. Never before, however, has the critical community been so galvanized than by the power of this screen event. It is a propitious time to emphasize the virtue of unity. Mr. Lifton, however, stands away, persisting in the promotion of an idea whose time never was, leveling attacks against those whose single-minded commitments to the destruction of the *Warren Report* were and are beyond reproach.

There is no doubt that David Lifton has done a great deal of work in researching the assassination of President Kennedy. Notwithstanding the earnest inanity of his camouflage theories, his 1967 article for *Ramparts* and his unpublished analysis that same year of the Zapruder head-snap were articulate, albeit in my opinion the latter flowed out of a bias toward the “Parkland version” of the wounds, a subset of evidentiary facts fixed during the early days of the case that may yet turn out to be erroneous in whole or in part; in any event, Mr. Lifton appears to have abandoned it. After 1967, something of a change seems to have taken hold in him.

His early work cannot overcome, nor his misspent youth excuse, however, the intellectual dishonesty that pervades *Best Evidence*. The book stands as an embarrassment and impediment to the critics who once spurned him. Whether that was its unconscious intent is beyond the ken of this author to pursue. One can only speculate what effect a renunciation of the book would have on the continued efficacy of the critical studies movement, and Lifton’s relationship to it. It would appear, however, that Mr. Lifton has placed himself in the same position as his old friend Liebler: committed to a public position that he cannot support, whatever his private leanings.

Lifton maintains that he found his way out of the labyrinth. On the contrary, David Lifton is like the taxi driver who cannot admit that he does not know his way to his patron’s destination. He is lost, yet he meanders around to preserve the appearance of knowledge while the meter continues to tick at the passenger’s expense.

He became an entertainer, peddling his old “shtick” like Jack Benny or Bob Hope. The jokes no longer matter, it’s the familiarity that draws attention. For Mr. Lifton to take all the time he did to write his Compuserve essays for so minuscule an audience may indicate his present situation as he sees it, and that he really has little to do except to theorize, speak, and occasionally write about the Kennedy assassination. He is fighting for what he thinks his reputation should be. Instead of wielding facts to counter this writer’s specific criticisms of *Best Evidence*, his 34-page single-spaced diatribe never once addresses them in any meaningful way.

Is it a purity of purpose, tainted with self-interest, that drives him to pontificate about the truth, or are his the empty words of a well disguised, well-protected Pied Piper leading us farther and farther off the track? Is Mr. Lifton committed to truth and precision, or does he prefer to employ his own sordid inventions in the ordering of facts? Harold Weisberg came to the conclusion, after reading Mr. Lifton’s Compuserve drivel, that, “Truth in your mind, Dave, is like [the word] ‘love’ in the mouth of the whore.” (Weisberg, Harold. Letter to David Lifton, May 19, 1993)

It is appropriate to conclude this exploration of the meaning and intent of *Best Evidence* with the prophetic admonition that Sylvia Meagher gave to David Lifton after he first explained his theory of the “men in the trees.” She deserves the best last word, considering his indignities to her reputation. Given a slightly different history of their relationship and its dénouement, she may well have written the same to him had he disclosed his published theory to her:

[Y]our theory dissolves the line between reality and illusion and makes any hypothesis more acceptable which at least leaves one on relatively solid ground ... [Y]ou have only a slender and tentative foundation for the elaborate structure you are projecting, against which many considerations of logic must be raised. Mainly, that there was no need for such a complicated and numerously manned an operation to achieve the objective ...

[D]iscussion of your hypothesis even within the small group of people who are working with the same objective as yours has a demoralizing and divisive effect and should be avoided. If friends and co-workers feel such violent antipathy, the effect on those who are committed to the *Warren Report* can be easily imagined. Premature discussion or disclosure, in the absence of conclusive proof, will do incalculable harm and will expose all attempts to reopen the investigation to the cruelest ridicule and vicious denunciation.

(Meagher, Sylvia. *Letter to David Lifton, November 2, 1965*)

Somewhere along the line, though, David Lifton lost sight of the distinction between hypothesis, theory, evidence and proven fact.

It is clear that, whatever his mission, David Lifton is not finished. When *Best Evidence* was finally published, he felt a tremendous letdown. He would come home, there would be no messages on his answering machine, and he wouldn't know what to do with himself the next day. He would ask himself, "What am I gonna do with the rest of my life?" ("His J.F.K. Obsession: For David Lifton, The Assassination is a Labyrinth Without End," *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1988, Id.) He has apparently found the answer, and it is more of the same.

Perhaps it is Mr. Lifton's exasperation with the ambiguities of the subject that has caused him to dwell consistently, if morbidly, on notions of faked evidence, disguises, and camouflage — all used to conceal the facts from what he insists were the honest and well-meaning official government investigations. But where has he led us, and what does it all amount to? As Harrison E. Salisbury has written of Mr. Lifton, "He has tried to count all the trees in the forest and prove that others have sometimes identified an ash as a maple or an oak as a willow." ("JFK and Further Sinister Forces," *New York Times*, February 22, 1981, Section 7, p. 11)

I do not make any money from the assassination controversy. I have no book or video to sell, neither have I any ambition to make the assassination my profession and business enterprise. Mr. Lifton may search to his heart's content to find the seed of a motive that would discredit my criticism of his work. If he cannot find one, he may sully the reputations of the dead with whom I fondly and proudly shared a collegial association. He obviously knows little self-restraint in that regard.

