

Who shot JFK?

WEARING white cotton gloves, they pored over the murky pictures of "the Umbrella Man" of Dealey Plaza.

They read the top-secret CIA report allegedly placing Lee Harvey Oswald at a party in Mexico City just before the shooting and recoiled from the gruesome autopsy close-ups of Oswald's wounds.

Serious scholars, journalists, curious tourists and a few flakes had jammed into a research room of the National Archives last week to explore a vast new trove of government documents on the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

"Fidel was behind it!" exclaimed a 20-something conspiracy freak wandering among the reporters and photographers who had come to record the scene. "I'm talking Mafia, exiles, some CIA, maybe some generals. They killed President Kennedy!"

Who really shot JFK? Many Americans actually believe the version offered by Oliver Stone's movie *JFK*: that a cabal of senior military and intelligence officials, backed by Lyndon Johnson, conspired to kill Kennedy before he could withdraw from Vietnam.

In 1992 Congress hoped to finally set the record straight by ordering the Federal Government, including the CIA, the FBI and the Pentagon, to make public all records on the assassination within 300 days. Last week, on day 301, the National Archives opened up a cache of 800,000 pages of documents.

They do not, however, tell all. Many have been heavily blacked out or replaced by pink slips stamped "Restricted." According to the Assassination Archives and Research Centre, a nonprofit organisation run by conspiracy buffs, the CIA has withheld 160,000 documents.

An independent panel that is supposed to review withheld documents has yet to be appointed. It will be years before the entire truth comes out. And, in the meantime, the believers in the Fourth Shot and the Man on the Grassy Knoll will continue to spin their theories.

In an effort to resolve these mysteries *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post* and *CBS News* have embarked on a joint project to examine just how the United States Government reacted in the week immediately following the shooting. The results of this investigation, which will be published by *Newsweek* and the *New Zealand Herald* around the time of the 30th anniversary of the assassination in November, so far do not support the sinister conclusions of Stone and other conspiracy theorists.

There was, to be sure, a cover-up — but probably not of a plot to kill the President. Far more likely is that officials at the CIA and FBI withheld evidence to conceal their own mistakes and keep hidden the CIA's hare-brained schemes to assassinate foreign leaders.

The documents revealed last week show the CIA scrambling almost desperately to learn whether Lee Harvey Oswald was a communist agent. The first reports that November weekend were troubling.

Only a few weeks earlier Oswald had been seen entering the Soviet and Cuban embassies in Mexico City, and wiretaps heard him dealing with a consular official who was, in fact, a KGB officer who handled "wet affairs" — assassinations.

But within a few days agency officials were reasonably satisfied that Oswald's deal-

Thirty years after the assassination of President Kennedy a stack of just-released government documents brings the conspiracy buffs out in force. They are right about a cover-up, says *Newsweek* magazine, but it probably wasn't a plot to kill the President.

ings with the KGB were nothing more than a "grim coincidence." KGB officials routinely posed as lowly consular officials and Oswald's conversations amounted to nothing more than innocuous requests for a visa.

The Soviet Union, American intelligence officials reasoned, was not about to start the third world war.

The White House was understandably eager to reassure the public on that score and Lyndon Johnson moved quickly to set up a commission that would — he hoped — find that Kennedy had been shot by a lone gunman. The CIA and FBI were ordered to co-operate, which they did — but only up to a point.

After the shooting the FBI did a very professional job of tracking down Oswald's movements and the gun he had used to shoot Kennedy. But the FBI's legendary director, J. Edgar Hoover, was horrified to discover that his Dallas field office may have bungled an opportunity to head off the assassination.

In early November Oswald sent a threatening note (the contents remain murky) to the FBI's headquarters in Dallas. But the agents there failed to follow up on it. The agent who got the warning, James Hosty, was ordered to get rid of the evidence (he flushed it down the toilet).

Hoover later lied to the Warren Commission, saying the bureau had no warning that Oswald was dangerous.

The CIA was also guilty of holding back. For three years the agency had been trying

to kill Fidel Castro, even going so far as to hire the Mafia to do the job. This information was clearly relevant to any investigation of Kennedy's assassination.

Suppose Castro had had Kennedy shot in revenge? Indeed, on the day Kennedy was killed a CIA agent was handing a poison pen to a Cuban dissident who claimed he could get to Castro.

But the Warren Commission was never told. Why? Former CIA officials disingenuously reply that they were never asked. They rationalise that Allen Dulles, their former director who had launched the assassination plots, was a member of the Warren Commission.

The CIA in those days did what it pleased with little oversight. The agency worked for the President. But presidents wanted "plausible deniability."

The picture of the agency as a "rogue elephant" has given rise to theories that it was the CIA itself that killed Kennedy. The spooks were mad at Kennedy, the theory goes, because he doomed the Bay of Pigs operation by refusing to order air support at the crucial moment — and then blamed the agency for the failure of the invasion.

But if there was a nefarious plot it could hardly have come from the upper levels. Richard Helms, who ran the agency's covert operations in 1963, was a shrewd and cautious bureaucrat who had opposed the Bay of Pigs.

