

JFK: What the Doctors Saw

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A new documentary, *JFK: What the Doctors Saw*, directed by Barbara Shearer, was made available for streaming online on Paramount Plus on November 14. At roughly 90 minutes, the documentary is a tightly constructed forensic examination of a limited category of evidence relating to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Jr. on November 22, 1963. Its subject matter consists of the observations of the doctors at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, where Kennedy was taken after he was shot.

With this narrow scope, the documentary does not substantively explore the political motives for a conspiracy to assassinate Kennedy within the American state apparatus. In fact, behind the idealized public façade of “Camelot,” there were violent political vendettas within the Kennedy administration over the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Nuclear Test Ban treaty and Vietnam. But while it confines itself to a forensic study of a limited range of evidence, what this new documentary does reveal is disturbing and explosive.

The official government account of the assassination, which was advanced within hours of the shooting and which has been maintained ever since, is that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, shot Kennedy from behind with a rifle from a window of the Texas School Book Depository Building after the presidential motorcade had passed the building and was driving away.

But what the doctors all say they saw when Kennedy arrived at the trauma room at Parkland Memorial Hospital was a bullet *entrance wound* in the *front* of Kennedy’s neck, with an *exit wound* at the *back* of his head. The doctors unanimously recall seeing that.

One of the most striking moments in the film is when the doctors are shown photos purportedly from the autopsy of Kennedy performed in Washington D.C. They shake their heads and express disbelief, and one doctor says incredulously, “That’s not what I saw.”

If Kennedy was shot from the front, that not only decisively rebuts the official story, it points to a government conspiracy, spanning years and decades, to cover up what really happened.

The film, which consists in large part of the testimony of the doctors themselves, opens with a depiction of Parkland Memorial Hospital in 1963. Many of the doctors themselves were Kennedy supporters and idolized him. Kennedy was a president who, in stark contrast to any politician in the American government today, could speak to genuine democratic ideals and aspirations, however much his administration deviated from them in practice.

The seven Parkland doctors are sympathetic, all-around decent people. They have all passed away since giving their testimony, much of which is shown in this new documentary for the first time.

The Parkland Hospital was evidently one of the best in the Dallas area, and the doctors and nurses were experienced professionals who had evaluated and treated countless gunshot wounds and other serious injuries before November 22. Speaking movingly in their taped interviews, they were all clearly shocked and traumatized by the events of that day—as well as by the shadowy government conduct they witnessed in the wake of the shooting.

After the shooting in downtown Dallas, the motorcade sped to the

nearest hospital, which was Parkland. The doctors received Kennedy’s body in the trauma room and were prepared to do their best. But Kennedy’s injuries were nothing short of catastrophic. While the doctors observed an entrance wound in the front of his neck, the back of his head, the doctors say, was “gone,” together with much of his brain.

As shown in the video shot by bystander Abraham Zapruder as the Kennedy motorcade was passing the infamous “grassy knoll”—which is no less unsettling to watch than it was a half-century ago—Kennedy’s head all but exploded as he was shot, sending bits and pieces of his skull and brain cascading over the back of the car. Jacqueline Kennedy, who was seated next to Kennedy in the car, can be seen in the video retrieving a piece of his brain that had been blown onto the rear of the car, which the Parkland doctors say she was still holding when she arrived at the hospital.

In the trauma room at Parkland Memorial Hospital, Kennedy was not breathing and his heart was not beating, and there was little for the doctors to do after briefly attempting to resuscitate him except pronounce him dead and send for a priest. Nevertheless, the doctors all documented and recorded their findings contemporaneously—including the entrance wound in the front of Kennedy’s neck.

It is the A-B-C of gunshot wound forensics that entrance wounds are small and exit wounds are larger—and in the case of bullets fired from powerful rifles, sometimes dramatically larger and horribly gruesome, in contrast to often sanitized Hollywood depictions.

This pattern of entrance and exit wounds often constitutes the key evidence establishing the position of a shooter relative to the shooting victim in a criminal prosecution. The doctors at Parkland had seen countless shooting victims, and distinguishing entrance from exit wounds was second nature to them. They all thought the neck wound was an entrance wound—and that this fact was obvious and uncontroversial.

As the documentary shows, there was shock and surprise when federal intelligence agents swiftly descended on the hospital, confiscated the body and whisked it away to Washington. The chief medical examiner for the Dallas Coroner’s office, Dr. Earl Rose, had an office at Parkland Memorial Hospital. When he protested that under Texas law the autopsy had to be performed in Dallas County, a government agent swore at him and manhandled him, putting his arms under the doctor’s armpits, lifting him into the air, and setting him down against a wall.

It is worth remembering that US intelligence agencies operate as a law unto themselves and were in 1963 at a high point of their unchecked criminality: connections to organized crime, illegal wiretapping, kidnapping, burglary, forgery, human experimentation, evidence tampering, persecution and harassment of journalists and civil rights leaders, and assassination. It was only 10 years later, in the wake of the Watergate scandal, that some of these activities, including the infamous Central Intelligence Agency “family jewels,” finally began to come to light and become the subject of public scrutiny.

