

**‘Live Recordings’ of the Shots in Dealey Plaza:
Reliability of Ear-Witness Evidence in the JFK Assassination**

Andrew M. Mason¹

The relative timing of the shots.

The 1.....2....3 pattern

There is a significant body of evidence regarding the relative spacing of the shots. The Warren Commission, in stating its conclusion that there were three shots, observed that most witnesses recalled that the second and third shots were closer together than the first and second.² The Commission made little use of this evidence in reaching its conclusions, however.

There were at least 44 witnesses who recalled this pattern.

Photographer Robert H. Jackson, who was one of four people who actually saw the sniper’s rifle in the sixth-floor window of the School Book Depository building, testified:

Then we realized or we thought that it was gunfire, and then we could not at that point see the President’s car. We were still moving slowly, and after the third shot the second two shots seemed much closer together than the first shot, than they were to the first shot.

...

I would say to me it seemed like 3 or 4 seconds between the first and the second, and between the second and third, well, I guess 2 seconds, they were very close together. It could have been more time between the first and second. I really can’t be sure.³

Linda Willis, a fourteen year old girl watching the motorcade with her father, recalled:

Yes, I heard one. Then there was a little bit of time, and then there were two real fast bullets together. When the first one hit, well, the President turned from waving to the people, and he grabbed his throat, and he kind of slumped forward, and then I couldn’t tell where the second shot went.⁴

Dallas Mayor Earle Cabell, who was riding in the motorcade two cars behind Vice-President Johnson’s car, recalled a longer pause between the first and second shots:

I heard the shot. Mrs. Cabell said, “Oh a gun” or “a shot”, and I was about to deny and say “Oh it must have been a firecracker” when the second and the third shots rang out. There was a longer pause between the first and second shots than there was

¹ **Andrew M. Mason**, B.A., LL.B. of the Saskatchewan Bar practices law in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

² WR 115. See also Warren Commission member Allan Dulles’ comment at WC 5 H 174

³ Jackson: WC 2 H 159

⁴ L. Willis: WC 7 H 498

between the second and third shots. They were in rather rapid succession. There was no mistaking in my mind after that, that they were shots from a high-powered rifle.

...

Mr. HUBERT. Could you estimate the number of seconds, say, between the first and second shots, as related to the number of seconds between the second and third shots? Perhaps doing it on the basis of a ratio?

Mr. CABELL. Well, I would put it this way. That approximately 10 seconds elapsed between the first and second shots, with not more than 5 seconds having elapsed until the third one.

Mr. HUBERT. Two to one ratio?

Mr. CABELL. Approximately that. And again I say that, as you mentioned, as a matter of being relative. I couldn't tell you the exact seconds because they were not counted.⁵

Texas patrolman Hurchel Jacks, driver of the Vice-President's car, said that the pause between the first two shots was long enough for a Secret Service agent to shield the Vice-President with his body:

I heard a shot ring out which appeared to come from the right rear of the Vice President's car. Mr. Rufus Youngblood, the Secret Service Agent riding in my car asked me what that was and at the same time he advised the Vice President and Mrs. Johnson to get down. He climbed to the rear of the seat with the Vice President and appeared to be shielding the Vice President with his own body. At that time I heard two more shots ring out.⁶

Lady Bird Johnson recalled:

We were rounding a curve, going down a hill, and suddenly there was a sharp loud report--a shot. It seemed to me to come from the right, above my shoulder, from a building. Then a moment and then two more shots in rapid succession.⁷

Luke Mooney, of the Dallas County Sheriff's office, testified:

The second and third shot was pretty close together, but there was a short lapse there between the first and second shot.⁸

Secret Service Special Agent (SA) Paul Landis, standing on the right rear running board of the President's follow-up car, recalled only two shots. He said that the interval between the first and second shots was enough for him to quickly look at the President, scan the depository building and the crowd and look at a tire of the President's limousine. He concluded:

The time lapse between the first and second report must have been about four or five seconds.⁹

⁵ Cabell: WC 7 H 478

⁶ Jacks: CE 1024, WC 18 H 801. Statement signed Nov. 28, 1963

⁷ Johnson: WC 5 H 564. Statement dictated in early Dec. 1963 and signed July 16, 1964.

