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JOHNSON AND HOOVER TALKED

by
Carleton W. Sterling

Did Lyndon B. Johnson and J. Edgar Hoover believe that John F. Kennedy was shot at by someone other than Lee Harvey Oswald?

The official story of the Dealey Plaza ambush impressed on the public from Day One was that, Oswald shot Kennedy from behind from the "sniper's nest" on an upper floor of the Texas State Book Depository. Of course, medical personnel at Dallas' Parkland hospital saw what they thought were Kennedy's frontal wounds and a blowout in the back of his head; and attending physicians certified the cause of death as a shot to the left temple. Initial news reports from Parkland reflected these findings. But, hard on the heels of the announcement of the President's death, the news media was flooded with information implicating Oswald and the book depository; the initial medical findings were repudiated by the official investigation; and the official story line was swallowed hook, line and sinker by the news media. Dissidents were disparaged or otherwise disciplined by the authorities and their allies.

But the official account of the assassination does not tell us what top officials believed about the case. Evidence that the official line diverged from what President Johnson and FBI Director Hoover themselves believed is captured on the White House tapes recording some of President Johnson's conversations. This evidence is now readily accessible in the compilation of the 1963-1964 tape transcripts edited with commentary by Michael J. Beschloss. (1)

Consider Johnson and Hoover's discussion of the shooting in Dealey Plaza as recorded on the afternoon of Nov. 29, 1963, one week after the assassination. The discussion opens with a review of candidates for the presidential commission on the assassination but turns to the assassination itself when Johnson asks about the number of shots and whether any were aimed at him.

Interestingly, both Johnson and Hoover refer to the shooter(s) as "they." However, their use of the plural pronoun could be in the colloquial sense of individual(s) indefinite in gender and number. Nevertheless, their

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grammar suggests that Johnson and Hoover could conceive of a distinction between shooters and suspects; and Johnson tested the link between shooter(s) and suspect by pressing Hoover to confirm his impression that Texas Governor John Connally was shot when he got between President Kennedy and the line of gunfire in Dealey Plaza. I quote from the transcript (Beschloss, pp. 54-55).

LBJ: How did it happen they hit Connally?

Hoover: Connally turned to the President when the first shot was fired and I think in that turning, it was where he got hit.

LBJ: If he hadn't turned, he probably wouldn't have got hit?

Hoover: I think that is very likely

LBJ: Would the President've got hit with the second one?

Hoover: No, the President wasn't hit with the second one.

*LBJ: I say, if Connally hadn't been in his way?**

Hoover: Oh, yes, yes, the President would no doubt have been hit.

LBJ: He would have been hit three times,

*Hoover: He would have been hit three times from the fifth floor of that building where we found the gun,** and the wrapping paper in which the gun was wrapped... [ellipsis in text] and upon which we found the full fingerprints of this man Oswald... [ellipsis mine; Hoover went on to recite the tale of what Oswald did from his alleged shootings of Kennedy and Connally to his alleged shooting of Police Officer J.D. Tippit].*

LBJ: You can prove that?

Hoover: Oh, yes, oh, yes, we can prove that. Then [after Tippit was shot] he walked about another two blocks and went to the theater, and the woman at the theater window selling the tickets was so suspicious the way he was acting, she said he was carrying a gun.... [ellipsis mine so we can leave the tale of Oswald's arrest and cut to the chase of Johnson's fingering the core problem with the frameup of Oswald.]

LBJ: Well your conclusion is (a) he's the one that did it; (b) the man he was after was the President; (c) he would have hit him three times, except the Governor turned.

*Hoover: I think that is correct.****

Let's take stock here. Hoover glibly told Johnson on

Day Eight that he could prove the case against Oswald, who had already been convicted in the press and executed in police custody before trial. Yet LBJ got Hoover to confirm repeatedly that Connally took a hit aimed at Kennedy. And LBJ made clear that he was not talking about a stray shot hitting Connally but about Connally getting between Kennedy and the shooter. What LBJ and Hoover left unstated was that Connally was seated in front of Kennedy and so could not have stopped a bullet fired at the President from behind whereas Oswald could only have been behind Kennedy,

Neither Johnson nor Hoover would say out loud that the shooter they suspected and the suspect spotlighted in the media were at opposite ends of Dealey Plaza. But both Johnson and Hoover were men of the world, and, while their discussion was behind closed doors, they must have known that "the walls have ears." Because openly admitting a frontal shot at Kennedy would discredit the official scapegoating of the "leftist" Oswald, Johnson and Hoover had to know they were sitting on a load of political dynamite, and neither was so rash as to strike a match to illuminate the situation.