Literally, before Kennedy’s body had even arrived in Washington D.C. for an autopsy, the federal government was presenting a version of events from which it has never deviated: Oswald, acting alone, shot Kennedy from behind. Oswald, who publicly insisted that he was innocent and a “patsy,” was shot and killed two days later by Jack Ruby, a Dallas

nightclub owner with ties to organized crime, who in turn died in prison before the criminal proceedings against him could be completed.

The day of the assassination, Dr. Malcolm Perry, the surgeon who attended to Kennedy, gave a press conference in Dallas where he described the wound in the front of Kennedy's neck as an "entrance wound." Dr. Robert McClelland, who was present at that press conference, testifies in the new film: "When [Dr. Perry] left the room, someone came up to him who Dr. Perry thought maybe was a Secret Service man, and he told Dr. Perry, 'You must never, ever say that was an entrance wound again if you know what's good for you.'"

When Kennedy's body arrived in Washington and began to be subjected to an autopsy under strict military control, the documentary argues, it had already been tampered with. The brain stem had already been surgically severed and the remains of the brain had been removed, which was not done at Parkland Hospital. The autopsy itself was by all accounts a fiasco and incompetently performed by any standard.

When the Parkland doctors are shown photos from the autopsy years later, they all say that these images do not match their recollection of Kennedy's injuries when they saw him. In one of the most chilling and striking sections of the documentary, the Parkland doctors are all adamant that Kennedy was shot from the front. They had no motive to lie, and, if anything, were putting themselves at risk by refusing to accept the official government story.

While all opposition to the government version of the assassination is officially branded as "conspiracy theories," 60 years later a solid majority of Americans do not believe the government version and its implausible "single bullet theory," according to which one bullet struck both Kennedy and Texas Governor John Connally, who was seated in the car in front of him. Connally himself publicly stated that he did not believe it, as did newly sworn-in President Lyndon Johnson in a recorded phone call.

The official government version of events was assembled and presented by the dubious Warren Commission, which included former CIA Director Allen Dulles, who had been personally fired by Kennedy in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, as well as John J. McCloy, an influential behind-the-scenes figure and old friend of Dulles.

For his part, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the nephew of the assassinated president and son of Attorney General and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who was assassinated in 1968, has publicly stated that his father believed his brother was killed by a conspiracy involving Cuban exiles and the CIA.

Indeed, what the documentary does not explore, but which is powerful additional and circumstantial evidence of a conspiracy, is the political context for the assassination, which David North summarized in his essay on the 50-year anniversary of the assassination in 2013:

Less than three months after his inauguration, Kennedy gave final approval for the launching of a counterrevolutionary invasion of Cuba by an anti-Castro army that had been created by the CIA. The new president received assurances that the invaders would be greeted as liberators when they landed in Cuba. The CIA knew that no such uprising was in the offing, but assumed that Kennedy, once the invasion had begun, would feel compelled to commit US forces to prevent the defeat of an American-sponsored operation. However, Kennedy, fearing Soviet retaliation in Berlin, refused to intervene to back the anti-Castro mercenaries. The invasion was defeated in less than 72 hours and more than 1,000 mercenaries were captured. The CIA never forgave Kennedy for this "betrayal"

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In the final year of his presidency, the political divisions within the ruling class over critical issues of international policy became more intense. Kennedy's decision to avoid an invasion of Cuba in

the October 1962 missile crisis was opposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff ... [T]he last three months of his presidency were preoccupied with the intensifying crisis in Vietnam. ... Kennedy authorized the overthrow of South Vietnamese President Diem, which resulted in the latter's murder on November 1, 1963. The purpose of the coup was to establish a new anti-communist regime that would wage war against the National Liberation Front more effectively than Diem. Three weeks later, Kennedy was murdered in Dallas.

Barbara Shearer, the director of the documentary, is a former network executive for National Geographic. She previously directed a factual three-episode 2021 TV miniseries, "Epstein's Shadow: Ghislaine Maxwell." While the scope of her Kennedy documentary is narrow, the clinical focus is in some ways a strength, as she steers clear of the more speculative elements of the many conflicting and controversial theories surrounding Kennedy's death. The result is credible and objective. The testimony of the Parkland doctors suffices in itself to be highly disturbing.

In 2023, not a day goes by without American newspapers and television programs deferentially presenting the opinions of supposed "experts" from the so-called "intelligence community." This is the same "intelligence community" responsible for secret "black sites" and torture camps around the world that operate in categorical defiance of US and international law; the same forces that served up the lies about "weapons of mass destruction" that were used to justify the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003; that plotted to assassinate WikiLeaks journalist Julian Assange for exposing US war crimes; that are engaged in worldwide illegal surveillance against political opponents and dissidents, as exposed by Edward Snowden in 2013.

Over the past month and a half, this "intelligence community" has been mobilized in an effort to intimidate and suppress opposition to Israeli war crimes in Gaza with false accusations of antisemitism. It does, indeed, have a dark and sinister history. In this context, Shearer's documentary is timely and welcome.



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