⁸ Mooney: WC 3 H 282.

Bonnie Ray Williams, one of three men watching the motorcade from the fifth floor of the Texas School Book Depository just below the window where the rifle was seen, recalled:

The first shot--there was two shots rather close together. The second and the third shot was closer together than the first shot and the second shot, as I remember.¹⁰

Deputy Sheriff Roger Craig standing on Main Street watching the motorcade testified:

Mr. BELIN. About how far were these noises apart?

Mr. CRAIG. The first one was—uh—about three seconds—2 or 3 seconds.

Mr. BELIN. Two or 3 seconds between the first and the second?

Mr. CRAIG. Well, it was quite a pause between there. It could have been a little longer.

Mr. BELIN. And what about between the second and third?

Mr. CRAIG. Not more than 2 seconds. It was—they were real rapid.¹¹

Senator Ralph Yarborough, riding with the Vice-President, provided an affidavit stating:

After what I took to be about three seconds, another shot boomed out, and after what I took to be one-half the time between the first and second shots (calculated now, this would have put the third shot about one and one-half seconds after the second shot--by my estimate--to me there seemed to be a long time between the first and second shots, a much shorter time between the second and third shots--these were my impressions that day), a third shot was fired. After the third shot was fired, but only after the third shot was fired, the cavalcade speeded up, gained speed rapidly, and roared away to the Parkland Hospital.

I heard three shots and no more.¹²

SA Winston Lawson, traveling in the lead car ahead of the President, testified:

... It came from behind me. Then I heard two more sharp reports, the second two were closer together than the first. There was one report, and a pause, then two more reports closer together, two and three were closer together than one and two.¹³

SA Rufus Youngblood, riding with the Vice-President, recalled:

There seemed to be a longer span of time between the first and the second shot than there was between the second and third shot.¹⁴

⁹ Landis: CE 1024, WC 18 H 755

¹⁰ Williams: WC 3 H 175

¹¹ Craig: WC 6 H 263

¹² Yarborough: WC 7 H 439. The affidavit was sworn July 10, 1964

¹³ Lawson: WC 4 H 353

SA George Hickey, riding in the rear of the President's follow-up car, provided this account:

After a very short distance I heard a loud report which sounded like a firecracker. It appeared to come from the right and rear and seemed to me to be at ground level. I stood up and looked to my right and rear in an attempt to identify it. Nothing caught my attention except people shouting and cheering. A disturbance in 679x [*the car he was in*] caused me to look forward toward the President's car. Perhaps 2 or 3 seconds elapsed from the time I looked to the rear and then looked at the President. He was slumped forward and to his left, and was straightening up to an almost erect sitting position as I turned and looked. At the moment he was almost sitting erect I heard two reports which I thought were shots and that appeared to me completely different in sound than the first report and were in such rapid succession that there seemed to be practically no time element between them. It looked to me as if the President was struck in the right upper rear of his head.

The first shot of the second two seemed as if it missed because the hair on the right side of his head flew forward and there didn't seem to be any impact against his head. The last shot seemed to hit his head and cause a noise at the point of impact which made him fall forward and to his left again.¹⁵

Many others recalled that the second and third shots were closer together than the first and second, including Special Agents Forrest Sorrels¹⁶, William McIntyre¹⁷, William Greer (driver of the President's limousine)¹⁸ and Samuel Kinney (driver of the Secret Service follow-up car)¹⁹, Sheriff's Deputies C.M. Jones²⁰, Allan Sweatt²¹, John Wiseman²², Harold Elkins²³, Dallas Police Chief Jesse Curry²⁴, Dallas police officer

¹⁴ Youngblood: WC 2 H 150

¹⁵ Hickey: CE 1024, WC 18 H 762

¹⁶ Sorrels: WC 21 H 548 and WC 7 H 345. "There was to me about twice as much time between the first and second shots as there was between the second and third shots."

¹⁷ McIntyre: WC 18 H 747. "The Presidential vehicle was approximately 200 feet from the underpass when the first shot was fired, followed in quick succession by two more."

¹⁸ Greer: WC 2 H 118. Greer stated that the second followed the first by three or four seconds and "The last two seemed to be just simultaneously, one behind the other, but I don't recollect just how much, how many seconds were between the two. I couldn't really say."

