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MIAMI New Times

For 38 years the CIA has lied about its man in Miami, his work with militant Cuban exiles, and what he knew about John F. Kennedy's killer

«A Special Report»

REVELATION

19.63

By Jefferson Morley

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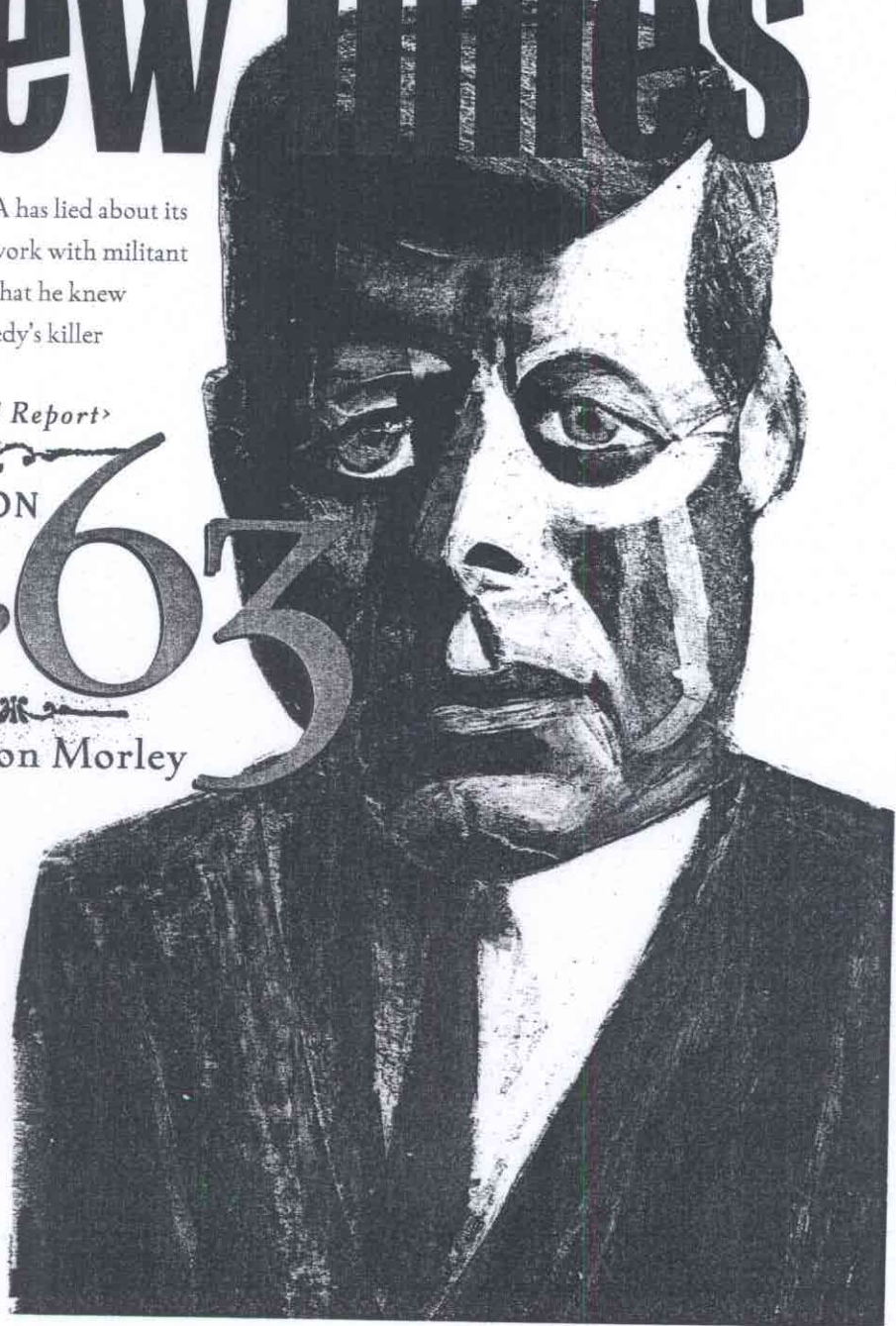
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The man is Richard Helms, former director of the CIA. Now retired and living in the swank Foxhall section of Washington, D.C., the 89-year-old Helms declined interview requests for this story, the basic facts of which have emerged from recently declassified JFK files.

Through four intensive investigations of the Kennedy assassination, Helms withheld information about a loyal CIA officer in Miami — a dapper, multilingual lawyer and father of three — who guided and monitored the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil (the Revolutionary

IN THE EARLY SIXTIES, THE DRE WAS AT THE CUTTING EDGE OF THE CUBAN RESISTANCE MOVEMENT.

Student Directorate, or DRE). His name was George Joannides, and his charges in the DRE were among the most notoriously outspoken and militant anti-Castro Cuban exiles in the early Sixties. For several weeks in the summer of 1963, those same exiles tailed, came to blows with, and harassed Lee Harvey Oswald, who just a few months later changed the course of U.S. history.

Helms never told the Warren Commission — the presidential panel set up after Kennedy's death to investigate the assassination — about his officer's relationship with the exile group. He never disclosed that the CIA was funding the DRE when it had contact with Oswald, who was agitating on Castro's behalf in New Orleans in August 1963. A skillful bureaucrat, Helms withheld files on Oswald's pro-Castro activities from an in-house investigation of the accused assassin (and when the veteran officer in charge of that probe protested, Helms relieved him of his duties).

