

JFK's Death, Re-Framed

By Max Holland and Johann Rush

FORTY-FOUR years ago today, a clothing company owner named Abraham Zapruder filmed the assassination of John F. Kennedy in Dallas. And for 44 years, most people have presumed that his home movie captured the assassination in its entirety. This presumption has led to deep misunderstandings.

The majority of witnesses in Dealey Plaza heard three shots fired. Lawmen found three cartridges in Lee Harvey Oswald's nest on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository. Yet Zapruder's film captured only two shots clearly. As a result, the film has been scoured for evidence of another shot, presumably the first one fired at the president. Research has yielded contradictory findings.

But what if Zapruder simply hadn't turned on his camera in time?

Zapruder's 26-second movie has two distinct parts. Approximately seven seconds after he started filming from the north side of Elm Street, Zapruder stopped his Bell & Howell Zoomatic at frame 132 because only Dallas police motorcycles were driving by. He did not restart his camera until the president's limousine was clearly in view. Consequently, Z 133 is the first frame to actually show the president's Lincoln—a frame exposed several seconds after the car had made the sharp turn onto Elm Street from Houston Street, and, we believe, after Oswald had squeezed off his first shot.

Several witnesses saw a man firing from the sixth floor. No one's recollection about the first shot was more precise, though, than that of a ninth grader named Amos L. Euins. He told the Dallas County sheriff, "About the time the car got near the black and white sign, I heard a shot."



As the photograph from a December 1963 restaging shows, the president's limousine would have passed a black and white sign before Zapruder restarted his camera (the ghost image here approximates the location of the Lincoln at the moment Zapruder started his camera again.)

[View this photo.](#)

If one discards the notion that Zapruder recorded the shooting sequence in full, it has the virtue of solving several puzzles that have consistently defied explanation. The most exasperating one is how did Oswald, who was able to hit President Kennedy in his upper back at a distance of around 190 feet, and then in the head at a distance of 265 feet, manage to miss so badly on the first and closest shot?

A first shot earlier than anyone has ever posited gives a plausible answer. About 1.4 seconds before Zapruder restarted filming, a horizontal traffic mast extending over Elm Street temporarily obscured Oswald's view of his target. That mast was never examined during any of the official investigations. Yet if this mast deflected the first shot, that would surely explain why the bullet missed not only the president, but the whole limousine. Significantly, the highway sign cited by Amos Euins was just a few feet west of the traffic light's vertical post in 1963.

In May 1964, with the help of surveyors, the Warren Commission first considered the idea that a shot could have been fired before Zapruder restarted his camera. The commission later heard testimony that included references to what the staff labeled "Position A." It did not appear on the Zapruder film, but represented the "first point at which a person in the sixth-floor window of the book building . . . could have gotten a shot at the president after the car had rounded the corner."

If the commission had followed up this insight, it would have conceivably been able to describe the duration and intervals of the shooting sequence: that Oswald fired three shots in approximately 11.2 seconds, with intervals of 6.3 seconds and 4.9 seconds between the shots.

Why would this have mattered? Because the lack of a clear explanation for the shooting sequence was a key reason the *Warren Report* fell into disrepute.

And why has it taken so long to realize that the assassination and the Zapruder film are not one and the same? Part of the answer lies in the power of the film itself. As the critic Richard B. Woodward wrote in *The Times* in 2003, the assassination became "fused with one representation, so much so that Kennedy's death is virtually unimaginable without Zapruder's film." To that, one has to add the element of distraction. The Warren Commission did not pursue its May 1964 insight because it was fixated not on the shot that missed but on the ones that killed the president.

If this belated revelation changes nothing from one perspective—Oswald still did it—it simultaneously changes everything, if only because it disrupts the state of mind of everyone who has ever been transfixed by the Zapruder film. The film, we realize, does not depict an assassination about to commence. It shows one that had already started.