¹⁹ Kinney: CE 1024, WC 18 H 731. "There was a second of pause and then two more shots were heard." SA Kinney, like SA Hickey, saw JFK's hair fly up on the second shot.

²⁰ Jones: WC 19 H 512 (Decker exhibit, 5323). "I heard an explosion followed in about 3 to 5 seconds later two more explosions."

²¹ Sweatt: WC 19 H 531 (Decker exhibit). "I heard a shot and about 7 seconds later another shot and approximately 2 or 3 seconds later a third shot".

²² Wiseman: WC 19 H 535 (Decker exhibit). Wiseman was standing in front of the Sheriff's office, which is on Main Street, half a building from the corner of Main and Houston, when he heard the first shot. "I ran at once to the corner of Houston and Main Street and out into the street when the second and third shots rang out".

²³ Elkins: WC 19 H 540 (Decker exhibit). Elkins said a "couple of seconds elapsed" after the first and "then two more shots ring out"

Clyde Haygood²⁵, and bystanders Victoria Adams²⁶, Eugene Boone²⁷, Lee Bowers²⁸, Rose Clark²⁹, James Crawford³⁰, Wesley Frazier³¹, James Jarman Jr.³², Emmett Hudson³³, Billy Lovelady³⁴, John Martin Jr.³⁵, Mary Ann Mitchell³⁶, Joe Molina³⁷, Lillian

²⁴ Curry: WC 4 H 172. Chief Curry was not asked directly about the shot pattern. He was asked about the positions of the President's car on Elm Street when he heard the shots. He said that he heard the first shot when the President's car was mid-way between Houston Street and the overpass; that at the second shot the car was about 25-30 feet further along; and the third occurred after it had moved another 15-20 feet. In making this distinction of the distances traveled between the shots, he described the last two shots as being closer together as measured by the distance the President's car traveled between shots.

²⁵ Haygood: WC 6 H 298. "The last two were closer than the first. In other words, it was the first, and then a pause, and then the other two were real close."

²⁶ Adams: WC 6 H 388. "And we heard a shot, and it was a pause, and then a second shot, and then a third shot."

²⁷ Boone: WC 3 H 292. "there seemed to be a pause between the first shot and the second shot and third shots-a little longer pause.

²⁸ Bowers: WC 6 H 287. "I heard three shots. One, then a slight pause, then two very close together".

²⁹ Clark: CE 2100, WC 24 H 533 (FBI report). "She noted that the second and third shots seemed closer together than the first and second shots".

³⁰ Crawford: WC 6 H 172. "The second shot followed some seconds, a little time elapsed after the first one, and followed very quickly by the third one". He also confirms that the VP security car had completed the turn when the first shot was heard.

³¹ Buell Wesley Frazier testified before the Warren Commission but was not specifically asked about the shot pattern. However, he did mention that he heard a noise and then a few seconds later heard two more but did not elaborate: WC 2 H 234. In his 1969 testimony at the Clay Shaw trial he said this (Transcript, State of Louisiana v. Clay L. Shaw Trial, Feb 13, 1969, afternoon, page 27-28, part of the HSCA JFK Collection, Ex. RG 233):

A Shortly after there were two more in rapid succession.

...

Q Did you recognize any of the noises as rifle shots?

A Well, the two that come in fast succession by that time, like I said, people were hollering, and then I recognized them, they were rifle shots.

Q Approximately how much time lapsed from the first noise you heard until you heard the second noise?

A It was just a few seconds.

Q How much time elapsed from the time you heard the second noise until your heard the third noise?

A When I heard the second noise, the third was followed nearly just right back to back. It was fired in rapid succession.

³² Jarman: WC 3 H 204. "and then the third shot was fired right behind the second one."

³³ Hudson, FBI report, November 26, 1963 CD5 (unpublished Warren Commission document): "He said he then heard two more loud reports which sounded like shots, such reports coming in rapid succession after the first shot." His much later testimony was quite different, however: see, *infra*, fn. 78.

³⁴ Lovelady: CE 2003 (affidavit) WC 24 H 214. "there was a slight pause after the first shot and then the next two was right close together".