[Note: Lifton does not shrink either from calumny against the living heroes of the critics' struggles. In Chapter 20 of his book, he portrays Dr. Cyril H. Wecht, one of the world's foremost forensic pathologists who, alone among them, has lent his weight and prestige to the cause of truth in this matter at considerable personal cost, as a man who couldn't read X-rays; more a politician than a physician; and, someone for whom Lifton felt sorry. "Our' expert," he wrote, "left much to be desired." Mr. Lifton did not refrain from undermining Dr. Wecht's position even after availing himself of the hospitality of Wecht's home and family, imposing upon Wecht for his time and advice. Recently, while circulating hard copies of his Compuserve essays to a number of critics and seeking succor in his campaign against this writer, Lifton also went to Wecht wearing sackcloth and ashes, claiming that he would have written the chapter differently. *Best Evidence* has been published in four editions, the latest paperback having been issued last Fall. Mr. Lifton had numerous opportunities to correct a gross and unforgivable injustice, yet he allowed each of them to pass. At the beginning of this manuscript, I also quote from a letter that Mr. Lifton recently wrote to the President of Emerson College, maliciously denouncing two other well-known critics as unsuitable to lecture college students on the assassination, clearly intending to queer their pitch in terms that I cannot even synopsise here without further compounding their harm.]

At bottom, however, the immutable facts are these: Mr. Lifton professes to believe that the Warren Commission acted honestly and in good faith. He also professes to believe that the critics of the Warren Commission were ill-motivated and fundamentally in error. He reserves his venom for them, and not for the perpetrators of a monstrous frame-up. He further professes to believe that none of the known key participants in the creation and handling of the medical evidence acted less than honestly. He shouts "Conspiracy!", but his message boils down to: "Well, something must have happened, and maybe someday they'll tell us."

It is these broad and basic truths that far transcend the interpersonal rivalries, the quibbles, the different shadings of emphasis and interpretation of the assassination evidence and motive among critics, to set David Lifton and the continuum of his activities in the case distinctly apart from the rest.

Whoever David Lifton is, to label him as "a critic" is nothing less than fraudulent. Rather, he plays into the hands of the very forces we are all opposing. It is therefore a source of deep regret that no voices among the critics have been raised against him. Not everyone or everything that incites the public or arouses interest in the case is inherently good and valuable.

In the course of promulgating his dogma, Mr. Lifton has persisted in either twisting or casting aside the painstaking work of his predecessors, choosing instead to fiddle at the edges, rather than to work within the substance of the evidence, while spinning ghost stories that conjure up memories of marshmallow roasts around a good campfire on a summer's night. His commercially acceptable theory leaves his listeners entertained, enthralled and filled with wonderment, but by morning's light the winding details of his saga vaguely meld into the sense memory of a good time had by all. That is hardly the full extent of his consequence, however, since it is clear to this writer that celebrity in the Media Age confers legitimacy, wherefore Mr. Lifton has gathered a faithful flock of passionate believers to his aimless cause. And therein lies the danger of a foolish idea run amok. David Lifton's attempt to persuade the American public to buy this hideous, ghoulish, sick, perverted, twisted and insane fantasy of body-snatching, postmortem wound infliction, and alteration mocks the assassination researchers and critics of the government's case. He clearly intends to resurrect the *Best Evidence* theory with further ideations that will continue to mock and debase serious criticism of the government's posture and subvert our efforts to achieve a reversal of the official verdict.

Here, then, is David Lifton: Is he the scholar and role model for the present and future generations of researchers that he aspires to be? Is he, in the words of the popular song, merely "still crazy after all these years?" Does he sail under false colors, seeming to explore for truth as he leads us far astray? Or is he little more than a commonplace liar, plagiarist, thief, con artist, extortionist, and fraud? I cannot decide, neither do I have any interest in passing judgment and affixing labels, but this much I do know and deeply care about: Whatever or whoever David Lifton may be, he is the perfect public spokesman for the assassination research community, only if we look at things from the perspective of both the government and the established news media.

His publisher said it checked his citations. It consulted lawyers, a forensic pathologist, and a neurosurgeon to examine the book for "potential factual errors," none of whom has ever been identified. (*The New York Times*, January 2, 1981, Section C, p. 17) What did any of them know about the case that David Lifton did not tell them? Mr. Lifton remains his own best expert in support of a scheme that all the special effects laboratories in Hollywood could not effectuate. Curiously, Macmillan did not vouch for the book (*ibid.*), only for its own mechanical effort to verify isolated facts as though it had neglected to comprehend the insanity of the whole. Macmillan failed to make due inquiry before publishing *Best Evidence*. Other publishers have sought out responsible and authoritative experts in the Kennedy assassination for pre-publication critiques. If Macmillan did so, then the identity of its experts was and is unknown to Sylvia Meagher and Harold Weisberg. Certainly, it could not have been Lifton's personal qualities which endeared him to Macmillan. Lifton proudly admits how he misrepresented himself as a law student so as to get witnesses to talk (, page 398). He also freely admits to surreptitiously taping his interstate telephone conversations.

Granted for the sake of this analysis (for I have no intention of personally verifying Mr. Lifton's footnotes), his citations were correct, his thinking profound. He was "right" in everything but his conclusions. Developments since the publication of *Best Evidence* in 1980 ignored him, as he has them. And, just as America went to the moon without David Lifton, we too must now leave him standing still on the side of the road to our destination in the study of President Kennedy's assassination.