



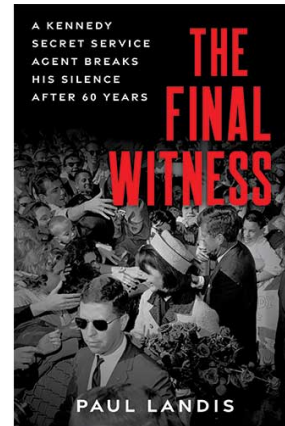
Written by [William P. Hoar](#) on November 7, 2023

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The Review

The Final Witness: A Kennedy Secret Service Agent Breaks His Silence After 60 Years, by Paul Landis, Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2023, 240 pages, hard-cover.

Everything happened so fast. BAM! I heard the sound of a high-powered rifle being fired, coming from behind us, from over my right shoulder.



We are on page 156, having been transported in print to Dealey Plaza in Dallas on November 22, 1963. We are riding the rear of the right running board on a black Cadillac convertible, which is code-named Halfback. Our narrator at the time is a 28-year-old Secret Service agent situated just behind the limousine carrying the president of the United States and his wife, as well as the governor of Texas and his wife.

The next several seconds and what ensued changed the futures of many — and cost the life of John F. Kennedy. It also altered history. Endless speculation — about who and why and how — stimulated a wave of analyses, including hundreds of books, with more to come on this 60th anniversary of the tragic death.

According to the official report of the Warren Commission that investigated the assassination, published in September 1964, Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, firing three shots — with the second and third striking the president and the third killing Kennedy. It led to what has been called the “single-bullet theory” (with the bullet sometimes being called “pristine” or “magic” since it presumably was responsible for seven entry/exit wounds in both the president and the governor, causing all of Governor John Connally’s wounds and the non-fatal wounds to Kennedy, while escaping virtually unscathed).

Nonetheless, according to public official polls a decade ago, just before the 50th anniversary of the assassination, more than 60 percent of Americans believed the murder was not the work of one man, but rather part of a conspiracy.

What the Warren Commission did not do was interview the agent who was perhaps 15 feet from the struck president on that fateful day. (According to Paul Landis, now age 88, only one of the eight agents in the follow-up car was interviewed by the commission; at the time, Landis was detailed to the protection of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy.)

When word broke about the upcoming book by Landis, he was interviewed by *The New York Times*, which noted that the commission’s investigators came up with the single-bullet theory in part because the bullet was supposedly found on Connally’s stretcher at Parkland Memorial Hospital. So, said the *Times*, the investigators “assumed it had exited his body during efforts to save his life.”

Not so, says Landis. He maintains that the Warren Commission was wrong.

The account at hand, says the author, “is the story I kept buried — even from myself — for more than



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fifty years.”

Shots Erupt in Dallas

The key eyewitness is now describing when the second shot rang out. That also, he writes, “came from behind, but it sounded louder than the first one. It also had a different feeling, a different reverberation. It was still the sound of a high-powered rifle, but it was definitely different from the first.”

It is a macabre, horrifying image — one that has haunted Landis for decades. Here’s the mental picture as the presumed third bullet finds its mark: “I saw a flash of white as the right side of President Kennedy’s head exploded in a pink spray of blood, flesh, and brain matter. I automatically ducked, not wanting to get splattered as we drove through it.”

He knew, the former agent recalls, that the president “probably died the instant the third shot hit him in the head.”

This new volume, *The Final Witness: A Kennedy Secret Service Agent Breaks His Silence After 60 Years*, is a largely a personal memoir. And it’s touching in many places, effective generally, and predominately evocative of the “Camelot era” painted by so many in the largely friendly mass media of the time. At one point, Landis was the youngest agent in the Secret Service, garnering the code-name “Debut.” His first temporary assignment with the U.S. Secret Service was protecting President Dwight Eisenhower’s grandchildren prior to JFK’s election. (The book includes photos throughout, many personal, including one with an Eisenhower grandchild giving the young agent “bunny ears” for the camera.)

His assignment with the Kennedys began with the “Kiddie Detail,” where, for instance, we see him running alongside JFK daughter Caroline, age four, atop her pony Macaroni outside the White House. He tells of some much more innocent mishaps from that period — such as when he and Caroline *and* the pony surprised the president by popping into his office. (The smiling chief executive, we are told, said “Mr. Landis, I really don’t think this is a good idea.”)

We get to travel, vicariously, with Kennedy family members to Hyannisport, Massachusetts; Newport, Rhode Island; Middleburg, Virginia; and West Palm Beach, Florida; among other places. There is time in Ravello, Italy, as well. For the most part, the book is apolitical. When the agent transfers to the “Lace Detail” (named after the First Lady’s Secret Service code-name), it is a critical time historically — though coverage of the Cuban Missile Crisis is essentially reduced to one long paragraph.

Personal tragedy intrudes when Mrs. Kennedy goes into premature labor and Landis must rush her in the car to Otis Air Force Base, zooming 80 mph through country roads. The most concerning part of that trip is in Centerville, Massachusetts, when they encounter a short stretch on Craigville Beach (a specific spot this reviewer remembers from his own younger years) with a 10-mph speed limit and speed bumps. The First Lady gives birth to Patrick Bouvier Kennedy in the emergency wing of the military hospital. Thereafter, however, the stricken baby, accompanied by Landis, had to be rushed to Boston Children’s Hospital. He died shortly later.