Mooneyham³⁸, Samuel Paternostro³⁹, Arnold Rowland⁴⁰, Edward Shields⁴¹, William Shelley⁴², Ruth Smith⁴³, John Solon⁴⁴, Pearl Springer⁴⁵, Ruth Thornton⁴⁶, and reporter Mary Woodward.⁴⁷

There were many others who reported hearing a shot and then two more shots, without describing the relative times between shots.⁴⁸

³⁵ Martin: FBI Interview, March 31, 1964. CD 897 “he heard a loud report and first thought that it was a firecracker and a few seconds later heard two more reports”.

³⁶ Mitchell: FBI Interview, January 18, 1964. CD 329 “heard a loud report or explosion and then after a short pause of four or five seconds, there were two more rapid explosions”.

³⁷ Molina: WC 6 H 371. “Of course, the first shot was fired then there was an interval between the first and second longer than the second and third.”

³⁸ Mooneyham: CE 2097, WC 24 H 531. "Following the first shot, there was a slight pause and then the second and third shots sounding closer together"

³⁹ Paternostro: CE 2105, WC 24 H 536. “He said he estimated several seconds, possibly four or five or more, elapsed between the first report and the second and third reports”... “then when the other reports followed in quick succession”

⁴⁰ A. Rowland: WC 19 H 494 (Decker exhibit). “and then in about 8 seconds I heard another report and in about 3 seconds a third report”

⁴¹ Shields: WC 7 H 394. “I heard one shot and then a pause and then this repetition-two shots right behind the other”.

⁴² Shelley: WC 6 H 329. “Well, I heard something sounded like it was a firecracker and a slight pause and then two more a little bit closer together.

⁴³ Smith: CD 206. “...she heard what she felt was a shot. She stated there was a pause then two more shots fairly close together.”

⁴⁴ Solon: CE 2105, WC 24 H 535. “First shot, pause, two shots, then echoes of the shots. Mr. Solon advised he would judge that approximately five and one-half seconds was taken for all three shots.”

⁴⁵ Springer: CE 2087, WC 24 H 523. ”She recalled that after the first shot there was a pause, then two more shots were fired close together.”

⁴⁶ Thornton: CE 2107, WC 24 H 537. ”Then she said two more reports followed in quick succession”

⁴⁷ Woodward: FBI report, CE2084, WC, 24 H 520. “There seemed to be a pause of a few seconds and then there were two more loud noises...”. In her Dallas Morning News report, published November 23, 1963, she stated: “Then after a moment’s pause I heard another shot and I saw the President start slumping in the car. This was followed rapidly by another shot”. In a 1988 interview by Nigel Turner for the film "The Men Who Killed Kennedy", Mary Woodward stated: “The second two shots were immediate --- it was almost as if one were an echo of the other -- they came so quickly. The sound of one did not cease until the second shot.” ... “and then the third shot came very, very quickly, on top of the second one”

⁴⁸ See, for example, Jane Berry, FBI Interview, Nov. 22/63, WCD 5, “Just as the car was passing by her, she heard a rifle shot. A few seconds later she heard a second and third shot.” See also: T.E. Moore, WC 24 H 534; Patricia Anne Lawrence, WC 22 H 660; James

The witnesses who recalled equally spaced shots

There were ten witnesses who thought that the shots were about equally spaced. This evidence is important because it provides an indication of just how close the last two shots could have been. It would be less likely that the last two shots were extremely close together if ten people thought they were about equally spaced.

Four witnesses, Clifton Carter, Delores Kounas, James Romack and Jack Watson, gave unqualified views that the spacing was "even" or "equal".

Carter stated in an affidavit dated May 20, 1964:

"I distinctly remember three shots. There was an interval of approximately 5 to 6 seconds from the first to the last shot, and the three shots were evenly spaced."⁴⁹

An FBI report on Delores Kounas states:

"She stated there were three of these noises which she now knows were shots equally spaced by a few seconds."⁵⁰

In his first two statements in March 1964 James Romack did not comment on the spacing. This comment was made in response to a somewhat leading question at his deposition on April 8, 1964:

"Mr. ROMACK. Oh, they happened pretty fast. I would say maybe 3 or 4 seconds apart.

Mr. BELIN. Were they equally spaced, or did one sound like it was closer than another one in time?

