

people on one of the longest rides ever in American journalism. In its very first issue after the assassination, *Life* seriously misrepresented the content of the Zapruder film, a practice that would continue until the film finally gained general release in 1975.

The doctors at Parkland Hospital, who had worked on the president, had reported that he had suffered an “apparent” entrance wound to the throat. Since the book depository, from which Oswald had allegedly fired, was to the presidential limousine’s rear, how, some were beginning to wonder, did the president suffer a frontal throat wound? *Life*’s December 6, 1963, edition gave a simple and conclusive explanation, based on the Zapruder film, an answer only *Life* could provide.

Wrote *Life* “The 8mm [Zapruder] film shows the President turning his body far around to the right as he waves to someone in the crowd. His throat is exposed to the sniper’s nest just before he clutches it.”

This description of the Zapruder film went a long way toward allaying fears of conspiracy in those early days, for it explained away a troublesome inconsistency in the lone assassin scenario. There was only one problem: The description of the Zapruder film was a total fabrication. Although the film shows Kennedy turning to the right—toward the grassy knoll, that is—at no time does he turn 180 degrees toward the book depository. Indeed, by the time he is hit, he is once again turning toward the front.

Even this yeoman’s effort pales, though, beside *Life*’s October 2, 1964, edition, which was largely committed to the newly released Warren report. Rather than assign a staff writer the job of assessing the committee’s work, *Life* gave the assignment to Warren Commission member Gerald Ford.

But it is not the articles in that edition of *Life* that are so extraordinary, but the pictures, and the pains that were taken to rework them so they fit the Warren report perfectly. The October 2, 1964, issue underwent two major revisions after it hit the stands, expensive changes that required breaking and resetting plates twice, a highly unusual occurrence. That issue of *Life* was illustrated with eight frames of the Zapruder film along with descriptive captions.

One version of caption 6 read: “The assassin’s shot struck the right rear portion of the President’s skull, causing a massive wound and snapping his head to one side.” The photo accompanying this caption—frame 323—shows the president slumped back against the seat, and leaning to the left, an instant after the fatal bullet struck him. The photo makes it look as though shots came from the front—the railroad trestle—or the right—the grassy knoll.

A second version of the issue replaces this frame with another, the graphic shot of the president’s head exploding (frame 313). Blood fills the air and all details are obscured. The caption, oddly enough, remained the same—describing his head snapping to one side.

A third version carries this same 313 slide—frame 323 has been thrown on the dumpheap of history—but now with a new caption, one that jibes perfectly with the Warren Commission’s findings. “The direction from which shots came was

established by this picture taken at instant bullet struck the rear of the President's head and, passing through, caused the front part of his skull to explode forward."

Nice try. Of course, as all the world would learn years later, it was the back of the president's skull that would explode, suggesting an exit wound, and sending Jackie Kennedy crawling reflexively across the trunk of the limousine to try to salvage the pieces. But this would not be fully understood until the Zapruder film itself had been seen in its entirety. For the moment, the only people in a position to spot *Life's* error were the Secret Service, the F.B.I., and possibly the busy pressmen at R. R. Donnelly, who must have piled up a lot of overtime trying to keep up with the ever-changing facts. (*Life* wasn't the only publication on the assassination to have bizarre layout problems. The Warren Commission Report itself never addressed the backward motion of the president's head, thus sparing itself the burden of having to explain it. This omission was facilitated by the reversal of the two frames following the explosive frame 313 in the Warren Commission's published volumes, which considerably confused the issue by making it seem as if the head jerked forward. J. Edgar Hoover later blamed the switch on a "printing error.")

*Life's* exclusive monopoly on the Zapruder film came in just as handy for Dan Rather, CBS's New Orleans bureau chief, who was permitted by Zapruder to see the film before it was whisked off to the vault. Rather told the world he had seen the film and that the president "fell forward with considerable force." (CBS spokesman Tom Goodman told *The Voice* that Rather only got to see the film briefly and viewed it on a "crude hand-cranked 8mm machine.")

What was the effect of these misrepresentations of the Zapruder evidence? One can only guess, but they could well have been crucial to the public's faith in the single assassin theory. British journalist Anthony Summers, author of the book *Conspiracy*, speculates that "if they had shown the film on CBS the weekend of the assassination or at any time the following year there would not have been anyone in America who would not have believed that the shots came from the front of the President and that there was therefore a conspiracy."

Meanwhile, *Life's* sister publication, *Time*, did its best to swat away any and all conspiracy talk. *Time* countered the ground swell of conspiracy rumors in Europe with an article in its June 12, 1964, issue. Entitled "J.F.K.: The Murder and the Myths," the article blamed the speculation on "leftist" writers and publications seeking a "rightist conspiracy." Proponents of further investigation suffered fates similar to that of Thomas Buchanin, who in 1964 wrote the first book critical of the Warren Report, *Who Killed Kennedy*. Buchanin's thesis was groundless, *Time* argued, because he had allegedly been "fired by the Washington Star in 1948 after he admitted membership in the Communist party."

By late 1966, however, it was getting harder for the media to hold the line. Calls for a reexamination of the Warren report now came from former Kennedy aides Arthur Schlesinger and Richard Goodwin, *The Saturday Evening Post*, the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore*, Walter Lippmann, Cardinal Cushing, William F. Buckley and the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. It was in this climate that The New York