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PREFACE

Abraham Zapruder’s famous film is key evidence in the investigation of one of the worst crimes that can occur in a representative society, the assassination of the head of state. The film was part of the official evidence assembled by the government in pursuit of its inquiry into President John F. Kennedy’s death. What the film actually reveals firmly and definitively refutes the official conclusions.

The President’s Commission to Investigate the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy, known as the Warren Commission after its chair, Chief Justice of the United States Earl Warren, conducted its inquiry from November 29, 1963, to September 24, 1964, with unlimited resources and funding. The Commission included the chief justice, a future president, a former director of central intelligence, and powerful senators and congressmen, with a staff and observers that included a future Supreme Court justice, federal judges, senators, esteemed judicial scholars, future deans of law schools, and outstanding attorneys, with the powerful assistance of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, and many other agencies of government.

In the Commission’s official account of the crime and in the writings of countless commentators, as well as in the works of numerous critics, the history, importance, and understanding of Zapruder’s film is often dimly perceived or crippled by frequent gaps in the record. Thus, to provide a solid history of the film—from its creation to its current resting place—and its relationship to the criminal investigation is the primary purpose of this work, which rests squarely upon a careful analysis of the voluminous evidentiary base of the official investigation.

I appreciate the assistance of many librarians and archivists, especially at the National Archives and the Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library. The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza in Dallas provided exceptional assistance from its unique collection. Over the years the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point library has been consistently helpful. Attorney Jim Lesar, president of the Assassination Records Center in Washington, D.C., counseled me and filed my Freedom of Information Act suit. For three decades he has labored on complex legal suits associated with dissent from the official
findings. Many other individuals helped and guided me, including Hal Verb, Ray Marcus, Jerry McKnight, and Clay Ogilvie. Gary Mack provided invaluable insight and commentary from his deep knowledge.

As a friend and associate for thirty years, Harold Weisberg provided inestimable advice. He opened to me, as he did to all who asked, the voluminous records in his private archives in Frederick, Maryland, soon to be transferred to Hood College. These include a third of a million pages of FBI records (better arranged and easier to use than those in federal depositories), indexes, and extensive subject matter files compiled from the documentary base over a lifetime. Since 1965 a principal figure in the community of those who dissented from the official findings of the Warren Commission—known as critics—he possessed unsurpassed knowledge of the crime, insights into the evidence, and perspectives on approach to issues that are unmatched. On the assassination, Weisberg wrote nine published books and thirty-five unpublished book manuscripts now available on CD-ROM. His main concern, indeed passion, was that those who examine the assassination rely only on the evidence in the crime and the facts and eschew theory and speculation, the bane of understanding. I have relied on his files and on his published work.

Mike Briggs of the University Press of Kansas played a principal role in guiding me through the process of publication, and to him I owe my thanks and a debt of enduring gratitude.

My wife, Elaine Alley Wrone, provided advice and help. Without her unfailing assistance and constant encouragement, the book would not have been possible.
For it is a truth, which the experience of ages has attested,
that the people are always most in danger when the means of
injuring their rights are in the possession of those of
whom they entertain the least suspicion.

—Alexander Hamilton, Federalist No. 25
INTRODUCTION

As we began the twenty-first century, our nation finally acquired ownership (but not the copyright) of perhaps the most famous home movie of all time—Abraham Zapruder's brief film of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. After a thirty-five-year odyssey, involving numerous disputes over the rights to and authenticity of the movie, the six-foot strip of film has now found a final home. It is held within a protective case inside a locked cabinet behind the secure doors of the cold storage freezer of the Special Media Archives Services Division of the National Archives and Records Administration at College Park, Maryland, maintained at twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit and 30 percent relative humidity. There it remains, a grim memorial to a tragic day that—like December 7, 1941, and September 11, 2001—forever altered American and world history. Like those other two fateful days, November 22, 1963, exploded the peace and security of the American nation; unlike those days, however, it also robbed the country of its leader by an act so bold and brutal that even now, four decades later, it is hard to comprehend. How could this event have happened in broad daylight on the streets of a major American city? Could it have really been the work of a solitary and crazed gunman, as the government's official investigation declared in pinning the murder on Lee Harvey Oswald?

In fact, the Zapruder film—both by itself and in conjunction with a body of other assassination evidence—convincingly contradicts the government's declaration. A close examination of the Zapruder film leads to the inescapable conclusion that more than one person wielded weapons in Dealey Plaza that day and that, most likely, Lee Harvey Oswald was not one of them.