My theory is that President Johnson was no fool and could smell a rat in the cooked-up evidence against Oswald. That he never exposed the fraud in what was being fed through the media can be laid to political expediency and not to misreading the evidence. However, the information professionals, with few exceptions, swallowed the stew of false and misleading information and now champion it as historical truth.

Historian Michael Beschloss deserves credit for compiling information about what Johnson knew and when he knew it, but his analysis of the transcripts is blinded by his faith in the official dogma of the JEK assassination. Consider his footnotes that imply that Johnson and Hoover couldn't tell their fronts from their rears.

On Johnson's observation that Connally got in the way of a shot, Beschloss notes* "Johnson misunderstands. Presuming that Hoover was correct in arguing that the gunman shot from behind and above, Connally, who sat in the jump seat in front of Kennedy, would not have been in the way." There is a presumption here, but is it either Hoover's or Johnson's? On tape, LBJ harped on his understanding of Connally's position in the line of fire, and Hoover fully agreed. And this understanding homes in on the very discrepancy between shooter and suspect that Mark Lane and other dissidents picked up on from Day One and that troubled objective reporters

until they deferred to the Warren Commission to resolve such contradictions.

On Hoover's placement of the evidence of a book-depository sniper on the fifth floor, Beschloss notes,** "Like the three empty cartridge cases, Oswald's rifle was actually found on the Depository's sixth floor." Yes, if the Warren report's findings are taken as literal sacred truth. The fifth/sixth-floor mixup was reflected the morning after the assassination in the 10 a.m. Nov. 23 LBJ-Hoover conversation, when Hoover reported that the book-depository rifle was found on the sixth floor but the shell casings were found on the fifth floor. Because Oswald could not plausibly have headed upstairs after the shooting and still been identified downstairs on the second floor less than two minutes later, the rifle finding was "corrected" down to the fifth floor by Nov. 29, and the rifle and cartridge findings were "corrected" up to the sixth floor sometime later — to the presumed relief of the fifth-floor witnesses, who would testify to the sound of shooting just above them. It seems that the authorities had more difficulty nailing down the so-called evidence than persuading the information elite of Oswald's guilt.

On Hoover's agreement with LBJ's (a)(b)(c) analysis, Beschloss notes,*** "Since he presumes that the shots came from behind and above the late President, Hoover is still getting it wrong." We can surely identify error in Hoover's reports of the shifty evidence against Oswald, but neither Hoover nor LBJ made self-wounding mistakes about the assassination, and any midcourse corrections in the evidence were expedient. Hoover had been overseeing the assassination investigation for a week; and Johnson had been just two cars behind Kennedy during the shooting and retained a personal stake in understanding what lay behind the ambush. Hoover and Johnson had done their homework on the ambush sufficient to discuss such details as Connally's turning in his seat before being shot. Their agreement that Connally took the "second" shot meant that they had some reason to think they understood about the sequence of shots. And Johnson homed in on the key issue of the direction of fire. So it is mindless to think that by Day Eight neither Hoover nor Johnson had the foggiest grasp of where President Kennedy and Governor Connally were during the shooting relative to the alleged "sniper's nest" in the book depository.

But the official suspect had already been lynched on Day Three, and he could not be unframed without dis-

crediting the local authorities, the FBI and other "informed sources" feeding the news professionals stories implicating Oswald. Then there's the problem that correcting the record might divert public attention to suspects with associations embarrassing to the authorities. This may explain why in their Nov. 25 exchange, the day after Oswald was iced, LBJ and Hoover discuss not at all what might lay behind the murders of Kennedy and Oswald (Beschloss, pp. 31 32). Instead, LBJ kicks off with his worry that someone in the Justice Department was lobbying the Washington Post to support assassination inquiry by a presidential commission; LBJ got Hoover to agree to help convince the press that it would be irresponsible to open the inquiry up to a media "circus." So Johnson appeared more worried about managing the news about the JFK assassination than the Dallas shootings themselves.

