

POLITICS & POLICY

Retired FBI Agent Recalls His Inquiry of Oswald, Depicts Post-Assassination Fears in Washington

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. — For 30 years Jim Hosty has relived that brief, truncated conversation with Lee Harvey Oswald, pondering the question that never got answered.

The time was 3:15 p.m., Nov. 22, 1963. President John F. Kennedy had been pronounced dead a little over two hours earlier. Now Oswald, his hands handcuffed behind him, faced five interrogators in a crowded Dallas police office. Among them was Federal Bureau of Investigation special agent James P. Hosty Jr., who sized up the suspect before him.

"A wise guy," he thought. Almost cocky, defiant and argumentative, Oswald was holding his own.

Then Mr. Hosty seemed to hit a nerve.

"Lee, have you ever been to Mexico?" he asked.

Sure, Oswald replied. To Tijuana, while a U.S. Marine. No, the agent persisted, not Tijuana — Mexico City. Had Oswald ever been to Mexico City?

"He jumped. He startled," recalls Mr. Hosty. But Oswald never had to answer the question. In one of the maddening coincidences that compound the confusion of that day, the interrogation was interrupted by an officer who stuck his head into the doorway. It was time for Oswald to appear in a police lineup. Jim Hosty, abruptly ordered by superiors to keep his distance from the local investigation, would never talk with him again.

The unanswered question is history's loss — and Mr. Hosty's loss as well. For the assassination of President Kennedy ended up damaging Mr. Hosty's professional reputation. Now retired here in Kansas City, he's telling his side of the story. It is a story of a post-assassination FBI frantically trying to insulate itself and its director, J. Edgar Hoover — and, at a more sensational level, of a Warren Commission Mr. Hosty suspects deliberately suppressed the importance of Oswald's September 1963 trip to Mexico City and his visits there to the Cuban and Soviet embassies.

"The Warren Commission wasn't try-

ing to get to the bottom of it," he maintains. "They were trying to prevent World War III."

Fear of war, secret agents, international intrigue — this is the high drama of Mr. Hosty's account. But it also is a study of how banal factors, particularly the self-protective instincts of large bureaucracies, can intertwine with, and distort, the most historic of events.

An Active File on Oswald

Mr. Hosty was the Dallas FBI special agent assigned to Lee and Marina Oswald before the assassination. It seemed a fairly routine investigation, one of more than two dozen he was working: Keep tabs on a former defector to the Soviet Union and his Russian-born wife. He had interviewed Marina, although not Lee, and knew from her that Lee was working at the Texas Book Depository. (He didn't know that in April 1963 Oswald had already tried to shoot Edwin A. Walker, a right-wing former general, in Dallas.)

None of this information was shared by the FBI with the Secret Service before the president came to Dallas. Suppose Mr. Hosty had alerted the Secret Service that a former defector to the Soviet Union was working along the president's motorcade route? "They would have said, 'What else is new?'" In those days, he says, the Secret Service was concerned with "one thing and one thing only: [people who had made] direct threats against the president."

But when the Warren Commission went on to criticize the FBI for taking "an unduly restrictive view of its role in preventive intelligence work," Mr. Hosty took a direct hit. After a formal letter of censure from director Hoover, he was transferred here to Kansas City in 1964 — "put on a bicycle," in bureau parlance. At 69, he remains a garrulous, stocky man who looks like the stereotypical Irish cop. And a man convinced that the FBI bureaucracy "sold me out."

Mr. Hosty asserts that FBI superiors altered his written answers to a post-assassination interrogatory to make him look worse. The altered answer has him admitting "it possibly would have been better" had he moved more aggressively on certain aspects of the investigation. But he also volunteers that, in a grave mistake, he carried out a superior's order to destroy an embarrassing piece of evidence — a note to him from Oswald — before director Hoover learned about it.

Just as he was under pressure, Mr.