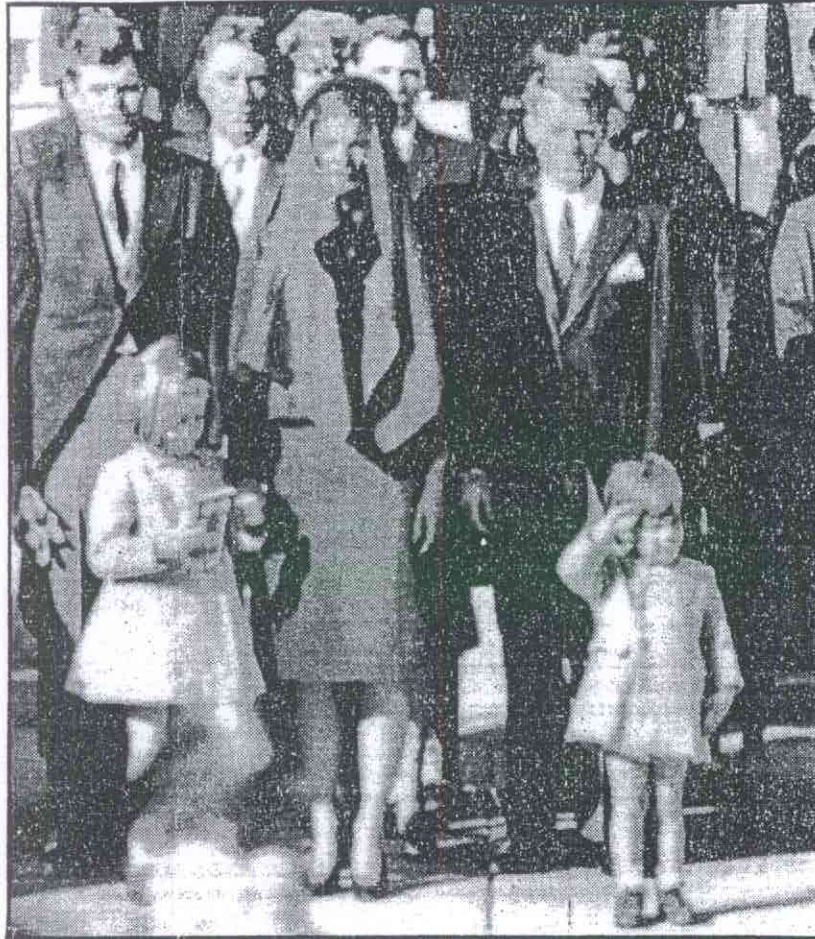
It is conceivable of course that some lower-level spook took revenge, perhaps in cahoots with right-wing Cubans who felt betrayed by the Bay of Pigs. The documents released last week will raise suspicions still further because they suggest that the CIA may have mysteriously destroyed photos of Oswald taken while he was entering the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City.

Oswald came and went from the Soviet and Cuban embassies no fewer than five times. It seems unlikely that the hidden CIA cameras stationed outside could have missed him. The photos, the fantasists suggest, would have shown not only Oswald but a CIA co-conspirator.

But this remains far-out conjecture. More concrete is the evidence that the CIA covered up its plots to kill Castro. Indeed, there was a cover-up within the agency. James Angleton, the famously spooky counter-intelligence chief who was charged with heading the agency's investigation of the Kennedy assassination, was never told of the poison-pen plot against Castro.

The reason may have been bureaucratic: the CIA is tightly compartmentalised. It is also likely that the official running the operation to overthrow Castro, Desmond FitzGerald, wanted to keep Angleton, a relentless conspiracy theorist himself, away from his domain. FitzGerald was personally embarrassed because a month before the assassination he had gone to meet a Cuban agent in Paris against warnings from his own

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● John F. Kennedy jun salutes his father's casket. To the left is his sister Caroline and behind the children are Ted, Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy.

advisers that the man might be a double agent for Castro.

The CIA was also loath to tell the Warren Commission about its Mob ties. This is more fuel for the conspiracy theorists. Chicago don Sam Giancana thought that he had bought himself a measure of security by helping the CIA with its assassination plots (not to mention leaning on corrupt Chicago polls to support Jack Kennedy in Illinois in 1960). So he was infuriated when the Kennedys came into office and began cracking down on the Mob. Did he order a "hit" on the President in revenge?

Top law-enforcement officials from the Kennedy era say that at the time the question never really came up. There was an investigation into the Mob ties of Jack Ruby, the small-time hood who shot Oswald, but the trail led nowhere.

It seems hard to believe that the Mafia angle was just overlooked. Bobby Kennedy, for one, is said to have worried that as Attorney-General he caused his brother's death by vigorously prosecuting the Mob.

But FBI officials say that there was no evidence to back Bobby's fears. According to William Roemer, the FBI agent who bugged Giancana's Chicago headquarters, the mobsters muttered threats and imprecations against the Kennedys but nothing that

sounded anything like an actual plot to kill the President.

In any case Lee Harvey Oswald made for a very unlikely Mafia trigger man. If Oswald had been hired by the Mob to shoot Kennedy why did he first try to kill a retired right-wing general, Edwin Walker, on April 10, 1963, before Dallas?

Lee Harvey Oswald was a pathetic mama's boy who beat his wife and dreamed of living in a socialist paradise. A new book, *Case Closed*, by Gerald Posner, vividly portrays the crazed Oswald and makes a strong argument that he was, in fact, Kennedy's lone assassin.

But the case of the Kennedy assassination will probably never be closed. Last week as Mike Hines, an amateur assassination buff from Minneapolis, sifted through documents in the National Archives he knew he was not about to find the smoking gun.

"You read one thing here, another there," he said. "The Warren Commission says this, a movie says something else . . . you wonder how it all connects.

"I'm waiting for someone to stand up and shout, 'Bingo! Here it is!' But that ain't gonna happen."

Not even in all likelihood after the Government opens up all its files.