

(Mount Clipping in Space Below)

FBI Memo on Oswald Imposter Overlooked by Warren Report?

WASHINGTON — J. Edgar Hoover in 1960 sent a memorandum to the State Department raising the possibility that an impostor might be using the credentials of an American defector named Lee Harvey Oswald, who was then in the Soviet Union.

This memo from the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and two subsequent State Department memos related to it were apparently not shown to key investigators of the Warren Commission, which examined the assassination of President Kennedy and determined that Oswald, acting alone, was the assassin.

The late Hoover's warning of the "possibility" that an impostor could be using Oswald's identification data, in the Soviet Union or elsewhere, came more than two years before the murder of the American President in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. The impostor theory was rejected, by implication but not directly, in the published report of the Warren Commission, and its significance could not be determined.

The body of the man who the commission concluded had shot the President — and who was shot to death by Jack Ruby two days later — was identified by his mother and other relatives and also by fingerprints and other physical features as that of Lee Harvey Oswald.

But the apparent withholding of information from commission investigators responsible for checking Oswald's activities in foreign countries supported a theory of some critics of the commission's final report that the panel had come to its conclusion regarding Oswald without having had all the facts.

An FBI spokesman said, in response to questions, that "we can definitely state, without hesitation, that a copy of the Hoover memo was shown to a member of the Warren Commission staff in the presence of an FBI agent." However, the spokesman said he could not identify the commission staff member to whom the memo reportedly had been shown.

Neither J. Lee Ranking, the former general counsel of the commission, nor any of his former staff aides who were most involved in investigating Oswald's background, said they could remember seeing it.

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However, Howard P. Willens, now a private lawyer here, identified himself as the commission lawyer who had reviewed the FBI file.

Willens, who was then the commission's special liaison officer to the Justice Department, said that "while I do not think that anyone can state now with the necessary precision whether or not he saw the Hoover memo, it is my best recollection that I did, in fact, see that memo."

"I do not want to be in a public debate with my old colleagues, but I know that there was discussion of this among others on the staff concerned with the activities of Oswald abroad."

Shown the FBI memos and the two State Department documents — discovered in the National Archives here by a private researcher — W. David Slawson, a lawyer who checked out rumors about Oswald for the commission in 1964, said he thought the assassination inquiry should be reopened.

Slawson, now a law professor at the University of Southern California, said he and other investigators had never been shown the memos.

"We were the rumor runner-downers," he said, "and we certainly should have seen this material, as we did a great deal of other stuff that we showed to be unfounded."

"It may be more significant that we did not see it, in terms of a possible cover-up and the reasons for it, then if we had seen it. I mean, I don't know where the impostor notion would have led us — perhaps nowhere, like a lot of other leads. But the point is we didn't know about it. And why not?"

Slawson said the investigation should be reopened also "because the interposition of an impostor if that happened, is a political act."

"And after all, this (the assassination) was not just another murder. It was, by definition, a political murder."

Two other commission staff members shared with Slawson the responsibility for checking out rumors. Neither recalled specifically having seen the memos, but they tended to discount any thought of a renewed investigation.

One of them, Dr. Alfred Goldberg, who wrote the gossip-puncturing "speculations and rumors" section of the commission's report, said:

"I don't have any recollection of having seen that (Hoover) memorandum. As a matter of fact, I am fairly certain I didn't."

"While I think we might have done more had we seen it — we might have engaged in more research, we might have looked for more, we might have asked for more from the State Department and the FBI — in terms of the outcome, I don't believe it would have made any difference."

William T. Coleman, Jr., Slawson's immediate superior at the commission who was nominated last month by President Ford to be Secretary of Transportation, was asked whether he had seen the memos.

"It's been 10 years," he said, "and I don't remember one way or the other."

He recalled, however, that his duties "required me to see everything that Oswald had done as a defector to the Soviet Union."

Hoover's memo was dated June 3, 1960. Its contents suggest that the FBI director raised the possibility of an impostor because of certain facts the memo recounts.

It cited a foreign service dispatch concerning Oswald's declaration in Moscow on Oct. 31, 1959, that he would renounce his citizenship and noted that he had surrendered his passport.

It also cited a report of an FBI agent in Dallas of May 12, 1960, which said that Oswald's mother, Marguerite C. Oswald, "stated subject had taken his birth certificate with him when he left home."

The agent's report indicated Mrs. Oswald was apprehensive about her son's safety because she had written him three letters and they all had been returned to her undelivered.

Hoover concluded: "Since there is a possibility that an impostor is using Oswald's birth certificate, any current information the Department of State may have concerning subject will be appreciated."

Two internal State Department memos transmitted Hoover's warning. One, dated June 10, 1960, went to the department's Soviet desk. The other, dated March 31, 1961, was sent from one section of the passport office to another.



Photo shows Lee Oswald with rifle later found in Texas School Book Depository Building in Dallas after Kennedy's slaying.