Helms stonewalled again in 1978, when Congress created the House Select Committee on Assassinations to re-examine Kennedy's murder. Once more the CIA kept every detail of Joannides's mission in Miami under wraps. Worse still, in veiled contempt of that inquiry, the CIA assigned to Joannides himself the job of deflecting sensitive inquiries from the committee's investigators.

As recently as 1998, the agency still disavowed any knowledge of Joannides's actions in Miami. John Tunheim, now a federal judge in Minneapolis, chaired the federal Assassination Records Review Board, which between 1994 and 1998 opened more than

four million pages of long-secret documents — including a thin file on Joannides. Yet even then the CIA was claiming that no one in the agency had had any contact with the DRE throughout 1963. The Joannides story, Tunheim says today, "shows that the CIA wasn't interested in the truth about the assassination."

Journalist and author Gerald Posner, whose 1993 best seller *Case Closed* argued that the DRE's harassment of Oswald was a "humiliation" that propelled him on his way to shoot the president, says he finds the Joannides piece of the JFK puzzle to be "obviously important" and suggests that the CIA is "covering up its own incompetence." In his view the agency's "intransigence, lying, and dissembling are once again contributing to suspicions of conspiracy."

G. Robert Blakey, who served as general counsel for the House Select Committee on Assassinations, says the agency's silence compromised that investigation. "If I had known then what Joannides was doing in 1963, I would have demanded that the agency take him off the job [of responding to committee inquiries]," he asserts. "I would have sat him down and interviewed him. Under oath."

The story begins on November 6, 1962. The Cuban Missile Crisis had just come to an end the week before, when Kennedy accepted the Soviet Union's decision to withdraw all its missiles from the island. The fear of nuclear war that had lasted for thirteen anxious days was easing.

That afternoon the *Evening Star* in Washington hit the newsstands with a disturbing front-page headline: "Exiles Tell of Missiles Hidden in Cuba Caves." The *Star*'s scoop, which alleged the existence of seven previously unidentified and cam-

ouflaged missile sites around the island, was based on information provided by the Revolutionary Student Directorate.

At the time the DRE was the single most popular exile group in Miami, according to a CIA survey, with a hard-core following of 2200 supporters. Since the group's founding on the University of Havana campus in early 1960, it had been receiving funding, training, and logistical support for its leaders, thanks to a CIA officer named David Atlee Phillips, known for his role in the 1954 overthrow of a leftist government in Guatemala. By the time of the missile crisis, the agency was giving the group's young leaders in Miami \$25,000 each month.

The CIA wanted the DRE "for one simple reason," recalls Luis Fernandez-Rocha, the Directorate's secretary-general at the time and a 23-year-old who had been expelled from medical school at the University of Havana. "We had the best organization in Latin America they had ever seen."

Fernandez-Rocha's boast is not idle. In the early Sixties, the DRE was at the cutting edge of the Cuban resistance movement. Founded by Alberto Muller, Ernesto Travieso, and Juan Manuel Salvat, the Directorate was born during a

Cuba Shelling Laid to Exiles; We Warn 'Em

By MICHAEL O'NEILL

Washington, Aug. 25 (NEWS Bureau).—The U.S. spiked Cuban charges of American aggression tonight by pinning the blame for last night's shelling of Havana on a group of Cuban student exiles in Miami and warning that the exiles would be punished.

The State Department, in late today, formally warned action by any group "would be taken under the U.S. Neutrality Laws." The department said an investigation showed that the exiles who launched last night's attack belonged to the Student Revolutionary Directorate (DRE) in Miami.

Launched from Bahama, the organization, a militant anti-Castro group, reportedly launched the attack from two



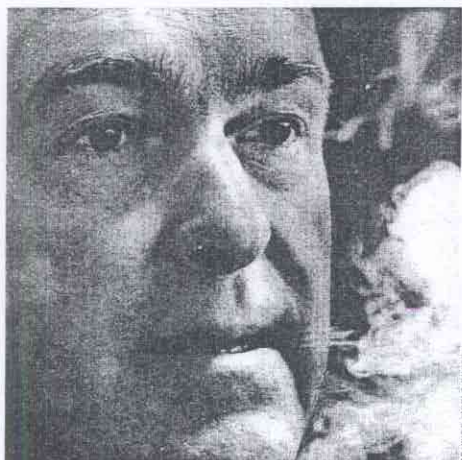
With help from CIA patron David Atlee Phillips, the DRE took a shot at Castro late one summer's night in 1962

cracked down on his foes. Salvat eluded capture, but scores of DRE sympathizers wound up in prison. In a blow to the DRE, cofounder Muller was among those caught and imprisoned. Others took refuge in the packed embassies of sympathetic Latin-American nations.

