

Thompson: Six Seconds in Dallas

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Recommended Citation

Arthur M. Scheller, *Thompson: Six Seconds in Dallas*, 18 DePaul L. Rev. 340 (1968)

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/law-review/vol18/iss1/20>

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At any rate Professor Leach's sprightly little *vade mecum* for the property law reformer is stimulating reading and a good source for vigorous quotations.

IRVING E. FASAN*

REASONING. Professor Shaffer says that, "[This] middle ground is sometimes devious and often capable of an ancient and esoteric sophistry, but it produces change, it maintains stability better than overt overruling would, and it is, for all its righteous dishonesty, useful." 43 NOTRE DAME LAW. 146 (1967). Is this also what Professor Leach really advocates, however without the deviousness and sophistry? But without these cloaks, do we really have the same thing? Isn't the fiction a vital part of the process?

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Six Seconds in Dallas. BY JOSIAH THOMPSON. New York: Bernard Geis, 1967. Pp. 314. \$8.95.

The publication *Six Seconds in Dallas* by Josiah Thompson, an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Haverford College, in which he concludes that there were four shots from three guns in six seconds. This again raises a familiar issue to students of the Kennedy assassination—how does one account for the forward movement of President Kennedy's body in frame 313 of the Zapruder film and the apparent violent backward movement of his body in frame 314? Writers had raised this problem as early as 1965, but Thompson's distinctive contribution was to analyze the photographs by means of micro-analysis and measurement, thereby achieving a scientific reconstruction in order to answer the problems of the source and timing of the shots.

One of the difficulties in studying the Zapruder film as it appears in the Warren Commission Exhibits is that the originals are in the private vault of *Life* magazine (which purchased them for \$25,000 within several hours of the assassination) and the Commission only had available to them a copy of a copy. Fortunately Professor Thompson, while in the employ of *Life* magazine, had the opportunity to examine sharper material. Mr. Zapruder's film picks up the presidential motorcade at what is known as frame 161, and continues until the motorcade disappears under the underpass at frame 434. No one has ever disputed the conclusion that the fatal second wound occurs in frame 313, although many commentators argue about the occurrence of the first shot—the Warren Commission placing it between frame 210 to 225. To Thompson, the Zapruder film in its entirety is the most important piece of evidence available to the Commission. Ironically, Mr. Zapruder had earlier in the day decided not to bring his eight millimeter movie camera to work because of an overcast sky condition, he somehow managed to return to his home when the overcast lifted at midmorning, and arrived at his office near Dealey Plaza just in time to film the historic event.

In addition to the Zapruder film, there were no fewer than 22 other people taking pictures in Dealey Plaza which were known to and available to the Commission. It is primarily to this type of evidence that Thompson structures his analysis, as he states: "[T]he present study seeks to make proper use of the photographs inasmuch as they constitute the only inviolable form of evidence. Whereas witness

reports can be in error . . . and pieces of physical evidence can be tampered with . . . photographic evidence is reliable."¹

Thompson's analysis of the photographic evidence (primarily the Zapruder film) leads to this undisputable hard core physical fact: after holding steady for some twelve frames, the President's head is suddenly driven forward between frames 312 and 313 at a forward acceleration of 69.6 feet per second and in frame 314 which is 1/18th second later, his head is moving backward and to the left at an acceleration of 100.3 feet per second.

After examining several hypotheses which might account for this change in movement, such as that the President's head struck some fixed surface in the car, or that Mrs. Kennedy pulled the President into her arms after the impact, or that the car suddenly decelerated and then accelerated, or that the President suffered a neuromuscular reaction, he rejects them all and then suggests that the only logical alternative is that a shot from a second assassin came from the grassy knoll with perfect timing, striking the President's head 1/18th of a second after the shot from the Book Depository. To quote Thompson: "First, a bullet from behind exploding forward, and in that same split second another bullet driving into the exploding mass, forcing tissue and skull in the opposite direction."²

His speculations then lead to the following reconstruction. An assassin, shooting from the Book Depository, fired a shot which hit the President in the back; a second assassin, shooting from the roof of another building (Houston Street Building) shot and wounded the Governor. The first assassin then fired again hitting the President in the back of the head (frames 312 and 313) and a third assassin, behind the stockade fence, shooting a pistol, hit the President in the side of the head (frame 314). Altogether, there were four shots from three guns in six seconds.

Having started with a hard core physical fact, the change in movement shown by the Zapruder film, the analysis becomes pure speculation should there be any incomplete hypotheses accounting for the double movement. Herein lies the basic error of his analysis: has every hypothesis accounting for the double movement been examined and rejected? One glaring unsuggested and unexamined hypothesis is what physical effect would a bullet entering from the rear have if it exploded within a skull in light of Newton's second law of motion that acceleration is directly proportional to the resultant force and is in the same direction as that force. Because of this failure, Professor Thompson's conclusions must fall.

Josiah Thompson appears to have joined a small cult of critics involved in the public attacks upon the Warren Commission. His introduction to the movement was by Vincent Salandria, one of the first on the scene and his index was prepared by Sylvia Meagher, an ardent toiler in the cause. In this light, it is interesting to note that Thompson apparently has still inadvertently retained his sense of humor when he remarked that: "I think some of us feel that Fortinbras hasn't arrived and that everything is somehow incomplete. And that's what we want: we want Fortinbras to arrive."³

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¹ THOMPSON, *SIX SECONDS IN DALLAS* 11 (1967).

² *Id.* at 111.

³ 43 *NEW YORKER*, June 10, 1967, at 11.

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