

The assassination labyrinth

by Ron Rosenbaum

WASHINGTON, D. C. — The tape from Dallas lies on top of a heap of fat file folders on Bob Smith's desk. The tape arrived in the mail yesterday morning.

It was addressed to:

Mr. Robert P. Smith
Director of Research
The Committee to Investigate Assassinations
Suite 409
927 15th Street, Northwest
Washington, D. C.

Suite 409 lies at the far end of a long corridor lined with doors that look as if they have grown accustomed to being shut. Each door is equipped with a pre-war ground

glass window-inset, lettered in gilt and black with the names and degrees of dentists and real estate brokers. Dark shades have been drawn down behind most of the ground-glass panels, rendering their original translucence opaque. There is a feeling that few cavities are filled, few deeds executed on this corridor.

Inside Suite 409, the ceilings, the walls, the radiators squatting beneath the window sills, have all

been painted a pre-faded pale yellow. The linoleum floor, once black streaked with white, has faded to a chiaroscuro of dark and lighter grays.

It is a tape of a tape of a tape, this cassette on top of the heap of file folders on Bob Smith's desk in Suite 409. The original tape, still in the hands of the Dallas Police Department, is a recording of all Police Band radio transmissions on November 22, 1963, from the moment John F. Kennedy was shot in Dealey Plaza to the moment Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested inside a movie theatre three miles away.

A "researcher" for the Committee to Investigate Assassinations, a Dallas resident with contacts within the police force, obtained a copy of the original tape, compiled a voluminous transcript of every word, every stutter, every burst of static on the tape, then forwarded tape and transcript to Bob Smith in Suite 409.

That is how the Committee to Investigate Assassinations works. There is a computer expert in Connecticut, a ballistics expert in Boston, an ex-FBI agent in Los Angeles, a journalist in New Jersey, a Jack Ruby specialist here, an Officer Tippit specialist there.

And there is Bob Smith in Suite 409. Bob Smith is a thin, middle-aged, owl-like type, who speaks slowly and carefully. He has a Cal Tech degree in chemical engineering, worked for a time as a chemical engineer for a Southern California defense contractor, and still wears the short hair, narrow tie,

white nylon shirt, and pale indoor pallor of the slide rule life. But he has grown accustomed, in two and a half years of operating out of Suite 409, to dealing with the unquantifiable and the incalculable.

"As 'Director of Research' for the Committee to Investigate Assassinations, I sit at the hub of a sort of wheel of information," Bob Smith has written. "Some may say, perhaps not without cause, that it is a wheel of misinformation. Certainly there are some rickety spokes to it, and it isn't always easy to keep from reeling

off the road. After long practice, though, and after having heard a lot of stories, I think I have acquired some skill in avoiding the more obvious ditches."

There is the story of the Three Mystery Tramps, for instance. Bob Smith sorts through the heap of file folders, plucks one from the bottom of the pile. Certain newspaper photographs, purportedly taken shortly after the assassination, show two Dallas policemen hustling three shabbily dressed men away from the vicinity of the infamous "grassy knoll," the site from which assassination investigators have long believed the fatal bullets were fired. Neither the identities, nor the subsequent detention and release of the three "tramps," as

they are called in assassination circles, have ever been fully explained.

Who were they? Over the years there has been considerable speculation in assassination circles

that the tramps were actually members of the assassination team, being hurried away by accomplices on the Dallas police force.

And then after the assassination of Martin Luther King, a whole new wave of attention was focused upon the mystery tramps, especially on the one who had come to be known as "Frenchy" (so named for his vaguely Gallic

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Continued from preceding page features and the seedy "Continental" clothing he wears in the grainy photos). In 1970 a certain assassination researcher published a story in Ramparts pointing out the extraordinary resemblance between "Frenchy" of Dealey Plaza and the FBI Crime Artist's composite sketch—circulated briefly in April 1968—of a man wanted in connection with the shooting of Martin Luther King. The question was then raised: could this mysterious "Frenchy" have any relation to the equally mysterious (and

*Rosenbaum's
view is that
Smith, while
skimming the
more sinister
interpretation of
confusing evidence,
nevertheless still
is commendable
in his determination
to get the
P.I. facts*