Thus, in effect and by technical definition, John F. Kennedy's murder was the result of a conspiracy. Precisely who the conspirators were this study does not attempt to say because the evidence at this time is insufficient to make such a determination. But there definitely is more than sufficient evidence still available—in the Zapruder film and elsewhere—to determine that a conspiracy killed the president and that the subsequent official investigation at minimum failed miserably in its efforts and at worst appears to have deliberately ignored or distorted evidence to force
Oswald into a Procrustean conclusion reached well before the actual official inquiry had even begun.

With that in mind, the present work is designed both to highlight the Zapruder film’s history, content, and controversies and to revisit the flaws and failures of the Warren Commission and its official report on the assassination. By doing so, I hope to encourage other scholars—especially those who continue to defend the Warren Commission—to reconsider the official evidence and conclusions and join with me in a collective march toward a deeper and more accurate understanding of the events of that dark day in November 1963.

Without question the Zapruder film is a crucial piece of evidence for understanding key aspects of the assassination, its investigation, and a wide spectrum of views about both that have emerged during the past forty years. First, the film provides an extraordinarily precise time line for examining what happened second by second from just before until just after the attack—thanks to our knowledge that the film’s 486 frames recorded this momentous event at precisely 18.3 frames per second or about one frame every one-eighteenth of a second. Second, the film provides with considerable clarity key information regarding the positions and reactions of the attack’s two victims—the murdered president and the seriously wounded Governor John Connally—which, in turn, helps us determine the number and direction of the shots fired that day. It also allows us to locate and identify many of the eyewitnesses to the murder. Third, and most important, it provides compelling evidence for the existence of a conspiracy to murder the president.

A comment about that word: the word “conspiracy” has acquired a lot of emotional baggage over the years, usually in dismissive reference to those who wail about alleged high-level corporate or federal misdeeds or to the overheated paranoia of Hollywood films and television shows like the enormously popular X-Files. Indeed, to argue “conspiracy” is to invite direct association with the so-called lunatic fringe, which would be anathema to any serious scholar. But, for those who are well versed in American history, the concept of conspiracy is a familiar one, in part because it represents a common phenomenon in American society, politics, and law—ranging from the revolutionary generation through the cabals of the Federalists, the treason of the Confederacy, the theft of public resources by various robber barons, the rise of organized crime, the plunder of savings and loans institutions, the demise of Enron and Worldcom, and so on.
The word itself has Latin roots—“con,” meaning with or together, and “spire,” meaning to breathe—and derives from the practice among the Roman legions of soldiers entering or leaving camp to voice the password to guards by whispering into their ears to avoid listening spies. From this curious origin it evolved under Roman and then European and American usage and law to mean two or more persons working together to do what the law says is wrong. Thus, it applies to procedures utilized by the Continental Congress to overthrow the colonial legal establishment, to methods devised and implemented by the railroad capitalists to acquire land for their corporations, to executions of competing mobsters by Mafia capos and hit men, to the cover-up of illegal misadventures by President Nixon and his henchmen, and to the killing of JFK by two or more individuals. All in all, such things have been a more frequent part of the American landscape than most of us might think.

To state unequivocally that the official evidence proves that two or more individuals, and none of them Lee Harvey Oswald, killed JFK does not, however, imply or require that the facts also reveal to us who those individuals were. Because I do not find evidence for such clear identifications, I do not speculate here regarding who might have shot JFK. Nor is it incumbent upon me or any other historian to go beyond the available facts to perform such speculations. Indeed, to speculate, to go beyond the evidence, is the antithesis of what a historian must do and what society obligates a genuine scholar to do. The historian, however, is obligated to establish what we actually know with a sizable degree of certainty—that is, a baseline on which all additional intellectual efforts can be built. Without that foundation, the whole edifice of the intellectual enterprise collapses.

America’s founding generation firmly believed that honor was the measure of a nation’s greatness and that with its quiet presence or loud absence the new American nation would thrive or crumble. In the history of the Zapruder film, however, very little honor or saving grace can be found in the conduct and execution of the profoundly sloppy and thus counterproductive official investigation into JFK’s assassination. Indeed, the actions of members of the Warren Commission, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Central Intelligence Agency, and a number of other federal agencies responsible for the original investigation must be viewed with grave disappointment, for those efforts failed the nation in a time of great crisis. To a lesser extent the same must also be said regarding the flawed inquiries that followed, including the 1965 prosecutors review, the 1968 Department
of Justice Panel Review, the Schweiker subcommittee of the Church Committee, the Belin-Rockefeller Commission, the House Select Committee on Assassinations, and the Assassination Records Review Board—all of which, despite the best of intentions, produced profoundly unsatisfactory results.