Mr. ROMACK. It sounded like to me that they were evenly spaced. They rang out pretty fast.

Mr. BELIN. Have you ever operated a bolt action rifle?

Mr. ROMACK. Yes, sir.

Mr. BELIN. Do you own one?

Mr. ROMACK. Yes, sir.

Mr. BELIN. Did it sound like the shots were faster than it could be operated with a bolt action rifle?

Mr. ROMACK. No, sir."⁵¹

Underwood, WC 6 H 169; Victoria Adams, WC 6 H 388: "And we heard a shot, and it was a pause, and then a second shot, and then a third shot".

⁴⁹ Affidavit of Vice-presidential aide Clifton Carter dated May 20, 1964. WC 7 H 475. No earlier statement was provided by Mr. Carter.

⁵⁰ FBI report dated November 24, 1963, WC 22 H 846.

⁵¹ Romack, April 8, 1964, WC 6 H 280

Jack Watson was operating radio communications in the Sheriff's office in the Courts building which looks out onto Main Street, a short block from the Texas School Book Depository. He said:

"and about that time I heard three loud reports evenly spaced which I presumed to be rifle or shotgun blasts."⁵²

Another four witnesses: API photographer James Altgens⁵³, motorcycle patrolman Marrion Baker⁵⁴, Dallas news photographer Thomas Dillard⁵⁵ and bystander Ronald Fischer⁵⁶ gave qualified opinions, using words like "almost regular", "approximately", "pretty well even". Fischer said "As far as I can remember, the shots were evenly spaced." but he also thought he had had heard four shots. Altgens could recall hearing only two of the shots and was not certain how many there were.

Emmett Hudson, testified in July 1964 that the shots were equally spaced. However, the FBI report about Hudson made a few days after the assassination stated:

"He said he was looking directly at President Kennedy and saw his head slump to one side simultaneously with the loud report made by the first shot fired by the assassin. He said he then heard two more loud reports which sounded like shots, such reports coming in rapid succession after the first shot. He volunteered the shots were fired 'just about as fast as you could expect a man to operate a bolt action rifle' or words that effect."⁵⁷

In his deposition on July 24, 1964 Hudson gave a confused story that was very different from his earlier statement. At this time he thought the shots took place over two minutes and "seemed pretty well evenly spaced". The inconsistency between this testimony and his much earlier statement was not addressed.

Two witnesses, Lawrence O'Brien and Phillip Willis, thought the shots were equally spaced but they appear to have been occupied with other tasks at the time of the shots. O'Brien was in one of the open press cars in the motorcade. He provided his 'impression' of the shot spacing, in response to a rather leading question:

"Mr. ADAMS. Is it your recollection that these sounds were evenly spaced?"

Mr. O'BRIEN. That is my impression. As I say, I apparently immediately engaged the driver in conversation after the first shot which forces me to conclude that there had to be a time between the first and second and third shots- because I simply-describing the exchange of my question and his answer, and his answer, I must say, probably

⁵² Statement of Jack Watson, November 22, 1963, WC 22 H 522

⁵³ Altgens: WC 7 H 520. "They seemed to be at almost regular intervals and they were quick."

⁵⁴ Baker: WC 3 H 247. "It seemed to me like they just went bang, bang, bang; they were pretty well even to me."

⁵⁵ Dillard: WC 6 H 164. "I heard three-the three approximately equally spaced."

⁵⁶ Fischer: WC 6 H 195.

⁵⁷ Hudson: FBI report November 26, 1963 (part of the HSCA JFK Collection: Ex. RG 233, and Warren Commission Document CD5). WC testimony: (WC 7 H 565).

was completed after the third shot. But he had started his answer to the question at about or just before the third shot."⁵⁸

Willis, thought the shots were fired approximately two seconds apart but he said his immediate attention was on his daughters:

"I proceeded down the street and didn't take any other pictures instantly, because the three shots were fired approximately about 2 seconds apart, and I knew my little daughters were running along beside the Presidential car, and I was immediately concerned about them, and I was screaming for them to come back, and they didn't hear me. But I was concerned about them immediately, because I knew something tragic had happened, and the shots didn't ring out long like a rifle shot that is fired into midair in a distance."⁵⁹

Witnesses who recalled the reverse pattern

Six witnesses apparently recalled the reverse pattern of shots with the first two sounding closer together than the second and third.