What the tapes' editor overlooks is that what the authorities presented as facts may not be what they personally believed. The current problem is that believers in the official myth of the JFK assassination dominate the mainstream media. So documentary evidence about what the authorities really knew won't be fairly presented in prime time. Johnson and Hoover could come back from the grave and declare that the assassination was misrepresented for reasons of political expediency and their testimony would be squelched by the information professionals who can not admit their own gullibility in disseminating propaganda. So any evidence of coverup in the JFK assassination will be ignored or bent to fit the establishment mindset.

Otherwise smart people are so far off base about the assassination that they can not see that the authorities were playing hardball politics in which truth is the first casualty. That political expediency governed the official spin on the assassination is apparent in Tip O'Neill's account of why, as Speaker of the House of Representatives, he appointed a panel of inquiry that reopened, however timidly, the JFK assassination can of worms. In his book, Man of the House, O'Neill cites a discussion with JFK's aides, Kenneth O'Donnell and David Powers, who were a few feet behind the President's car in Dealey Plaza when they thought that shots "came from behind the fence" [i.e. the grassy knoll to the right front of the President's car.] Of course, Kennedy's aides had shied away from challenging the official account in their testimony before the Warren Commission, and they broke from the official line only

after additional rounds of assassinations wracked the American political system. O'Donnell explained his commission testimony by saying, "I told the FBI what I had heard, but they said it couldn't have happened that way and that I must have been imagining things. So I testified the way they wanted me to. I just didn't want to stir up any more pain and trouble for the [Kennedy] family." Responding to O'Neill's astonishment about this failure to testify truly, O'Donnell replied, "Tip, you have to understand. The family — everybody wanted this thing behind them." And if the Kennedy loyalists bent their true beliefs under pressure, it is hardly surprising that others also bowed to the prevailing wind.(2)

To be fair, Beschloss does note that Johnson probes for signs of a plot in LBJ's question about whether he himself was targeted (Beschloss, p. 54), "Searching for evidence of conspiracy, Johnson knows that bullets fired at both the President and Vice President might mean a plot to bring down the government." But Beschloss skips past the obvious point that LBJ most needed to know how what lay behind the ambush could affect him. And so LBJ's probe aims too deep for superficial scholarship to follow.

It's not just the possibility of a conspiracy that would bother Johnson, it's whether the ambush was laid by Kennedy's enemies or enemies of the state. National security and Johnson's life could hinge on grasping the difference. If Kennedy were killed by the nation's enemies, then Johnson could not afford to let them get away with it. Forget that retaliation against the nation's enemies could lead to global war. If Kennedy were killed by his own enemies, then exposing them would discredit Johnson's ascent to the Presidency even if he were the innocent immediate beneficiary of the plot. Forget about truth and justice. If the assassination were a senseless act of random violence, then we could forget about political motivations for the assassination. But Johnson could not risk ignoring the politics of the situation, and so he had to think deeply about how things were moving and how to ride it out.

Johnson could not have believed the tale of Oswald as a lone assassin because LBJ had put his finger on the shooter-suspect discrepancy. So either Oswald wasn't the only shooter or he was an innocent patsy. If Oswald was part of a plot, then his apparent radical left associations would suggest a "commie conspiracy." If Oswald was taking the rap for others, then his heavily publicized leftwing associations would divert attention from

the rightwing extremists that accounted for the cheering in Dallas on Day One.(3)

President Johnson surely understood which way the wind was blowing and steered accordingly. In their Nov. 29, Day Eight, exchange, Hoover tells Johnson that the FBI is pursuing Oswald's leftist ties, particularly to Castro. But on the morning after the assassination Hoover had clued in LBJ that there was something fishy about Oswald's links to the communist masters of conspiracy. In his Day Two response to LBJ's question, "Have you established any more about the visit to the Soviet embassy in Mexico in September?"**** Hoover related that, while the CIA identified "Oswald" as visiting the Soviet and Cuban embassies in Mexico City, both the identifying photograph and audiotape of this man was not the Oswald held by the Dallas police. "It appears that there is a second person who was at the Soviet embassy down there," Hoover said (Beschloss, pp. 22-23).*****