The combined flaws and failures of these investigating institutions and organizations—chief among them the Warren Commission—have exponentially increased the difficulties confronting any scholar who wishes to pursue the complexities, contradictions, and misunderstandings surrounding JFK’s assassination. No wonder so many mainstream scholars have collectively abdicated their duty to submit this case to the highest standards of reputable scholarship. As a result the field has been overrun by best-selling popularizers, paranoid conspiracy theorists, and true believers in the Warren Report—none of whom have moved our nation any closer to true understanding and closure in this matter.

There have been exceptions to this sad state of affairs, and for those we should be immensely grateful. Working with average means and outside the halls of academe, individuals such as the late Harold Weisberg have labored against enormous odds to analyze and follow the evidence (no matter where it leads) and to critique the Warren Commission efforts in an investigation that was so flawed it created an effective, if not actual, cover-up. These scholars persisted after the truth in the face of gigantic spools of bureaucratic red tape; destruction or disappearance of evidence; the ridicule of government officials, mainstream academics, and media pundits; and the distortions supported or introduced by other less responsible writers on the assassination. One is reminded of the words of Edmund Burke (cited by JFK himself in Profiles in Courage): “He well knows what snares are spread about his path, from personal animosity . . . and possibly from popular delusion. But he has put to hazard his case, his security, his interest, his power, even his . . . popularity. . . . He is traduced and abused for his supposed motives. He will remember that . . . calumny and abuse are essential parts of triumph.” These individuals deserve our gratitude and respect for helping preserve the evidentiary record and for challenging the often contorted and ultimately unconvincing official conclusions that have denied our rightful access to the truth. Without their efforts this truth would forever be denied to the citizens of this nation.

Americans have always been supremely optimistic about their place in the firmament of nations, about the enduring efficacy of their democratic
form of government, and about their ability to triumph over the toughest obstacles. But the assassination of President Kennedy, like the attack at Pearl Harbor and the attacks of September 11, 2001, strongly tempered that previously unabashed optimism and signaled to the nation’s citizens that things would never again be the same. And, indeed, things never were. In the decade immediately after JFK’s murder, nearly sixty thousand Americans died and many thousands more were wounded in a disastrous war in Southeast Asia, violence erupted in response to black Americans’ pursuit of their constitutional civil rights, two more American leaders were assassinated, and yet another American president was removed from office for probable crimes against the state. Would things have been different had JFK not been killed? We will never know. But we do know that the events of November 22, 1963, stole from America both optimism and innocence, losses that succeeding events only deepened, forever framing JFK’s death as the doorway to those terrible times.

The chronicle of the world’s most famous amateur motion picture, then, goes well beyond the provision of a mere repository of insights into the assassination of an American president, a president after all who has been loved and reviled in equal measure (not unlike the heavy counterwinds that buffeted another assassinated president, Abraham Lincoln). It opens a window on a nation’s entire institutional order and demonstrates that those institutions that define and sustain our society can and do sometimes fail us—at a time when they are most needed to perform to the highest standards. In the aftermath of this particular failure, following the terribly tragic “darkness at noon” in Dealey Plaza, even darker times followed. But while we cannot change the past or bring back JFK, we can redeem that past and resurrect our own honor by taking another unflinching look at what actually happened, by following the evidence wherever it takes us, and by fearlessly challenging false reports and fantastic stories.
The Film
Early on Friday morning, November 22, 1963, late fall rain fell on Dallas, pushed with gusts of wind. A few hours before noon the rain ended and the sun broke through the clouds, but the erratic wind bursts lingered.

That morning, fifty-nine-year-old Abraham Zapruder drove seven miles from his Dallas home to his office in the Dal-Tex building at 501 Elm Street, the corner of Elm and Houston Street, where he manufactured ladies dresses. Catercorner lay the public park of Dealey Plaza; directly west across Houston at 411 Elm stood the Texas School Book Depository building. A co-owner of Jennifer Juniors, Inc., with his young partner Erwin Schwartz, the heir of his deceased partner, Zapruder managed the factory and Schwartz the sales. In 1905, Zapruder had been born in Russia, where his family had experienced privation, persecution, and sometimes near starvation. He recalled those years as “terrible.” America gave him freedom and opportunity and a good life. He spoke with a slight accent.