Landis also accompanied the First Lady to Greece, a trip highlighted by a cruise on a yacht owned by Aristotle Onassis. That’s followed by an unexpected side trip to Morocco. It was on the return trip from Morocco that word came that the president wanted the First Lady to go with him on a trip to Texas, with the departure date eventually set for November 21, 1963.



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The first nine chapters, even if readers do enjoy the diverting recollections of this Secret Service agent, are of course a prelude. After all, you don't sell too many books provisionally entitled *How I Got Macaroni Out of the Oval Office Before He Started Peeing on the Presidential-seal Rug*.

Found in Limo, Bullet Placed on President's Stretcher in Hospital

The core of the Landis book, drawing its principal attention and which prompted articles in, among other outlets, *The New York Times* and the BBC, and an extensive article by *Vanity Fair* even before the volume appeared in print, is its fresh revelations about the shots in Dallas. Some already are insisting that new assertions should finally topple the Warren Commission's single-bullet theory (though it already has had many detractors).

After the shooting, by his reckoning, Landis saw two bullet fragments in the presidential limo (he picked up the larger) in the blood next to Mrs. Kennedy (as agents finally convinced her to let go of the head of the "lifeless" president). In addition, and most crucially, after she stood up, "I looked again at the seat and saw a bullet on top of the tufted black leather cushioning behind where she had been sitting. It was resting in a seam where the tufted leather padding ended against the car's metal body."

The bullet was, he says — and its photograph appears in this book and in the Warren Commission report — "a completely intact bullet." Picking it up and examining it, the agent saw that it was "approximately two inches long and in almost perfect condition." Alone at this point, and concerned about the security of the crime scene (as he recalls in some length), the agent "slipped it in [his] right suit coat pocket." All of this occurs in mere seconds.

In short order, we find ourselves in the chaotic Parkland Memorial Hospital, where Landis' racing thoughts swing back to the important evidence he has found and how it might be helpful in an autopsy. Landis recounts how he placed the bullet on the blanket near the president's left shoe.

Meanwhile, the Secret Service and White House staff were trying to get the president's body to Washington. Yet, the medical officials insisted — and it was Texas law after a homicide — that the body could not leave the hospital without an autopsy. Matters got heated. "I thought," says Landis, "that a major altercation was going to escalate into something worse."

Skipping ahead, we get a good sense of the author's subsequent nightmares and more, helping to prompt his early departure from the Secret Service (made official in August 1964). It was not until 2013, says Landis, that he started to speak more openly about his career in the U.S. Secret Service. (Over the subsequent years, he has been involved in real estate, machine products, and house painting.)

For decades he avoided reading assessments of the assassination or the many conspiracy theories it generated. Then, in 2014, he read a book that was given to him (*Six Seconds in Dallas*), which alerted him to a key error in the official record — specifically, "The 'Super Bullet' hadn't been on Governor Connally's stretcher in Trauma Room #2. I recognized it as the bullet I had found in the limo and placed next to President Kennedy's feet in Trauma Room #1."

One step at a time, Landis goes through the developments he made in recent years before going public.



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(AP Images)

Other Views

Assassination theories abound, as this issue of *The New American* suggests. One prominent critic of the official conclusions — whose analysis does not dwell on the “single-bullet theory” — is Jacob Hornberger, founder and president of the Future of Freedom Foundation, who has studied the JFK assassination for more than three decades and written five books on it. The most recent one (dated 2022) is entitled *An Encounter With Evil*.

Hornberger’s blog also covers this topic regularly. A recent entry (prompted by the then-upcoming Landis book) points out that the “magic bullet,” per the official account, “entered the back of Kennedy’s neck, exited the front of his neck, entered Connally’s back, broke some of Connally’s ribs, exited his chest, entered his wrist and broke wrist bones, exited his wrist, and lodged in Connally’s thigh.” And it remained pristine.

The Landis account, concludes Hornberger, “if true, puts the quietus to what has gone down in history as the ‘magic-bullet’ theory, which is the core principle of the lone-nut theory of the assassination.”

For the record, Hornberger goes well beyond Landis in his own conclusions — pointing, for example, to “evidence that establishes beyond a reasonable doubt” that there was a “fraudulent autopsy that was carried out by the military on the very evening of the assassination” and “the fraudulent copy of the Zapruder film that the CIA produced on the Sunday following the Friday assassination.” His examinations, and how he came to his beliefs, are comprehensive; they would undoubtedly startle new readers.

One admitted potential skeptic seems to have been converted by Landis and his account; this is all



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covered in a thorough piece in *Vanity Fair* (dated September 9, 2023). It is written by James Robenalt, a Cleveland lawyer and the author of several books of history who also has researched the JFK assassination; he met with Landis more than a dozen times this past year.

“I was won over by his integrity,” writes Robenalt, who says Landis’ account of what he witnessed in Dallas “remained consistent and unwavering.” The historian describes Landis as “vigorous,” a man who exercises daily and plays golf weekly. “He works a steady job as a security guard and a kind of welcome ambassador at the Cleveland History Center.” The Landis account, acknowledges Robenalt, “raises questions about whether there might have been a second gunman in Dallas that day.”

Landis admits in *The Final Witness* that he had long accepted that the Warren Commission’s conclusions were accurate and true. He “always believed,” Landis told *The New York Times* not long ago, “that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman.” However, now he is “beginning to doubt.”

One can think of doubt as an invitation to think.



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