

Cuba and JFK

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WASHINGTON - If Oliver Stone can play make-believe with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, so can everyone else.

Here's my own view: Lee Harvey Oswald did the deed alone, but was put up to it by Cuban agents seeking revenge for the CIA's unsuccessful plots to kill President Fidel Castro. It wasn't a conspiracy. Yet there is more to the story than we know.

I originally heard this scenario from President Johnson, who believed it, although he had no proof. Compared to all the competing versions, it makes the most sense.

Producer Oliver Stone is about to open the conspiracy floodgates with his hyped-up movie "JFK," about that fateful day in Dallas. The 28th anniversary of Kennedy's death was Friday, Nov. 22.

The film, which debuts Dec. 20, reportedly dumps on the Warren Commission's conclusion that Kennedy was killed by a mentally unstable Oswald, firing three times and acting alone. It dabbles in unproven conspiracy theories, including the suggestion that Kennedy was killed by warmongers who feared he might end U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

That's nonsense. In those days, the Vietnam War was still in its early stages and not yet unpopular here at home. It was not widely viewed as a long-term major issue. Oswald was not worked up about it.

But Cuba is a different matter.

Roughly a quarter of a century ago, Castro was our most vexing bogeyman, flaunting his Soviet connections only 90 miles from our shores. We were still smarting from a failed U.S.-sponsored attempt to invade the Bay of Pigs and topple him. Although Kennedy had recently won a confrontation that turned back Soviet missiles headed for Cuba, the crisis had brought us closer to nuclear war than at any time since World War II.

Oswald, a self-proclaimed Marxist who had once applied to become a Soviet citizen, was sympathetic to the Castro government. Even nut cases can hold strong political views.

In September of 1963, Oswald was living in New Orleans. He was arrested in a scuffle while distributing pro-Castro leaflets. He formed a Fair Play for Cuba Committee, of which he was the only member. He appeared on radio programs to praise Cuba's revolutionary ideals.

An Associated Press story in the New Orleans Times-Picayune on Sept. 9 on page 7 quoted Castro at a Havana reception as accusing the president and the CIA of plotting

his death. The story, written by Daniel Harker, noted that Castro warned "United States leaders" that "if they are aiding terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders ... they themselves will not be safe."

Oswald's wife Marina later said that he pored over newspapers avidly, including the Times-Picayune. He could easily have read Castro's message.

Eighteen days later, Oswald took a bus to Mexico City and went directly to the Cuban Embassy to apply for a visa. He was told that he could only get a transit visa, conditioned upon continuing on to the Soviet Union. The Soviets, however, turned him down; his Oct. 1 call from the Soviet Embassy to the Cuban Embassy trying to work out a visit was recorded by the CIA.

During his 15-day stay in Mexico City, Oswald was seen at private parties conversing with Mexican communists and Cuban diplomats.

The Warren Commission found "no evidence to show that Oswald was employed, persuaded or encouraged by any foreign government to assassinate President Kennedy or that he was an agent of any foreign government."

But it had failed to energetically pursue the Cuban connection. Chairman Earl Warren, the chief justice, refused staff requests for permission to go to Mexico City to track Oswald's activities. Warren acted at the behest of the CIA, which did not want any link established between its own botched attempts to kill Castro and Kennedy's murder.

A classified letter sent by the late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to Warren Commission Counsel J. Lee Rankin, however, quotes a source claiming Castro told supporters that Oswald had vowed in the presence of Cuban consulate officials in Mexico to assassinate the president.

More than a decade later, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, chaired by the late Frank Church, investigated and disclosed five unsuccessful CIA assassination plots against foreign leaders, one of whom was Castro. It documented CIA worries that Kennedy's death might have been an act of retaliation.

But back in the early 1960s, covert CIA activities were considered a matter of deep national security, never to be discussed in public. There were also fears that too much attention to potential Cuban involvement in a murder plot might arouse political passions and build irresistible pressure for military revenge against Cuba.

And not even Sen. Barry Goldwater, running for president as a hawk, wanted to be dragged into a war with Cuba that might possibly draw in the Soviet Union.

So the Warren Commission fingered the killer. And went no further.



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