In midmorning Zapruder, at work in his fourth-floor office, was excited about President John F. Kennedy coming to Dallas and about watching the motorcade that the newspaper had reported was routed along Dealey Plaza’s Elm Street just outside his window. But, as he later recalled for a Warren Commission staff attorney, “I didn’t have my camera.” He had left it at home. The morning had been cloudy and rainy and did not seem suitable for filming. By around ten o’clock the skies cleared and the sun poked through. His clerks and staff urged him to go home to retrieve his camera. Zapruder demurred. “I wouldn’t have a chance even to see the President,” he told his secretary Lillian Rogers. Rogers finally convinced him with the argument that “the President didn’t come through the neighborhood every day.” The crowds would be light in the plaza, Rogers added. At around 10:00 A.M. Zapruder drove back home, picked up the camera, and returned to the office.

Zapruder was an avid amateur cameraman. The previous autumn, at the Peacock Jewelry Company in Dallas, he had purchased a Bell & Howell
8mm Director Series movie camera, Model 414 PD, serial no. AS 13486, with case. It had a good zoom telescopic lens, later determined by citizens to be a Varamat 9–27mm f1.8 zoom lens. Federal authorities never recorded the specifics and make.

The camera recorded images on a twenty-five-foot spool of 16mm color film, with a sprocket advancing mechanism, but exposed on only one half of the film. When that half was used up, the user reversed the roll of film in the camera and exposed the other half. After development, the laboratory precision-slit the film down the middle, and the second half of what then emerged as standard 8mm film was cemented to the first half. The lab returned the film to the user as though it had been a single reel of 8mm film rather than a doubled reel that had been split in half and then made into a single reel of twice the original length.

The day of President Kennedy’s visit to Dallas, Zapruder had his camera loaded with Kodachrome II Safety Film, a color outdoor film; at his home he had previously taken a few frames of his grandchildren playing. Only by inspecting the film edge of the reproduced frames printed in volume 18 of the Warren Commission’s Hearings as Commission Exhibit 885 (CE 885), however, can one identify with certainty the type of film he used, for the official investigation into the assassination never obtained that critical information.

Sometime after noon, Zapruder prepared to film the motorcade. He had first thought he could film JFK from the window of his office, but this proved to be impractical. As the time for the motorcade’s arrival drew near, he left the office to walk down to Elm Street on the plaza to find a site where he could “take better pictures.” “I tried one place and it was on a narrow ledge,” he told the Warren Commission on July 22, 1964, “and I couldn’t balance myself very much. I tried another place and that had some obstruction of signs or whatever it was there and finally I found a place farther down near the underpass that was a square of concrete.”

While searching near the north grassy knoll for a spot to stand, Zapruder tried the concrete steps of the pergola but was dissatisfied with them. As the scheduled time for the motorcade drew nearer, he checked on the proper functioning of his take-up reel by shooting a few frames of his office receptionist Marilyn Sitzman walking up the small hill, and also captured two persons sitting on the nearby pergola bench, Beatrice Hester, one of his payroll clerks, and her husband, Charles. As he recalled later
for the Commission, “I was shooting some of the pictures to start my roll from the beginning. I didn’t want to have a blank.”

Zapruder explained to Sitzman his problem with the position. She suggested that he stand on a small concrete abutment forming part of the pergola built on the slope of the north hill or knoll of the plaza, halfway between the Texas School Book Depository building and the railroad underpass. But her boss hesitated. He suffered from vertigo and was afraid he could not keep his balance on the abutment. Sitzman offered to hold onto his coat to steady him. Zapruder and Sitzman then scrambled up on the four-foot-high stumpy pillar. Behind them stood the pergola and behind that a tree-lined five-foot-high stockade fence that enclosed and shielded a parking lot. The tree-masked parking lot contained several rows of parked cars stretching back perhaps a hundred feet to the railroad tracks and four hundred feet to the north. Sitzman “was right behind him” holding on to his coat.

