

2577 Leconte Ave.
Berkeley, CA 94709
(415) 845-4669
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Peter Lennon
c/o Rep. Christopher J. Dodd
429 Cannon H.O.B.
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Peter,

As you suggested, I am putting on paper my initial reactions to yesterday's Washington Post article about the content of Oswald's phone call to the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City, as recorded by the CIA. These notes will not be very coherent, but along with the enclosed material I hope they will be helpful.

At the moment, I think my bottom-line comment is that it would be a mistake if this story served to define the Committee's interest in Oswald's Mexico trip and the government's reaction to it. Specifically, the alleged new information about Oswald's offer to the Russians might distract attention from the repeated procedural irregularities in the handling of information about Oswald's visit. I think it is necessary to go after the new information while keeping the context in mind. This applies to both questions: first, what Oswald said and its significance; second, how the government reacted at the time.

On the first question, I can not offer any hard evidence; clearly the Committee should find out exactly what the CIA learned about Oswald's conversations. It is hard for me not to see this latest story in the context of a thirteen-year history of the hypothesis of Cuban or Russian involvement as a fallback position among certain government people. You are familiar with the story (basically hidden until the Schweiker Report) of the apparent attempt by Mafia figures who had been involved in the CIA plots against Castro to put pressure on the government by suggesting a link with the Kennedy assassination. People like Frank Sturgis are actively presenting the case that Castro killed Kennedy in a not very plausible form. Let me suggest, speculatively, that the two Washington Post stories of the last few weeks represent a subtle presentation of a similar case. Although both stories are on the surface embarrassing to the CIA and the Warren Commission, I think that the message carried by both is: sure, some things were covered up, but they are the sort of things that would have tied Oswald to the Cubans or the Russians, and would have created unnecessary trouble if they had been widely publicized. ("Unnecessary" because neither item of evidence really implicates anyone with Oswald.) I should make it very clear that I have no reason at all to suspect the motives of the reporters involved; however, I do wonder about the motives of some of their sources. In any case, I see these developments as carrying more than their surface meanings, and in a historical context of considerable complexity. I think, therefore, that it is important that the Committee not abandon its game plan to immediately concentrate on these isolated bits of evidence.

As for what Oswald actually said, and its significance: a key piece of evidence is the article by Nicholas Horrock which appeared in the NY Times on September 21, 1975. (Copy enclosed.) The most relevant part of this story is the evaluation provided by his sources of the taped Oswald calls: "not conspiratorial" and "benign." One source (David Phillips?) suggested that it was Oswald's frustration at being rejected by the Cubans and Russians that led him to shoot Kennedy. Specifically, Horrock makes no mention of any offer from Oswald to the Russians. Whether this means it was not made, or just that it was not taken seriously by Horrock's source, is of course not clear.

Horrock's article is of interest for a number of other reasons, in the context of the funny business that has been going on for years. In connection with Oswald's Mexico trip, the main issues involved are (1) the "mystery man" whose description was attached to Oswald by the CIA before the assassination; and (2) the reaction by the CIA, the FBI, and other agencies to Oswald's visit. Enclosed is a 21-page chronology which covers both the pre-assassination events and the CIA's interaction with the Warren Commission. This chronology has not been updated to take into account

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documents released by the CIA in 1976, which tend to raise as many questions as they answer. Let me give a couple of examples: in the chronology, I showed that the CIA failed to respond promptly to a Warren Commission request of February 12, 1964, asking for an explanation of the photo of the mystery man which had been shown to Marguerite Oswald. At a meeting a full month later, the Commission staff (it is clear from their internal memo) did not even know that this photo was associated with Oswald's trip to Mexico! We now have some of the CIA's documents; one shows that an unnamed staff officer wanted to "wait out the Commission" on a matter related to these photos. The CIA memo of their March 12 meeting with the Commission suggests that they were actively covering up at that time, and writing deceptive memos for the record. An early memo discussed the photos of the mystery man but fails to mention that his description was attributed to Oswald before the assassination - a memo which suggests to me that an internal CIA coverup went into effect promptly. (If you do get into this topic, I would be glad to send you detailed notes on the most important newly released documents. Someone should update my chronology, but that would be a major effort.)

In this context, I think that Kessler's article gives the wrong impression. He said that the CIA waited until October 10 to pass on information to the FBI, and that the information was incomplete. He called this a "routine handling" of the matter. It may have been low-priority, but it (and the subsequent reaction) was hardly routine. It was not routine, I trust, for the CIA to attach an erroneous description; it was not routine to use the name "Lee Henry Oswald," it was not routine for the FBI agent handling Oswald's case to find out about this contact not from his own headquarters but from an INS agent in Dallas; it was not routine for the CIA to ask the ONI for a photo of Oswald (when the CIA had a news photo taken after Oswald's defection, and thus predictably after his last Marine photo); it was not routine - I would assume - for the Navy to fail to respond to this request for over a month, and then to be unable to find their copy of the CIA request when I asked for it. As you can see from the chronology, there are many problems of this kind. The two suspicions that must be kept in mind are (1) the possibility that the mystery man, or someone else, was impersonating Oswald (or was thought to have been doing so); (2) the possibility that Oswald was on an "intelligence assignment" for a friendly agency (or was thought to have been so occupied.) (Recall that the Schweiker Report indicates that the FBI thought so at one time.)