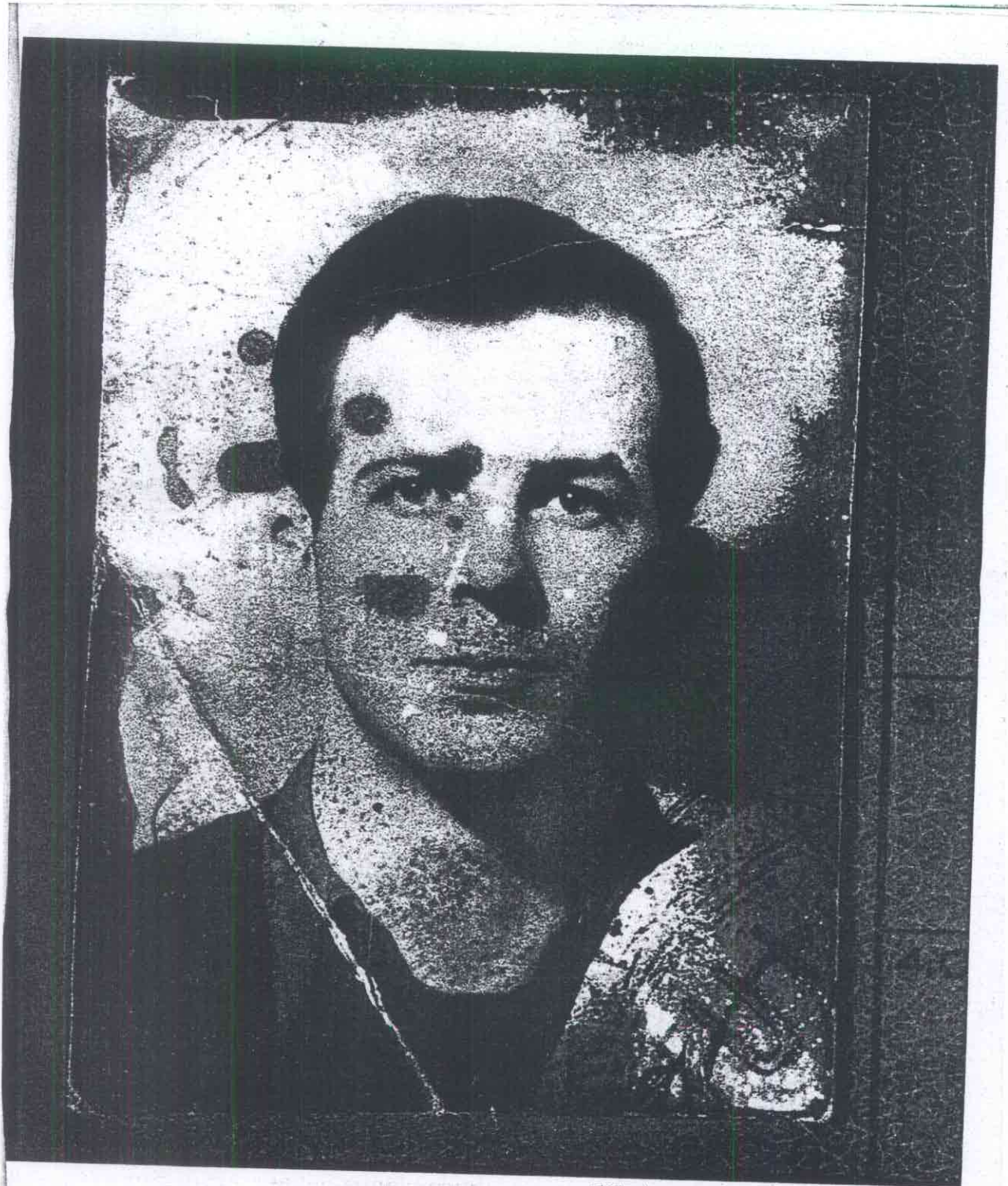
As the Directorate's leaders struggled back to Miami, they embodied the bitter mood that enveloped the city in 1961. But with assistance from David Atlee Phillips and the CIA, Salvat, Fernandez-Rocha, and engineer Isidro "Chilo" Borja revived the DRE.

In the summer of 1962, Fernandez-Rocha sneaked back into Cuba and spent several dangerous months trying to shore up the group's clandestine network. With continuous funding from the U.S. government, the DRE headquarters in Miami was able to send delegates to international conferences in Vienna and Helsinki. The group published a newspaper, *Trinchera* (Trenches), and an English-language newsletter, the *Cuban Report*, which often was cited by New York Sen. Kenneth Keating, a leading Republican critic of JFK's Cuba policy. Additional DRE chapters sprang up in cities throughout North and South America.

To announce the revival of the Directorate, the group's military section launched its most spectacular deed on the evening of August 24, 1962. Under the leadership of Salvat and Borja, two boats of DRE militants carried out a midnight fusillade attack on the Rosita Hornedo hotel in suburban Miramar, where Cas-



For nearly four decades CIA director Richard Helms managed to hide his ties to Oswald's antagonists in Miami





When Lee Harvey Oswald handed out pro-Castro pamphlets on a New Orleans street corner in August 1963, the CIA-funded DRE was watching carefully

Revelation continued from page 27

Shackley's assessment was on target. In a strategy memo to the Directorate in May 1963, Salvat proposed that the DRE continue to take CIA funding while the military section, under Borja's leadership, would act covertly to evade Washington's control. The DRE's goal, Salvat wrote in the memo (preserved in the University of Miami's Cuban Heritage Collection), was "to strike a surprise blow so strong as to bring about the fulfillment of [the military section's] plan" to overthrow Castro.

As Borja safeguarded the group's boats and guns on Catalina Island, just off the southern coast of the Dominican Republic, he heard from a close friend, Carlos Bringuier, with whom he had grown up on the beaches of Tarara, just east of Havana. "Carlitos," Borja reminisces, "We called him Vistilla [near-sighted], because he was a little bit blind, and his glasses were this thick. He was our delegate in New Orleans. He notified us that this guy was putting in propaganda all throughout New Orleans, and he wanted our directions."

The guy was Lee Harvey Oswald.

At age 23 Oswald had lived an itinerant life. He grew up in New Orleans and New York City, and enlisted in the Marines

when he was seventeen years old. After a series of tours in the Far East, he asked for a discharge in 1959. Sympathetic to communism, he moved to the Soviet Union and lived for two years in Minsk. He married a Russian girl but became disillusioned with socialism and brought his wife back to the United States. They settled in New Orleans, where, by the spring of 1963, he began to call attention to himself as a supporter of Fidel Castro.