Zapruder and Sitzman had some of the best views of the assassination of anyone in Dealey Plaza. They stood about sixty-five feet from the center of Elm Street and about two hundred feet from the seven-story Texas School Book Depository, which loomed to their left or east, the only building on the plaza. On the hill, they were above the street that dipped to enter the triple underpass. Zapruder, peering through the telephoto lens, would prove to be a witness to the president’s assassination. The lens magnified what it focused on approximately four times. The Commission failed to define precisely how much.

At 12:30, the president’s motorcade arrived from the east off Houston Street, slowly turning left 120 degrees onto Elm Street and led by three motorcycle policemen many feet ahead of the limousines. Elm curved in toward the center of the park and downward to join Main and Commerce Streets to dip beneath the triple underpass of the railroad tracks. Zapru-der kept his eye to the telescopic lens, filming the motorcycles. But then, seeing they were not the cars of the presidential party, he stopped.

When the limousines appeared he began filming again, and despite sounds and commotion around him, never took his eye off the viewer or stopped filming until the president’s limousine disappeared from view to his right. “I was shooting through a telephoto lens,” he later told Warren Commission staff attorney Wesley Liebeler. The lens magnified everything he saw, and he focused his eye on JFK.
Federal authorities ignored Sitzman. “I was totally ignored. Absolutely,” she recalled thirty years later. Only through the work of reporters and critics did Zapruder’s assistant on the abutment eventually find a way to relate what she had seen.

Immediately after the shooting, as Sitzman wandered in shock on the plaza, Darwin Payne, a reporter for the *Dallas Times Herald*, ran up to her and asked what she had seen. As he recorded in hurried notes, she replied: “I heard the first shot . . . he slumped over in seat . . . 2nd shot hit pres right in the temple.”

In 1966, three years later, Sitzman recalled the incident for critic Josiah Thompson:

There was nothing unusual until the first sound which I thought was a firecracker, mainly because of the reaction of President Kennedy. He put his hands up to guard his face. . . . And the next thing that I remembered clearly was the shot that hit directly in front of us, or almost directly in front of us, that hit him on the side of his face . . . above the ear and to the front. . . . And, we could see his brains come out, you know, his head opening.

Sitzman’s comments require two observations. Her description of seeing the first shot hit does not fit the Warren Commission’s findings. A large street sign on the north side of Elm Street blocked Zapruder’s vision for many frames, starting at frame 210. At this same time, the Commission stated that a tree blocked a shot from the Texas School Book Depository and that Lee Harvey Oswald could not have fired his first shot after frame 210. This is a fixed boundary of the federal assassination investigation. Thus, if a shot had been fired before frame 210, as Sitzman claims, it could not have been fired by the alleged official assassin.

The second observation relates to her seeing the next shot “hit him on the side of the face,” which also meant Oswald could not have fired it regardless of whether Sitzman heard a sound behind her. The angles and physical constraints of the evidence rule out a shot from the alleged sixth-floor easternmost window of the depository hitting JFK on the side of his face. The official allegations necessitate the death shot entering the back of his head. As the Commission concluded, “A bullet . . . entered the back of his head and exited through the upper right portion of his skull.”

Unlike Sitzman’s official exclusion as a witness, Zapruder had six brief chances to provide some scraps of information. Two arose when reporters...
contacted him immediately after the shooting; another came early that afternoon at a television station; the next he revealed during a conversation at the film developing plant; the fifth was recorded that night by a Secret Service agent; and the last occasion came nine months later in his exceptionally brief and cursory pro forma appearance before the Warren Commission.

Zapruder’s first opportunity to comment came when reporters asked him questions on Dealey Plaza. Darwin Payne, who had run most of the six blocks from his newspaper office, encountered Sitzman and Beatrice Hester, who told him about their boss and his film. Payne went to Zapruder’s office, spoke with him, took notes, and then phoned the Dallas Times Herald. At the rewrite desk they recorded his words. Payne said Zapruder “heard three shots. After 1st one pres. slumped over grabbed his stomach hit in the stomach 2 more shots looked like head opened up & everything come out . . . blood splatters everywhere . . . side of face . . . looked like blobs out of his temple . . . for[e]head.”

Harry McCormick of the Dallas Morning News had sped to Dealey Plaza from the Trade Center, where Kennedy was to have delivered a speech. Zapruder was the first witness McCormick interviewed after leaving his car for a fellow reporter to park. The photographer blurted out, “There were three shots. Two hit the president and the other Gov. Connally. I know the president is dead for his head seemed to fly to pieces when he was hit the second time.”

