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Shanin Specter on growing up with the JFK 'single-bullet theory'

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He was not yet 6 years old when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas 50 years ago this week. But Shanin Specter has carried the nuances of the tragedy with him his entire life.

His father, the late U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, was then a young prosecutor selected to work as an assistant counsel on the Warren Commission, where he co-authored the “single-bullet theory.” It stated that the non-fatal wounds sustained by Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connally were caused by the same bullet.



Arlen Specter demonstrates the controversial “single bullet theory” to the Warren Commission

This was a crucial yet controversial theory because if the two men had been wounded by different bullets, it would lend credence to conspiracy theories that there was a second gunman — often rumored to be situated on the now infamous grassy knoll in Dealey Plaza. The Warren Commission concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing Kennedy and that Jack Ruby acted alone in killing Oswald two days later.

This is the first major anniversary of the JFK assassination where the elder Specter, who died in October 2012, is not able to once again articulate his views on the subject. A name partner at one of Philadelphia’s best known plaintiffs personal injury law firms, Kline & Specter, [Shanin Specter](#) has enjoyed his own professional identity separate from that of his famous father. But with JFK assassination conspiracy theories still aplenty, Specter thought it would be cathartic to shares his thoughts in a recent article in the Daily Beast.

“I also miss my father and wish he was here for the 50th anniversary so he could explain how he came to his conclusions,” Specter said in an interview with the

Philadelphia Business Journal on Friday. “Now my kids are being asked about it in school by teachers and classmates and then coming home and asking me, 'What’s this all about.' It’s bittersweet.”

Specter remembers his father leaving for Washington to work on the Warren Commission. He remembers accompanying his father, then Philadelphia’s district attorney, to speaking engagements in the late 1960s and seeing him questioned in a hostile manner by constituents solely due to his work on the Warren Commission. And he remembers being challenged himself on the topic as a freshman at Haverford College in 1975.

“I was just besieged with people asking me about it. They would say, 'You’re Specter’s son; What about that?,' ” Specter said. “I had heard what my father said at those events and accepted the findings. But after being challenged on it, I thought I would educate myself. It was completely defensive on my part.”

Specter soon realized the conspiracy theories were buoyed by the secretive actions of the federal government after the assassination:

- The Warren Commission was not provided with all pertinent information, such as Kennedy’s autopsy.
- The FBI also withheld information from the Warren Commission, including a threatening note to agent James Hosty from Oswald in which Oswald complained about his treatment from the Bureau. The FBI never alerted the Secret Service about Oswald and the note was destroyed and never shown to the Commission. The contents were only revealed in 1975 when Hosty testified before Congress.
- The CIA never told the Warren Commission that it had engaged in efforts to kill Cuban President Fidel Castro, something that was revealed later.

But Specter still believes his father’s conclusions about the assassination, and those of the Warren Commission, were the right ones.

When Congress began investigating the JFK and Martin Luther King Jr. assassinations in the mid-70s, Specter, still a college student, wound up assisting Congressman Bob Edgar with his work on the House Select Committee on Assassinations. Edgar ultimately dissented with the majority of the committee’s finding that Kennedy was very likely assassinated as a result of a conspiracy.

The single bullet theory dogged Arlen Specter for his entire political career, especially when he was up for re-election. Shanin Specter said polling data always found around 2 percent of Pennsylvanians who were openly hostile to his father because of his work on the Warren Commission.

"It became a big issue when he was running for re-election in 1992 because [Oliver Stone's movie JFK, which was based on the convoluted conspiracy theory of former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison] came out in Fall 1991," Specter said. "The Inquirer had a front page article above the fold with a headline that said something like "Film Fires Bullet at Specter's Re-Election Campaign."

His father agreed with the findings of the majority of the Warren Commission but he was open to being proven wrong over time.

"And as time did go on, he felt the accuracy of the single bullet theory was proven," Specter said. "So he felt it should be called a conclusion and not a theory. It was half in jest but I think he believed that."

Shanin Specter has lived through all of the major anniversaries of the JFK assassination and thinks we would be better celebrating Kennedy's May 29 birthday and life rather than solely focusing on the circumstances surrounding his death. But as there is still a great interest in the events of that fateful weekend, Specter believes a whole generation needs to be educated about it and that the learning curve is steep.

"Because if you really want to learn about it, you have to put in a lot of work," Specter said. "There are a lot of superficial opinions out there with not a lot to back them up. I also think it is hard for some people to imagine that someone of the stature of President Kennedy could be killed by someone as seemingly insignificant as Oswald. But the single bullet theory criticism has waned in recent years. It has gone from being hard to believe to being shocking but plausible."