

ABC Finds K.G.B. Fickle on Oswald

By BILL CARTER

Until about a month ago, ABC News was convinced it had a chance to provide some stunning and exclusive information about the greatest unresolved story of the 20th century: the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Thanks to a commitment from Vadim V. Bakatin, the new chairman of the Soviet secret police, the K.G.B., ABC was to have been granted access to the secret K.G.B. file on Lee Harvey Oswald.

But circumstances changed quickly, and tomorrow night, when the ABC News program "Nightline" presents a special broadcast about the K.G.B.'s Oswald file, it will be, in the words of the program's executive producer, Tom Bettag, "intriguing but clearly not conclusive."

What ABC has, Mr. Bettag said, are "the headlines from the file," including what he called the overall Soviet conclusions about Oswald, who lived

in the U.S.S.R. for two-and-a-half years before returning to the United States and becoming, the Warren Commission said, the man who shot President Kennedy in Dallas 28 years ago tomorrow.

The K.G.B. conclusions, Mr. Bettag said, are that Oswald was "not capable of having been an American agent and not a threat to anybody." He added, "They clearly question whether he was capable of acting alone in the assassination, and their conclusion is that he simply wasn't capable of doing it."

All of these conclusions would have been bolstered by an extensive examination of the file. But the early agreement with Mr. Bakatin unraveled, for reasons that seem to range from the sudden resistance of the K.G.B. bureaucracy to Mr. Bakatin's reluctance to decide which of two aggressive suitors, ABC and CNN, should have access to the file.

Mr. Bettag said ABC's access had

been carefully established through months of contact with Mr. Bakatin, beginning in the days after the Soviet coup failed in August. Mr. Bakatin established a cordial relationship with a "Nightline" reporter, Forrest Sawyer, who stayed in Moscow for many weeks, trying to persuade Mr. Bakatin to open the Oswald file to ABC.

Finally, in late September, Mr. Bakatin assented, on the condition that ABC devote a special broadcast to the Oswald file. Mr. Sawyer was then allowed inside K.G.B. headquarters and was taken to the room where the Oswald file has been kept "under lock and key," Mr. Bettag said, "in a musty room, on pieces of paper squirreled away in cardboard folders."

Mr. Sawyer also discussed the file with its K.G.B. case officer, who outlined the broad conclusions the K.G.B. reached about Oswald. Then on Oct. 5, ABC was able to bring a camera into the room.

Mr. Bettag said the file was 10 inches thick. He said it showed that Soviet officials had deep suspicions about the ex-Marine who claimed to be a defector and kept him under constant surveillance, planting agents to work beside him at a factory in Minsk, bugging the room where he courted his future wife, Marina, even giving him a gun and monitoring his shooting ability at a firing range.

'Things Changed Suddenly'

"Clearly we felt we had hit the mother lode," Mr. Bettag said. ABC made plans to document all the details contained in the full file.

But before that could happen, "things changed suddenly," Mr. Bettag said. "The bureaucracy suddenly seemed to be striking back." He said veteran K.G.B. officials started asking Mr. Bakatin how he could be giving access to such sensitive material to American journalists before it was even available to Soviet journalists.

"They told Bakatin this was illegal, this was a top secret file," Mr. Bettag said. He added that ABC was aware that CNN had also been pressing for access to the file.

CNN's president, Tom Johnson, said yesterday that he had asked Mr. Bakatin for access to the Oswald file after the coup attempt and that the CNN Moscow Bureau had pressed the request. But he said CNN did not complain to Mr. Bakatin about ABC's being granted exclusive access.

Whatever the reason, ABC's access dried up after Oct. 5. ABC was told that the Government would undertake to declassify the file but that the process would take months. At the end of that process, the file would probably be made available to all journalists.

At that point, Mr. Bettag said, ABC decided it would "go with what we had."

The bulk of "Nightline" tomorrow night will be devoted to a discussion in which the anchor, Ted Koppel, tells Mr. Sawyer what he saw of the file and the conclusions he was told the K.G.B. had reached.

Mr. Bettag said the program would be more impressionistic than detailed and probably would not answer any of the lingering questions about the assassination. "It comes out saying: Boy, here's another damn twist in this story," Mr. Bettag said.

The overall result left the "Nightline" reporters and producers frustrated. "It's a journalist's nightmare," Mr. Bettag said, "to be on the edge of one of the most exciting stories that Americans care most intensely about, but having seen the Promised Land and getting within 10 feet of it, to see it yanked away." He added, "At the same time, we have to be happy to have gotten this far."