About an hour later, Zapruder was afforded another brief moment to comment when he appeared on television station WFAA, an ABC affiliate, where he had been taken to see if the station could develop his film. The station’s program director, Jay Watson, interviewed Zapruder live on the air, and the program was broadcast nationally. Erwin Schwartz, Zapruder’s partner, stood off scene holding the camera with the film still enclosed. Watson began by asking Zapruder if he would “tell us your story please, sir?” Zapruder described the scene on Dealey Plaza, then added, “I heard a shot, and he slumped to the side.” His use of the word “slumped” seems peculiar, for it indicates no direction, and he never mentioned it in any other instances.

After the introductory comments, Watson and Zapruder were discussing the efforts of WFAA to process Zapruder’s film when suddenly the station interrupted them with the announcement that President Kennedy’s body had left Parkland Memorial Hospital. It screened some footage of the
The interruption occurred just after 2:00 P.M. The break also showed a recent photograph of the Texas School Book Depository building. When they returned to the interview, Watson pointed to the sixth-floor window and explained to Zapruder, “This is a picture of the window where the gun was allegedly fired from that killed President Kennedy.”

Zapruder interrupted Watson to comment, “I must have been in the line of fire.” He repeated, “I say I must have been in the line of fire where I see that picture where it was” and added an observation on the scene. Then Zapruder put his right hand to his right temple with the fingers pointing to where he saw the president’s head explode. With that Watson ended the interview. But there is a problem with the phrase “line of fire.” Zapruder had been on the knoll or hill. To his far left stood the depository, and to his front was Elm Street. For him to have been in the line of fire from the sixth-floor window, the bullet would have had to traverse a triangle from the window to Zapruder’s camera to JFK, which is physically impossible. Was Zapruder perhaps struggling to say that the shots came from behind him?

But in showing and commenting on the photograph of the depository, was it possible that the interviewer, although reflecting the information then coming over the wire in the studio, confused Zapruder by introducing details Zapruder himself did not recall? Zapruder the eyewitness should have been asked where he thought the shots came from without being presented with the memory-filtering photograph.

After the brief television interview, Zapruder traveled to the Kodak plant to have his film developed. As he sat on a bench near the processing machinery, he discussed what he had seen with Jack Harrison, a manager of the firm. Years later Harrison recalled the scene in an oral interview for the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza in Dallas: “Zapruder thought he heard gunshots from behind him.”

Whereas Harrison’s memory is subject to the possible flaws attributable to the passage of many years, Zapruder’s statement made on the evening of November 22 was set down while his memories were fresh and confirms the earlier comments. Around 9:30 P.M., at the offices of the Dallas Secret Service, the dress manufacturer arrived to give federal authorities two copies of his film. Agent Max Phillips wrote in a memorandum that accompanied one print of the film to Washington, “Mr. Zapruder was photographing the President at the instant he was shot. According to Mr. Zapruder, the position of the assassin was behind Mr. Zapruder.” Since
Oswald was to the far left of Zapruder, sixty-one feet high in the Texas School Book Depository building, he could not have fired that shot.54

Having spoken to two reporters, a television interviewer, a film developer, and a Secret Service agent on November 22, Zapruder spoke again on July 22, 1964, when federal officials grudgingly decided to take his testimony in a hurried and truncated session before Commission assistant counsel Wesley J. Liebeler in Dallas. (Until late June, officials had intended not to interview him.) He reiterated for Liebeler, “I saw his head opened up and the blood and everything came out.”55 Regrettably for history, when Zapruder struggled to locate the position of the shooter, Liebeler abruptly shifted topics and cut off his testimony.56 Regarding the first shot, he testified:

MR. ZAPRUDER. ‘I heard the first shot and I saw the President lean over and grab himself like this (holding his left chest area).57

Regarding the shot to the president’s head:

MR. LIEBELER. Do you have any impression as to the direction from which these shots came?

MR. ZAPRUDER. No, I also thought it came from back of me. Of course, you can’t tell when something is in line—it could come from anywhere, but being I was here and he was hit on this line and he was hit right in the head—I saw it right around here, so it looked like it came from here and it could come from there.

MR. LIEBELER. All right, as you stood here on the abutment and looked down into Elm Street, you saw the President hit on the right side of the head and you thought perhaps the shots had come from behind you?

MR. ZAPRUDER. Well, yes.

MR. LIEBELER. From the direction behind you?