Hosty believes the Warren Commission itself was under pressure — from a President Lyndon Johnson worried that the assassination might escalate into a U.S.-Cuban-Soviet showdown. The Hosty thesis was strengthened recently when the National Archives released transcripts of President Johnson's telephone conversations in the weeks following the assassination. The transcripts show Mr. Johnson worrying repeatedly about nuclear war. To Chief Justice Earl Warren and Sen. Richard B. Russell of Georgia, he talked of a war that could "kill 40 million Americans in an hour."

With the Warren Commission, Mr. Hosty believes that Oswald, acting alone, killed President Kennedy. But, citing a web of admittedly circumstantial evidence, he diverges sharply after that.

The Warren Commission, after investigating "literally dozens of allegations," found "no evidence that Oswald's trip to Mexico was in any way connected with the assassination of President Kennedy." But Mr. Hosty notes that, at the time, the Kennedy administration was actively engaged in assassination plots against Fidel Castro, and that the Cuban leader had publicly warned that two could play this game. He believes Oswald offered to the Cubans, and possibly to the Soviets as well, to kill the president. (As is now known, Oswald met with the Soviets' Valeriy Vladimirovich Kostikov, regarded by the Central Intelligence Agency as the man in charge of assassinations in the Western Hemisphere — though he did so before Mr. Kennedy scheduled his trip to Dallas.)

Evidence From the Solo Source

Mr. Hosty thinks neither the Cubans nor the Soviets encouraged Oswald, an unstable and amateurish-looking man, and were horrified when they learned of what he had done. If so, then in three capitals — Washington, Havana and Moscow — the overriding consideration became averting nuclear war.

Mr. Hosty argues that the Warren Commission dismissed evidence from two undercover agents, together designated as Solo Source, dispatched by the FBI to talk with Fidel Castro after the assassination. As since revealed, Solo Source consisted of Morris Childs, then treasurer of the U.S. Communist Party, and his brother Jack Childs, then editor of the Daily Worker.

Castro "told the Childs brothers of

Oswald's offer to kill Kennedy for the Cubans, because he [Kennedy] was threatening Castro," Mr. Hosty writes. "Castro claimed his people turned Oswald's offer down."

Moreover, citing an internal FBI source, Mr. Hosty alleges that President Johnson and Robert F. Kennedy ordered intelligence agents in Mexico to stop pursuing a possible Cuban or Soviet connection. His informant tells him CIA agents in Mexico City were "near mutiny" at this order. Startling as it is, this aspect of Mr. Hosty's theory has drawn support from the U.S. ambassador to Mexico at the time, Thomas Mann, who has said he received "peremptory instructions to stop" investigating those issues.

Mr. Hosty says the post-assassination investigation got off to a disastrous start when J. Edgar Hoover assured President Johnson that the FBI didn't have an active file on Lee Harvey Oswald. Then Mr. Hoover learned to his dismay that Mr. Hosty had in fact been investigating the Oswalds. After that, the bureau's investigation was intertwined with an effort to minimize embarrassment to Mr. Hoover and to itself.

Destroying the Oswald Note

"Basic fact-finding had degenerated into telling Hoover what Hoover wanted to hear," he writes in an unpublished manuscript. "Agents learned to live with it."

Thus the destruction of the Oswald note. As Mr. Hosty tells it, the note made no mention of President Kennedy, but was rather an indignant protest against FBI interviews of Marina Oswald. After Jack Ruby killed Oswald, Mr. Hosty says, he was called into the office of his superior, who took the note and a memo explaining it from a folder and said: "I don't ever want to see these again."

Mr. Hosty took the note to a men's room, tore it into pieces and flushed it down a toilet.

In yet another incident that ultimately came to light to help fuel conspiracy theories for decades to come, a fellow agent omitted from a report that Mr. Hosty's name — spelled "Hasty" — appeared in an Oswald notebook. Mr. Hosty surmises it was there because Marina Oswald had told her husband about his interviews of her. The fellow agent, he says, was trying to do him a favor.

On the whole, Mr. Hosty still believes he did a professional job. He says he doesn't lie awake at night, agonizing over what-ifs. But, he says ruefully, "I would rather read history than live it."



Jim Hosty