On Day Eight, Hoover also addresses other CIA-channeled disinformation. I quote the transcript (Beschloss, p. 53):

*Hoover: This angle in Mexico is giving us a great deal of trouble because the story there is of this man Oswald getting \$6,500 from the Cuban embassy and then coming back to this country with it. We're not able to prove that fact, but the information was that he was there on the 18th of September in Mexico City and we are able to prove conclusively he was in New Orleans that day. Now then they've changed the dates. The story came in changing the dates to the 28th of September and he was in Mexico City on the 28th. Now the Mexican police have again arrested this woman [Silvia] Duran, who is a member of the Cuban embassy ... and we're going to confront her with the original informant, who saw the money pass, so he says, and we're going to put the lie detector on him.******

Let's take stock again. Hoover had reason to suspect this tale of Oswald as a paid Castro Cuban agent because the FBI established that Oswald was in New Orleans when the disinformation placed him in Mexico City. This falsification didn't immediately discredit the story implicating Castro's Cuba in the assassination because the CIA "corrected" the date of the Cuban embassy payoff. But Johnson was not hoodwinked, and the next day he secured an admission on the taped record from the CIA Director that the Cuban embassy story was

a fabrication. I quote the 3:14 p.m. Nov. 30 transcript of Director of Central Intelligence John McCone (Beschloss, p. 78):

McCone: We got a phone call from Mexico City that this fellow Alvarado that I was telling you about this morning signed a statement that all the statements he'd made in connection with that matter have been false.

LBJ: [chuckles]

McCone: ... [ellipsis in text] Apparently there's no substance in it at all. He explained that he had wanted to ingratiate himself to the United States interests in order to gain admission to the United States, and to work with the security forces here. So we're sending down a whole series of questions to be sure this isn't misleading, but this is the opinion of the [CIA Mexico City] station and I guess the FBI... [ellipsis in text] This looks to me like it probably washes that out entirely,

LBJ: Okay, my friend, thank you.

Now let's look at how Beschloss' notes handle, without raising any alarms, this evidence that the CIA dangled stories implicating Oswald as a communist assassin and Hoover and Johnson spat back the bait: On Oswald's link to the Soviet masters of assassination:****

"A CIA memo written that day [Nov. 23] reported that Oswald had visited Mexico City in September and talked to a Soviet vice consul whom the CIA knew as a KGB expert in assassination and sabotage. The memo warned that if Oswald had indeed been part of a foreign conspiracy, he might be killed before he could reveal it to U.S. authorities (National Archive),"

Did the national security agencies take any steps to protect Oswald and what he knew from the fate anticipated by the CIA or was it understood that the "warning" was propaganda intended to implicate the Feds?

On the chinks in the evidence for the implied scenario of the KGB using Oswald to kill Kennedy:*****

"The tape and photograph came from CIA surveillance, The discrepancy has yet to be fully explained."

Did the CIA experience technical difficulties with their audiovisual equipment that created the illusion of a "second Oswald" or were some CIA men pushing false information with horrendous implications? And is 34 years too short a time to get an honest account of how a "second man" was falsely identified as Oswald at the

point where the trail of the alleged assassin otherwise appeared to lead back to the camp of our nation's enemies?

On the allegation of the Cuban embassy paying Oswald to advance an assassination plot:*****

"While in Mexico City in September, Oswald had talked to Silvia Duran about obtaining a Cuban visa. On November 26 [Day Four], John McCone had informed [national security adviser McGeorge] Bundy by memo that a Nicaraguan named Gilberto Alvarado had told the U.S. embassy in Mexico City that he had seen Oswald on September 18 discussing assassination and taking money from someone inside the Cuban embassy. McCone warned that his information was as yet completely unevaluated."

Were the U.S. security agencies engaged in a disinterested search for truth or were political agendas being advanced in this trading in false, corrected, and recorrected information? Would Alvarado have recanted and McCone have repudiated Alvarado if Johnson had not wanted the dirty story spiked? Caught in by the ruling mindset about the JFK assassination, Beechioss appears clueless on these questions. In fairness, his transcriptions of the White House tapes do reveal how LBJ dealt with the problem, which was to resist being stampered by allegations channeled through the CIA that Oswald was a communist catspaw in the JEK assassination. The tape transcripts don't record directly LBJ's dealings with Earl Warren, and perhaps it would have been indelicate to record the President giving the Chief Justice his marching orders on the assassination inquiry. But the Day Eight transcript of LBJ pressuring a very reluctant Sen. Richard Russell to serve on the assassination commission record the President's concern with reassuring the public that there was no communist plot behind the assassination (Beschloss, pp. 66-72). Note that LBJ opposed blaming the communists the day before McCone confirmed that the Alvarado story of a Cuban plot was phony.