MR. ZAPRUDER. Yes, actually—I couldn’t say what I thought at the moment, where they came from—after the impact of the tragedy was really what I saw . . .

MR. LIEBELER. But you didn’t form any opinion at that time as to what direction the shots did come from actually?

MR. ZAPRUDER. No.58

Zapruder’s perception that JFK received the first shot prior to frame 210 demolishes the official solution to the crime. His view of the death shot
hitting the president on the right side of his head makes impossible a shot from the alleged sniper's lair in the depository.

Immediately after Zapruder had filmed the assassination, his receptionist on the abutment with him recalled he lowered his camera from his eye and screamed, “They killed him! They killed him! They killed him!” In his testimony before the Commission staff, Zapruder described himself as wandering “incoherent, in a state of shock”:

And then, I didn’t even remember how I got down from that abutment there, but there I was, I guess, and I was walking toward—back toward my office and screaming. “They killed him, they killed him,” and the people that I met on the way didn’t even know what happened and they kept yelling, “What happened, what happened, what happened?” . . . I kept on just yelling, “They killed him, they killed him, they killed him,” and finally got to my office and my secretary—I told her to call the police or the Secret Service—I don’t know what she was doing, and that’s about all. I was very much upset.

These several strands of information, pieced together from scattered sources, provide an indication of what Zapruder saw through his viewfinder. Federal officials—FBI, Secret Service, Warren Commission staff—never interviewed him properly, although federal conclusions about the assassination often turn on the critical facts held on his film.

After he climbed down from the abutment, for several minutes he wandered dazed around the plaza. Finally he was starting to move toward his office when Harry McCormick of the Dallas Morning News found him. On the plaza McCormick had met Beatrice Hester, who told him about what Zapruder had filmed. He approached Zapruder to speak to him, but Zapruder refused, saying he would talk only to federal authorities. McCormick recalled that Zapruder told him, “I got it all on film,” to which the reporter replied, after taking down Zapruder’s description of the shots, “The Secret Service will want to see those films. Where are you going?” Zapruder said he was going to his office across the street. “Go ahead,” McCormick directed him. “I will find Forrest Sorrels, head of the Secret Service here, and we’ll be back to talk with you.” As an experienced crime reporter, he knew Sorrels well, and he left for the sheriff’s office to find him.

In the meantime, Zapruder reached his own office. He had his secretary put the camera, still loaded, on top of a filing cabinet near her desk. Still in
a daze, he directed her to telephone the police about his film. The police did not respond; they were so caught up in the events surrounding the murder that the odd phone call from someone claiming that an amateur had filmed the assassination was ignored. Zapruder sat at his desk weeping. The scene had so shocked him that for the rest of his life he suffered recurring nightmares and never got over the horrible sight.

Back on Dealey Plaza, Zapruder’s employees continued to tell police and reporters about the film. One of his shipping clerks, probably Beatrice Hester, who had heard him exclaim about his filming JFK’s murder, told a policeman that her boss had taken a motion picture of the assassination. The officer got his partner and, carrying their shotguns as was standard practice for the emergency, walked over to Jennifer Juniors to obtain the film. Zapruder refused to give it to the officers. He would hand it over, he said, only to someone in authority. The officers lingered in the outer office, trying to sort out their problem.

After Zapruder went back into his office, two of his employees standing outside the Texas School Book Depository, Beatrice Hester and Marilyn Sitzman, told Darwin Payne about their boss’s film. Payne wanted to see it, so they led him across the street and to Zapruder’s office. In the office Payne questioned Zapruder about the assassination and then about his film. He attempted to obtain publication rights for the Dallas Times Herald. Again, the distraught Zapruder shrugged off the request.

Payne persisted, asking Zapruder if they could take the film to his newspaper’s laboratory to have it developed. He told Zapruder that he was certain his paper would pay for the film rights and would “do the right thing.” But Zapruder insisted on giving it to the Secret Service or FBI. Next Payne got the president of the Dallas Times Herald on the phone, and they had a three-way conversation with Zapruder. If the film was good, James F. Chambers Jr. said, he would pay. The figure of a few hundred dollars was mentioned. Despite entreaties, Zapruder refused. The classic newsman’s drive was pushing Payne, who later recalled that for a second he had thought, “The camera was on top of the filing cabinet right there. And in a fleeting moment, I thought, ‘Well, I could grab it. Nobody would stop me. I could grab the camera and run.’ ” As he dallied, Secret Service agent Sorrels arrived with McCormick.