Carlos Bringuier told Borja that Oswald had tried to infiltrate the group on August 5 by walking into the local headquarters of the Directorate and offering to train commandos to fight Castro. Four days later a DRE supporter reported to Bringuier that he'd seen Oswald on a street corner handing out pamphlets for the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC), the best-known pro-Castro group in the United States. Bringuier and his friends went to find the double-dealing leftist. As they angrily denounced him, a crowd gathered and police broke up the altercation.

Bringuier called Borja to ask what he should do next. "Our answer to him was just 'face him down,'" the former military-section chief recalls. "Go out there and contest him. Talk to the press, uncover this guy." And Bringuier did just that. On August 16 another friend of Bringuier in the Directorate reported that Oswald was again handing out FPCC pamphlets. Bringuier sent the friend to Oswald's house posing as a Castro supporter to find out who was backing his work.

Meanwhile Oswald's support for the Cuban revolution had caught the attention of a local radio host named Bill Stuckey, also a friend of Bringuier. Stuckey invited Oswald to speak on his weekly program and asked Bringuier to participate. Before the planned debate, Bringuier wrote to Miami, to José Antonio Lanuza, who was in charge of the DRE's North American chapters, requesting background on the FPCC. Lanuza sent back information from the Directorate's files.

On Saturday evening, August 21, 1963, Bringuier and Oswald debated the Cuban revolution over radio station WDSU. In the middle of the discussion, in which

Oswald defended Castro's policies, Stuckey suddenly shifted gears. Was it true, the moderator asked, that Oswald had lived in Russia?

"That is correct, and I think those — the fact that I did live for a time in the Soviet Union — gives me excellent quali-

JOANNIDES'S NAME
IS UNKNOWN. HE DOES
NOT APPEAR IN ANY
OF THE HUNDREDS
OF BOOKS ABOUT THE
ASSASSINATION.

fications to repudiate charges that Cuba and the Fair Play for Cuba Committee is communist controlled," Oswald replied, obviously taken aback.

"I would like to know," Bringuier chimed in, "if it is the Fair Play for Cuba Committee or Fair Play for Russia Committee."

Bringuier was pleased with the program. When it was over, he drafted a press release that called on the U.S. Congress to

investigate Lee Harvey Oswald and denounce the FPCC. A rewritten and slightly toned-down version of the press release was issued in the name of the Directorate, as well as Alpha 66 and five other hard-line exile groups. Bringuier also sent a note to Lanuza three days after the debate, stating, "You can rest assured that the traitor Lee H. Oswald (the same one who tried to infiltrate the DRE here) came off looking so bad that it is possible that he will have to be transferred by his organization to another city."

(Although Fernandez-Rocha says he has "no specific recollection" of telling George Joannides about the Directorate's actions against Oswald, Borja recalls that the CIA officer was "defi-



Juan Manuel Salvat and José Basulto in 1962: "We wanted to put pressure on Castro"

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tro's Soviet-bloc advisors were gathering. (The man who fired the 20mm cannon was José Basulto, now famous as founder of Brothers to the Rescue.)

Meanwhile the *Cuban Report* was publishing information provided by Luis Fernandez-Rocha from inside Cuba that the Soviet Union was installing large ballistic missiles on the island. The Kennedy White House dismissed such claims as exile exaggeration, but within weeks aerial-reconnaissance photos confirmed the reports. The missile crisis ensued.

When that confrontation ended peacefully that fall — but with Castro still in power — the DRE again sought to force the United States to confront Cuba. On November 12, just six days after the *Star* story broke, Fernandez-Rocha appeared on *The Today Show* and repeated the details, claiming that nuclear missiles had been stashed in caves in the Yumuri valley in Matanzas, in the hills of Camagüey, and in Hershey in Havana province — and that he had seen the sites with his own eyes.

Kennedy was incensed at Fernandez-Rocha's brashness so soon after the near-nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union had been defused. "The refugees," the president told his advisors, "are naturally trying to build up the story in an effort to get us to invade [Cuba]." He ordered the CIA to rein in the young exiles, and within 24 hours Richard Helms summoned Fernandez-Rocha to Washington.

The 49-year-old deputy director spent the better part of a day grilling Fernandez-Rocha and, according to the CIA's minutes of that meeting, concluded that the new missile allegations were not altogether reliable. Helms rebuked the Directorate for going public — on national tele-

vision no less — but softened the reprimand by adding that he wanted to forge a "reasonable collaboration" with the DRE. He understood their disappointment with U.S. policy, he said. He confided that he was promoting a new agent in Miami who would be "personally responsible to me" for the success of the relationship.

For this sensitive task Helms selected an up-and-coming political-action officer, George Efythron Joannides, who had been transferred to Miami earlier that year and was working as deputy chief of psychological warfare operations against the Castro government. With a staff of 24 and a budget of \$2.4 million, he ran his clandestine activities out of a ramshackle office building in then-rural South Dade that was known to CIA hands by its aquatic code name: JM/WAVE station. Joannides reported to station chief Theodore G. Shackley, who was overseeing one of the CIA's largest operations in the world, with an annual budget of more than \$50 million, more than 100 leased vehicles, several thousand Cuban agents, and 300-plus American employees.