In this context, the most interesting thing about Horrock's article is the "unusual public statement" he got from the CIA. It certainly is unusual. It fails to mention the erroneous pre-assassination description, and explains how the photo of the mystery man was brought into the picture after the assassination. The CIA's explanation may be technically correct for the single photo which was shown to Mrs. Oswald, but is certainly very misleading. (To give you an idea of how confusing the evidence is, it wasn't until mid-1975 that Belin revealed that one photo of the mystery man was taken on October 1 - the day of Oswald's visit.)

Horrock's basic story was the existence of the taping. But that was hardly new to some of us. FBI documents released in 1970 made it obvious that some calls and/or conversations had been overheard; I asked the CIA for transcripts and tapes in 1971 and was of course turned down. In my memo of March 24, 1975, on the CIA and the Warren Commission investigation (which I sent to the Rockefeller Commission and others), I specifically suggested that the intercepted calls be looked into. (See p. 469 of "The Assassinations;" cf. p. 480, re the mystery man.) By the way, as the enclosed list of still-withheld CIA documents shows, they were concerned about possible damage to Agency operations as a result of the Horrock article.

Let me now pass on some random comments on the Kessler article (based on the version printed yesterday in the S.F. Chronicle).

Kessler doesn't date the call. However, ABC radio news at noon yesterday described it as a call from the Cuban to the Soviet Embassy. (This same broadcast quoted Phillips, who may have been their source for this little fact.) This makes the call sound like the one described under (2) in the chronology entry for Sept. 28, 1963. As discussed in detail there, this call sounds very odd - why would

Oswald go from one Embassy to another to get his address, and then call to say he was indeed coming back? I wouldn't rule out the possibility that Oswald (or "Oswald") was trying to put his visit on the CIA's record.

Kessler asks why the CIA didn't tell the FBI or the Warren Commission about Oswald's alleged offer to the Russians. A fair question, but the FBI reaction was oddly weak even without this information. (See Hosty's testimony.) It has been suggested that the government's reaction was also inappropriately weak when Oswald made a similar offer to the Russians at the time of his defection in 1959.

It does seem odd that the CIA would withhold part of the transcript from the Warren Commission. I was not aware that the transcript had been submitted; I'm fairly sure it is not a CD. My impression had been that when Slawson, Willens, and Coleman went to Mexico rather late in the investigation, they were probably shown some details of the CIA's surveillance operations - e.g., transcripts and tapes - and given a superficially plausible explanation for the mystery man. There are two withheld attachments to the undated large Coleman-Slawson memo on possible foreign involvement; these might be the transcripts in question and should be looked at.

Kessler says that the CIA told the Warren Commission that it learned of most of Oswald's activities in Mexico City only after the assassination. The implication is that the CIA deliberately withheld information about these taped calls. That's news to me. As the chronology indicates, the Commission learned about this rather early, at first from the FBI. The CIA was certainly holding back, but not, as far as I know, on this specific point. There was a distinction made (see WR 777; chrono, see 9/27/63) between Oswald's visits to the 2 embassies. Slawson said he could explain how the initial reports happened to refer only to the Soviet Embassy, not the Cuban Embassy (chrono, 8/6/64). It is clear that some of the surveillance data, apparently that associated with the Cuban Embassy, was not linked to Oswald until after the assassination. However, I am not aware that the CIA misled the Commission about what it knew about Oswald's contacts with the Soviet Embassy, which is what is in question here.

It does strike me as unusual that Kessler's sources included a translator and a typist who had worked for the CIA, as well as Phillips. Even Phillips was quoted yesterday as reluctant to talk about sources and methods in detail because he takes his secrecy oath seriously. Is it that easy to get CIA translators and typists to talk? Interestingly, even though Phillips is a major source for Kessler's description of Oswald's offer to the Russians, he was quoted repeatedly yesterday to the effect that they considered Oswald kooky and that as far as he knows Oswald was not under their guidance or influence. (Phillips - with whom I am, of course, reluctant to agree - made similarly cautious and reasonable statements when the Schweiker Report came out with its stories of mysterious traveling Cubans. I think his position reflects a general problem faced by those in the government who would like to pin the assassination on Castro: the more "evidence" that Oswald was not just a kook, but maybe under foreign influence, the harder it is to defend the lack of concern of the U.S. government.)

Kessler's discussion of the CIA's October 10, 1963 message to the FBI does not go into the erroneous description at all. In defense of Kessler, the whole mystery man problem is such a quagmire that I can see why he wouldn't want to muddy up his story with it. But for the House Committee it really is part of the story.

Kessler indicates that knowledge of the conversation might have intensified FBI interest in Oswald. As discussed in the chronology, that question can be raised without reference to any additional information the CIA might have had.

It is interesting that some CIA officers who were in Mexico at the time suggested that the CIA may have had a relationship with Oswald.

Belin, of course, is not a very good source on this; Slawson should be talked with. I find Schweiker's comment disappointing, since his subcommittee certainly was told that the CIA had intercepted some of Oswald's calls and could have gone into that.

I hope the Committee will study the CIA's response to the memo I sent the Rockefeller Commission, which is still withheld. I have also enclosed my letters to Slawson and the CIA, which summarize some of the unanswered questions. Sincerely,

Paul