After his initial contact with Zapruder on the plaza, McCormick had been covering the events at the sheriff’s building a block away, where he had met Secret Service agent Forrest Sorrels. Sorrels had gone to Parkland
Memorial Hospital with the wounded president but at about 12:45 P.M. had returned to the plaza. Much of our information comes from his January 22, 1964, report on the film to Inspector Thomas J. Kelley, chief of the Secret Service, in which Sorrels explained how he came in contact with Zapruder (see documents 1 and 2 in the appendix).

Many witnesses to the assassination had been taken into the sheriff’s office to be interviewed. Soon after returning to the plaza, Sorrels had gone to the sheriff’s office to question them. He amplified his account when he testified before the Commission. While in the sheriff’s office, he testified, he was approached by McCormick, whom he “had known for many years.” McCormick informed Sorrels about Zapruder, telling him, “I have a man over here that got pictures of this whole thing.” Sorrels replied, “Let’s go see him.” Together the two walked the block to Zapruder’s office. It appears that it was just after 1:00 P.M.

By the time Sorrels and McCormick entered Zapruder’s office at a little after 1:00 P.M., Erwin Schwartz had arrived to join his partner. Minutes earlier Schwartz had telephoned the office from across town where he was having lunch, only to be told by the secretary, Lillian Rogers, that policemen were in the office with shotguns and wanted the film, which Zapruder had by then placed in the safe directly behind her. “Mr. Z” was in his office, distraught. Thirty years later Schwartz recalled that he had told Rogers to lock the safe.

In the outer office when McCormick and Sorrels entered were Payne, the two officers, Schwartz, Rogers, and apparently other media representatives. In the outer office McCormick, for the Dallas Morning News, promptly offered Zapruder $1,000 for the film, which was refused. Sorrels and McCormick headed straight for Zapruder’s office, but Payne protested his rival being favored, whereupon Sorrels and Zapruder ejected McCormick.

On May 7, 1964, before the Commission, Sorrels recalled his meeting with Zapruder: “And Mr. Zapruder was real shook up. He said that he didn’t know how in the world he had taken these pictures, that he was down there and was taking the thing there, and he says, ‘My God, I saw the whole thing. I saw the man’s brains come out of his head.’” Sorrels then asked if it would “be possible for us to get a copy of those films.” Zapruder said yes, for Sorrels was the person of authority he had sought.

Sorrels related Zapruder’s reply in his report to the chief of the Secret Service, providing a glimpse of Zapruder’s commercial concerns even at the early critical period, a theme fated to run throughout the history of the
film’s various owners: “Mr. Zapruder agreed to furnish me with a copy of this film with the understanding that it was strictly for official use of the Secret Service and that it would not be shown or given to any newspapers or magazines as he expected to sell the film for as high a price as he could get for it.”

At this point two larger questions arise. One wonders whether Zapruder would have given the original to the government at that time if authorities had asked for it rather than a copy. Richard Stolley, who later purchased the film for Life, believed that in his shock Zapruder would have given the film to the government if he had been asked. As Stolley remarked, “If the federal government had not been in such disarray at that moment . . . someone would probably have asked Zapruder for the original film and he probably would have relinquished it.” However, Forrest Sorrels’s report that Zapruder’s expectation less than an hour after the assassination was “to sell the film for as high a price as he could get for it” seems to contradict Stolley’s observation.

During the short time Zapruder was in the office, the film remained in the camera. Now Zapruder and Sorrels faced an additional task of developing it and making a copy for the government. McCormick hastily spoke up that the News could do it. “Can we go there?” Zapruder answered, “Sure!” They would go to the offices of the Dallas Morning News, which were five blocks away. Sorrels commandeered a squad car and ordered the two policemen to drive them. Schwartz retrieved the camera, with its film, from the safe and joined Sorrels, Zapruder, McCormick, and the two police officers. With Schwartz clutching the camera holding the undeveloped film, the six men piled into the police car and left Payne behind. With the car’s siren blaring and lights flashing, the men pushed through the crowds on their way to develop the film.

The task they undertook was not an easy one. Over the next nine hours a bedraggled Schwartz and Zapruder would visit seven offices and plants. Then, in the midst of the process being abandoned by officials, they would have to figure out on their own how to deliver their two promised finished copies to a government in profound disorder.