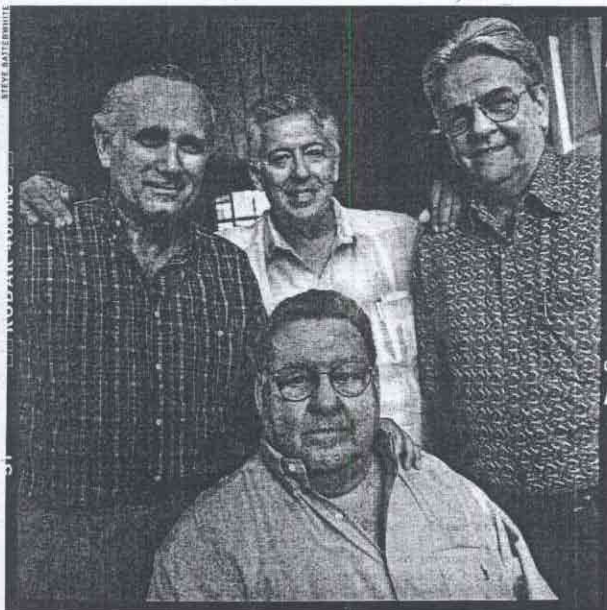
Joannides was 40 years old then, a native New Yorker who had attended City College and St. John's University School of Law in Queens. Recruited for the CIA in 1951, he'd spent eleven years in Greece and Libya, confounding communists and influencing local politicians. He was a cosmopolitan man, fluent in French and Greek, competent in Spanish. He wore tailored suits, spun bilingual puns, and enjoyed Greek pastries. He and his wife, Violet, and their three children lived in suburban anonymity on SW 65th Avenue in what is now the Village of Pinecrest.

Luis Fernandez-Rocha, now a doctor at Mercy Hospital, recalls his initial meeting with "Howard," as the CIA man called himself. Howard spoke confidently, with a New York accent, and wore an ornate pinky ring. In Fernandez-Rocha's view he compared favorably with the DRE's previous handler, Ross Crozier. "[He] was a great human being, but he was a sergeant," Fernandez-Rocha says. "When I was dealing with this guy Howard, I was talking to a colonel."

Howard was always available, Fernandez-Rocha adds. The agent would meet him anywhere from "three times a week to once every two weeks. We used to have a cup of coffee at a Howard Johnson's on U.S. 1."

The relationship was complicated. While the DRE was financially dependent on the CIA, its leaders publicly vilified Kennedy for his actions regarding Cuba: the Bay of Pigs defeat followed by a missed opportunity to topple Castro during the missile crisis. When the president came to Miami on December 29, 1962, to welcome returning Bay of Pigs prisoners at the Orange Bowl, DRE leaders stayed away in disgust.

In the spring of 1963, the Directorate's military section continued to plan raids on island targets, drawing up an elaborate scheme to destroy the



The DRE plus 40 (clockwise from bottom): Organizational mastermind Juan Manuel Salvat flanked by businessman José Antonio Lanuza, Brothers to the Rescue leader José Basulto, and spiritual founder Alberto Muller

Nazabal sugar mill in central Cuba. They sent word of the operation through Joannides to Richard Helms, according to a declassified CIA cable, but Joannides emphasized the CIA's opposition, and the raid never took place. The Kennedy White House, wanting no return to the tensions of the missile crisis, then cracked down hard on Cuban Miami. In April 1963 the Immigration and Naturalization Service issued an administrative order forbidding 25 of the most militant exile leaders from leaving Dade County without permission. On the list were DRE secretary-general Fernandez-

encouraging their propaganda campaigns and intelligence-collection efforts. But by the summer of 1963, the DRE harbored an "extremely bitter animosity" toward Kennedy, according to Ross Crozier, Joannides's predecessor. In fact they were scarcely less hostile to the president than to Castro.

On July 31 Joannides was promoted to chief of psychological warfare operations at the JM/WAVE station in South Dade. Among his most notable accomplishments, his supervisor wrote, was his "excellent job in the handling of a significant student exile group, which hitherto had successfully resisted any important degree of control."

Chilo Borja has a clear recollection of the summer of 1963. Now the owner of a Miami air-conditioning business, he was 28 years old at the time. Skilled with guns and familiar with boats, he became the chief of the group's military section in Miami in 1961. In the summer of 1963, the Directorate was desperate and divided. "At this point there's a big wedge between the international faction and the military faction of the DRE," Borja remembers. "The CIA is pumping money to do anything in Latin America, but it's not giving anything for anything in Cuba. We have a lot of our good friends that are killed or in jail. Alberto [Muller] is in jail. We've got to tell these people that we are still doing something."

Along with his good friend Salvat, Borja was undeterred by the Kennedy administration's crackdown on the exiles, and their antagonism didn't go unnoticed. The Miami station chief, Ted Shackley, had long since warned CIA headquarters that the DRE's attitude toward U.S. policymakers "was one of contempt repeat contempt."

continued on page 28

PRINCIPAL PLAYERS

Basulto, José DRE gunner
Blakey, G. Robert General counsel to the House Select Committee on Assassinations
Borja, Isidro "Chilo" DRE military-section leader
Bringle, Carlos DRE representative in New Orleans
Crozier, Ross CIA agent based in Miami
Escalante, Fabian Chief of counterintelligence for Cuba's security services
Fernandez-Rocha, Luis DRE secretary-general
Fonzi, Gaetano Investigator for the House Select Committee on Assassinations
Helms, Richard CIA director
Hoover, J. Edgar FBI director
Joannides, George CIA agent based in Miami; agency liaison to the DRE
Lanuza, José Antonio DRE's director of North American chapters
Muller, Alberto DRE cofounder
Phillips, David Atlee CIA agent
Salvat, Juan Manuel DRE propaganda chief
Shackley, Theodore CIA Miami station chief
Travieso, Ernesto DRE cofounder
Whitton, John CIA agent who headed probe of Lee Harvey Oswald

"WE WORKED WITH THE CIA," RECALLS JUAN MANUEL SALVAT. "WE NEVER SUBORDINATED OURSELVES TO THEM."