Johnson and his allies could not have been covering up for an assassination plot by our nation's enemies because to do so would expose the nation and the President to further threat. They rejected "evidence" of a communist conspiracy that they had every reason to believe was false.

Of course news professionals, including Walter Cronkite, later reported that Johnson confided that he

suspected Castro was behind the JFK assassination. This "confidence" came from a "deep background" (not intended for publication) briefing that got leaked to the public with followup confirmations. The information elite was smart enough not to embrace the Castro-did-it theory as truth, but publicizing that LBJ suspected Castro served to distract from and discredit other allegations.

Hoover also surely knew that JFK was not killed by communists. In a previous issue of this journal, I pointed out that the FBI sabotage of a setup that would allow federal agents to monitor Marina Oswald's communications with Soviet agents establishes that the feds were confident that there was no communist conspiracy to expose and that they feared Marina might reveal information embarrassing to the United States. (4) So the CIA men pushing information implicating the Reds in the JFK assassination were fools or worse. And Hoover and Johnson must have understood that.

The political solution to the incendiary information scapegoating an apparent leftist was to portray Oswald as a nut who shot our President for no rational reason. This political accommodation eliminated the need for retribution against political extremists. Johnson both forestalled another Cold War anti-Red witchhunt and avoided making Kennedy's real mortal enemies his own enemies. The "evidence" for Oswald as lone-nut gunman would come mainly from the testimony of his wife. The groundwork for Marina's assistance had been laid by Day Eight when Hoover informed LBJ that he had authorized guaranteeing the "hostile" widow that she would not be deported — in exchange for her cooperation (Beschloss, p. 56). As we know, Marina kept her end of the deal by portraying Lee as a kooky gunman who would shoot at political figures regardless of their political stripes. Because Marina undoubtedly was not given the option of implicating anyone who actually wanted Kennedy dead and she had to avoid being seen as enemy spawn herself, her spin on her husband and his intrigues probably came as close to the truth as one could expect. The contradictions in her testimony are small potatoes compared to what LBJ and Hoover knew. (5)

The President and his commission on the assassination played along with the frameup of Oswald, but they also contained it to the "random violence" explanation that suited the political establishment and allowed Johnson to dominate the nation's political agenda in 1964 and win that year's Presidential election by a land-

slide as the nation's consummate "moderate" leader. Johnson knew the score and how to play the game.

*, **, ***, ****, ***** are keys to Beschloss' notes in the order I cite and discuss them.

Notes

- (1) Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964, edited with commentary by Michael R. Beschloss (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).
- (2) Tip O'Neill, Man of the House (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 178.
- (3) I first heard about Dallas school children cheering the news JFK's death on a CBS-news radio station in New York City the day after the assassination. This report sparked anger in Dallas against and within the CBS network because it implied hate so strong among the locals that it came out in the unguarded cheering of their children. Although CBS would drop that line of reporting and get aboard the Oswald-did-it bandwagon, the story of children cheering the assassination in some Dallas classrooms was confirmed by other sources reported in the New York Times Nov. 25, 1963.
- (4) The Fourth Decade, November, 1995, pp. 11-12. In that letter, I warned that some of the declassified information I quoted from the Gannett News Service story was "disinformation," although I was not prepared to prove it at the time. The most suspect statement was, "Castro was aware of Oswald's angry threat to kill JFK, made at the Cuban consulate in Mexico." That libel is essentially the Alvarado story stripped of the payoff that would implicate Oswald as an agent of communist Cuba but redressed for the portrait of Oswald as a pro-Castro communist lone-nut assassin. Researchers who seek truth in the declassified documents should beware that they contain planted "evidence".
- (5) The contradictions in Marina Oswald's testimony were identified more than 30 years ago in Sylvia Meagher, Accessories After the Fact (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967; New York: Random House, 1976; New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

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