The President's secretary, Kenneth O'Donnell, riding on the left side of the middle seat of the President's follow-up car, described the shots this way:

Mr. SPECTER. And was there any distinguishable tempo to the shots?

Mr. O'DONNELL. Yes; the first two came almost simultaneously, came one right after the other, there was a slight hesitation, then the third one.⁶⁰

It may be noted this statement was made six months after the assassination and Mr. O'Donnell had not provided any statements or notes close to the time of the assassination.

Nellie Connally, who was sitting beside her husband in the President's limousine, thought the first two shots 'seemed' closer together than the second and third:

Mr. SPECTER. What is your best estimate on the time that passed from the first to the last shot?

Mrs. CONNALLY. Very short. It seemed to me that there was less time between the first and the second than between the second and the third.⁶¹

Her recollection of this was provided on April 21, 1964. There is no earlier statement or note in which the shot spacing was mentioned.

Cecil Ault was inside a courtroom in the Court House on Houston Street looking through a closed window. He did not testify and gave only a verbal statement to an FBI agent that is contained in an FBI report.⁶² According to the report, Mr. Ault "noted that the first and second shots sounded to him to be close together and the third shot was spaced more

⁵⁸ O'Brien: WC 7 H 162

⁵⁹ Willis: WC 7 H 495.

⁶⁰ O'Donnell: WC 7 H 448 (testimony given May 18, 1964).

⁶¹ Nellie Connally: WC 4 H 149

⁶² Ault: FBI report dated January 10, 1964, CE2103, WC 24 H 534.

after the second shot, first two shots sounding close enough to be automatic rifle". The report also states: "Following the first shot Mr. Ault noted that President Kennedy appeared to raise up in his seat in the Presidential automobile and after the second shot the President slumped into his seat". (It may be noted that the President actually fell over in his seat immediately after the third shot, which struck his head).

William and Gayle Newman were standing with their two children on the sidewalk 15 feet from the motorcade's path at the time of the shots. The FBI report on Gayle Newman dated November 24, 1963 states: "She believed there were first two shots in succession, a pause, and then another shot was fired which struck the President".⁶³ In a separate FBI report of the same date regarding William Newman this statement is found: "It was his belief that two shots were fired in rapid succession".... and "about that time another shot was fired which he estimated was about 10 seconds after the first shot was fired".⁶⁴

Texas School Book Depository employee, Steven Wilson, was sitting in his office three floors directly below the sixth floor window sniper's nest. He gave a statement in December 1963 in which he did not mention the spacing of the shots. In a statement dated March 25, 1964 he said he was positive that he heard three shots and gave his 'opinion' of the spacing:

In a matter of ten seconds or less after car and occupants were obscured from my view by the trees, I heard three shots. I am positive there were three shots, no more and no less. It is my opinion there was a greater space of time between the second and third shots than between the first and second. The three shots were fired within a matter of less than five seconds.⁶⁵

Conclusions about the shot pattern

As seen from the above review of the evidence, there are at least 44 witnesses who recalled a relatively long pause after the first shot and a much shorter separation between the last two. Only 6 thought the pattern was the reverse. Another 10 may have thought the shots were fairly equally spaced.

If one assumes that the likelihood of a witness recalling a simple pattern of three loud noises correctly was at least as great the likelihood of recalling it incorrectly, there is only one rational conclusion to be drawn from this evidence: the last two shots were closer together than the first two. If the shot pattern was 1...2.....3 one would have to explain how it could be possible that only 6 out of 60 witnesses perceived the pattern correctly. One would have to explain not only why the rest of the witnesses were mistaken, but why 44 of them randomly made the *same* mistake.

One can conclude from this evidence that there were three unevenly spaced shots, the second shot being closer in time to the third than the first. Since the difference in spacing of the shots was obvious to so many witnesses, one can conclude that the second shot occurred several frames after the midpoint between the first and third shots.

⁶³ Gayle Newman: WC 22 H 842.

⁶⁴ William Newman: WC 22 H 842.

⁶⁵ Wilson: statement, March 25, 1964, WC 22 H 685