Rocha, military-section leader Chilo Borja, and propaganda chief Juan Manuel Salvat, the group's corpulent, hot-tempered mastermind.

The exiles didn't obey the order. "We worked with the CIA," recalls Salvat. "We never subordinated ourselves to them." Nor did the Directorate's members try to hide their anger. Joannides walked a fine line — trying to discourage the group's military ambitions while

declassified CIA files. Reports were filed monthly by Joannides's successor as well. (And Joannides himself received praise in a July 1963 performance evaluation for his "adherence to valid reporting techniques.")

Six retired CIA operations officers interviewed for this article agree that after November 22, 1963, Joannides had a duty to report, in writing, whatever he knew about the relationship between the Directorate and Oswald. "He would have been completely remiss if he didn't," says Justin Gleichauf, a retired CIA official who worked in Miami in the early Sixties. "[The Directorate's members] were up to their eyes with this guy [Oswald], and they hadn't told him! He must've been hot about that. He undoubtedly reported it, and in writing."

"There may not be a report in the file," adds Peter Jessup, a CIA officer assigned to the National Security Council in 1963, "but you can be sure there was a report."

If there were such a report, someone at the CIA either destroyed it without authorization or is still keeping it secret.



In the fall of 1963, CIA Miami station chief Ted Shackley warned Washington that the DRE regarded U.S. policymakers with contempt

If DRE members were "up to their eyes" with Oswald in August 1963, the modest propaganda victory provided by the WDSU radio debate was just the impetus they needed for ratcheting up their anti-Castro schemes. In early September the JM/WAVE station received a copy of a national tabloid called *See*, in which the DRE had taken out an advertisement offering ten million dollars to persons willing to help the group assassinate Fidel Castro.

On September 15, the DRE's records show, Salvat and his cohorts used \$660 provided by the CIA to travel to New York City to challenge pro-Castro students speaking at a conference in midtown Manhattan. The resulting brawl made page one of the *New York Times*.

And on October 9, DRE propaganda

Miami on October 15, 1963.

A little more than a week later, on October 24, the Directorate presented the CIA with a plan for an ambitious attack on Cuba. The group proposed to insert fourteen commando teams, totaling 200 men, inside the island. The fighting force would instigate an uprising against Castro's 25,000-man army while being resupplied by the CIA.

Joannides's reaction to the scheme is unknown, but JM/WAVE station chief Shackley's was scathing. In a cable to headquarters, Shackley scorned the DRE leaders for imagining themselves "the equals of generals and ambassadors." He recommended that all funds to the Directorate's military section be cut off. A week later Richard Helms agreed. Joannides, who had been paying maintenance expenses for the group's boats and guns, had to deliver the message. On November 19, 1963, while President Kennedy was in Miami speaking to Latin-American newspaper publishers under tight security,

Luis Fernandez-Rocha was called in to receive the news that the agency was cutting off its support.

Three days later Kennedy traveled to Dallas. As the presidential motorcade passed by a friendly crowd in Dealey Plaza, Kennedy was struck by gunfire in the back and head and died instantly in his wife's arms. Ninety minutes later Dallas police arrested a suspect in the shooting: Lee Harvey Oswald.

What exactly did George Joannides do on November 22, 1963, when news of Oswald's arrest spread? Few records exist to provide an answer.

In 1978 José Antonio Lanuza told Gaeton Fonzi, an investigator for the House Select Committee on Assassina-

tions, how the DRE reacted to Kennedy's murder. On November 22, 1963, Lanuza was coordinator of the DRE's North American chapters. When he heard the news stories linking Oswald to the shooting, he remembered delegate Carlos Bringuier's reports from New Orleans and went to DRE headquarters to check his files. There he found Bringuier's letters about the confrontations with Oswald, along with tapes of the WDSU radio debate. The group's leaders gathered, he said, and one of them — Salvat, Fernandez-Rocha, or Borja — “made the first outside call about the discovered material.” That call, he said, went to the DRE's case officer at the CIA's JM/WAVE station in Miami.

The Directorate "was told by the CIA

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nately" informed. "That's the kind of thing we took a lot of merits and credits for," he says. "That's what the money [given to the DRE] was for."

Perhaps humiliated in the radio debate, Oswald did indeed cease all public activities in support of Castro. According to his wife, he spent his time reading books and cleaning his rifle on their back porch. The Directorate, Bringuier now says, soon forgot about the FPCC adventurer. A few weeks later, Bringuier says he ran into an FBI agent who told him Oswald had left New Orleans. That was

the twelve volumes of evidence and analysis that accompanied the report of the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1979. He does not appear in any of the hundreds of books about the assassination. There is no character based on him in Oliver Stone's 1991 film JFK.

Joannides's career was only forced into the public record by the immense popularity of Stone's movie. In response to renewed interest in the

any Student Directorate. An official in the CIA's Office of Historic Review, J. Barry Harrelson, responded with a memo stating that no agency employee had been in contact with the DRE in 1963. "Major policy differences between the agency and DRE developed ... because the DRE

any officer using the name Howard who had dealt with the Cuban students. The CIA, he claimed, had no evidence that Howard was an "actual person."

At this the review board staff grew skeptical. Empowered by the JFK Assassination Records Collection Act, the board was able to conduct its own check of agency files, and in March 1998 Michelle Combs, an investigator who had once worked at the CIA, uncovered Joannides's personnel file. The board ruled that the file was an assassination-related record and ordered that it be made public.

The file seems unexceptional. It contains just four performance reviews, three of them written during Joannides's tenure at the South Dade JM/WAVE station and one from 1978. The reviews describe his day-to-day responsibilities, grade his performance, and include written comments from his supervisor. That much was fairly routine.

More intriguing was what the files did not contain. The CIA's archives contained no reports, receipts, memoranda, notes, or cables that accounted for how the Directorate spent U.S. funds in August 1963 (when Joannides's Cuban charges were in contact with Oswald) or for November 1963, when Kennedy was slain. In fact there are no reports in the file for the entire seventeen-month period he handled the DRE, from December 1962 to April 1964. Although Joannides's personnel file stated he was paying the Directorate for "intelligence collection" and "propaganda," the CIA's Office of Historic Review maintained that it had no reports from Joannides about the group's intelligence and propaganda activities.

Why is the absence of those documents significant? Because such reporting almost always was mandatory. Contrary to Hollywood images of espionage, operations officers spend a lot of time at their desks doing paperwork. As a bureaucracy that collects information systematically and processes it efficiently, the CIA expects and requires its employees to account for their efforts. Such written reports were filed monthly by Joannides's predecessor, Ross Crozier, and are found in continued on page 30



As deputy chief of psychological warfare, CIA agent George Joannides ran the DRE undercover while working out of this South Dade office building

true. In late September Oswald took a bus to Mexico City, where he tried to obtain a visa for travel to Cuba and the Soviet Union. (Coincidentally David Atlee Phillips, the DRE's first CIA handler, was monitoring the Cuban embassy at the time.) Oswald's request was denied. Returning to the States, he went to Dallas, where he moved into a boardinghouse under an assumed name. Seven weeks later Kennedy was dead.

George Joannides's name is unknown to JFK historians. Unlike the countless scoundrels and spies who haunt the vast literature of the assassination, his cameo role in the tragedy has been neither documented nor debated. His name does not appear in the 26 volumes of evidence collected by the Warren Commission in 1964. His relationship to the DRE was unknown to New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, whose JFK conspiracy case failed to persuade a New Orleans jury in 1969. Joannides's actions do not figure in

JFK murder, open-government advocate Rep. Lee Hamilton, an Indiana Democrat, secured unanimous passage of the JFK Assassination Records Collection Act, intended to clarify public confusion about the Dealey Plaza tragedy. The law created an independent civilian panel with unique powers to declassify JFK files, even over the objections of federal agencies. Between 1994 and 1998, when its funding ran out, the panel, known as the Assassination Records Review Board, dislodged four million pages of classified documents. Among the new records were portions of George Joannides's personnel file. They confirmed he was the DRE's case officer.

During its existence the review board and its staff solicited help from the public in locating JFK records. In December 1997 I suggested that the board ask the CIA to review its files on the Revolution-

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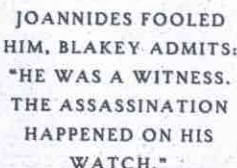
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not to do anything or contact anyone else about the discovery for at least one hour, time enough for the agency to contact Washington and get back to them with instructions," Lanuza told Fonzi. Later that night the case officer called back to say the FBI would come by to collect their evidence.

By then, however, the DRE had already gone public. The group "was so anxious to get word out about Oswald's association with a pro-Castro group, that [we] waited only about 50 minutes," Lanuza related to Fonzi. Other members of the DRE then spread a variety of stories — some true, some false — about Oswald: He had attempted to infiltrate the Directorate in New Orleans (true), he had once lived in the home of the Soviet foreign minister (false), he had recently been in Mexico City (true).

The details of Oswald's pro-Castro activism, as they hit the American airwaves on the evening of November 22, 1963, had an added benefit for the Directorate: They advanced the long-standing goal of the DRE's military section. "We wanted to put pressure on Castro," Salvat explains today. The play worked. Castro responded by putting his Revolutionary Armed Forces on high alert along Cuba's northern coast.

Meanwhile Oswald was in jail in Dallas, denying he had shot Kennedy. "I'm a patsy," he told reporters.

Joannides had only to read the next morning's newspaper to know his assets in the DRE were exerting a powerful influence on the coverage of the president's murder. Carlos Bringuier's story appeared in the *Miami Herald*: "Oswald Tried to Spy on Anti-Castro Exile Group." The story also made the *Washington Post*: "Castro Foe Details Infiltration Effort."

Castro continued to play defense. In a radio speech to the Cuban people the day after the shooting, he portrayed the assassination as a provocation aimed at destroying the revolution. He derided Bringuier's statements to the *New York Times* that Oswald was a supporter. "How curious!" Castro said. "They say that he is a Castroite, a communist, an

admirer of Fidel Castro. And it appears that he tried to enter [the DRE in New Orleans] and was not admitted because they thought he belonged to the FBI or CIA.... They must know pretty well the kinds of agents the FBI and CIA have, since they deal with them a lot." George Joannides was one of the few people on the planet in a position to know the accuracy of those words.

As Castro spoke Salvat put the finishing touches on a special edition of *Trinchera*, the Directorate's newspaper. It featured an English-language banner headline, "The Presumed Assassins," over photos of Oswald and Castro. The text consisted of reprints of Bringuier's letters to the Miami DRE about Oswald and the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. *Trinchera* also quoted from a telegram

American public was convinced that Oswald had accomplices.

On November 25, three days after Kennedy's murder, FBI agent Jim O'Connor interviewed José Antonio Lanuza and collected the Directorate's file on Oswald, including an eight-page memo arguing that Fidel Castro was the "intellectual author" of the assassination.

But FBI director J. Edgar Hoover squelched investigations into a Cuban or exile connection. Within days of the assassination, for example, the Secret Service, which had launched its own investigation, received an urgent report from its Chicago office about a Cuban exile who had been seeking to buy guns in Chicago since September. He was traveling in the company of one Juan Francisco Blanco Fernandez, a friend of Salvat and a member of the DRE's military section. On the day before the assassination, the exile told a Secret Service informant that the group had "plenty of money" and would buy weapons "as soon as we take care of Kennedy." But Hoover, whose bureau took over the investigation with the support of President Johnson, forced the Secret Service to drop further inquiries. The FBI preferred to pursue the theory that Oswald had acted alone.

Over at the CIA, Richard Helms withheld files on Oswald's pro-Castro activities from the agency's in-house investigation of the accused assassin within weeks of the shooting, according to a sworn deposition by John Whitten, the CIA veteran in charge of the probe. When Whitten protested, Helms reassigned him.

Not long after Oswald was killed, the DRE laid off its efforts to link him and Castro. George Joannides continued to assist the group in ways large and small. He paid expenses, accepted intelligence reports, and helped "exfiltrate" Jorge Medina Bringuier, Carlos's cousin and the Directorate's last remaining leader inside Cuba who wasn't in prison.

Fernandez-Rocha recalls only one conversation with the CIA man after November 22, 1963. They continued on page 32



Hours after the assassination, the DRE publicly linked Oswald to Fidel Castro, who warned there might be a plot afoot to provoke a war with Cuba

"Oswald could be guilty or innocent; we can't tell," Castro continued. "Or he could be a CIA or FBI agent, as those people [the DRE] suspected, or an instrument of the most reactionary sectors that may have been planning a sinister plot.... [He] may be innocent, a cat's paw in a plan very well prepared by people who knew how to prepare such plans. Or he may be a sick man, and if so, the only honest thing is to hand him over for a medical examination and not to be starting a campaign extremely dangerous to world peace."

the group had sent to the newly sworn-in president, Lyndon B. Johnson: "May God enlighten the government of this country at such difficult moments."

Copies of *Trinchera* were being distributed outside a church on Key Biscayne on Sunday morning, November 24, when nightclub owner Jack Ruby shot Oswald in the basement of the Dallas jail. Nothing would contribute so powerfully to the popular belief in a conspiracy as Ruby's execution of Oswald. Within days pollsters found that 60 percent of the

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At a 1995 conference former Cuban counterintelligence chief Fabian Escalante (left) dissected events leading up to November 22, 1963, with Investigator Gaeton Fonzi

Revelation continued from page 32

nides revelation. Fonzi adds, just recon- firms that the CIA deceived the American people about who really was responsible for Kennedy's death.

The HSCA issued its final report in February 1979, chillingly concluding that "in all probability" there had been a conspiracy perpetrated by Oswald and persons whom the committee could not identify. Blakey believed the CIA had cooperated fully with the committee, a claim he no longer cares to defend. Joannides fooled him, Blakey admits. "He was a witness," he marvels. "The assassination happened on his watch."

In November 1978 George Joannides retired permanently. He was not a man to talk about his work. He once told one of his children he was skeptical of JFK conspiracy theories but did not explain why. His heart problems worsened in his later years, and he moved to Houston to receive treatment from renowned surgeon Michael DeBakey. He died on March 9, 1990, at the age of 67.

Family and friends mourned him as a loving husband, thoughtful father, and delightful and ethical friend. His obituary in the *Washington Post* on March 14, 1990, made no mention of his 26 years of CIA service, stating only that he had been a lawyer for the Defense Department.

Fidel Castro and the majority of the American people don't often agree, but on the JFK conspiracy question they are like-minded. In December 1995 Fabian Escalante, retired chief of counterintelligence for Castro's security services, offered new details of the Cuban interpretation of Kennedy's assassination. As Castro had insinuated from the beginning, Cuban communists believed that certain exiles, working in league with CIA officials who loathed Kennedy's Cuba policy, were likely responsible for the crime. Speaking at a conference of JFK historians in the Bahamas, Escalante said he had conducted the Cuban government's first full-scale inquiry into the assassination in 1991 and 1992. He claimed he and a colleague had interviewed 150 people in Cuba and said he had reviewed all relevant files.

"I think that the people that had to do

with [the assassination] are people in the DRE," he told the conference. But Escalante was another investigator who knew nothing of Joannides. He emphasized that he didn't think Juan Manuel Salvat or other military section leaders were the organizers of the plot. "When you are going to carry out an operation as complex as this one, you cannot put all your money on one single horse. You have to use different ways in order not to have any mistakes," he added. "Obviously the DRE was in on the whole plot against Cuba."

**"IF THERE WAS
 A CONSPIRACY,"
 SALVAT OFFERS,
 "IT WAS AT A MUCH
 HIGHER LEVEL
 THAN THE DRE."**

Salvat shrugs at the suggestion that the Directorate had a hand in Kennedy's death. His response is self-deprecating, not defensive. "If there was a conspiracy," he offers, "it was at a much higher level than the DRE."

The Joannides story doesn't prove the existence of an assassination conspiracy, but it does demonstrate that a U.S. government intelligence officer was far better positioned to know about Kennedy's accused killer than the CIA has ever admitted. Still the agency prefers to bluff rather than to disclose. When I asked the CIA in 1999 to explain why J. Barry Harrelson of the agency's Office of Historic Review had, a year earlier, denied that the CIA had had any contact with the Directorate in 1963, as well as any knowledge of Joannides's activities that year, a spokesman said the agency could not help me. "We think the records speak for themselves," he replied.

Contact the author to discuss the story:
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