

FIDEL on the Grassy Knoll

JEFF COHEN AND DONALD FREED

Perhaps the most shocked group of people in the nation on November 23, 1963 were the men who conspired to assassinate the President. It is now apparent that the murderers had contrived—as an integral component of their conspiracy—a left-wing, pro-Castro Cuban cover story for the crime and for their chosen fall guy, Lee Harvey Oswald.

This Castro scenario, a generic descendant of the Cold War *mythos*, did not unfold as planned. The President was dead, but the projected “retaliation” against Cuba did not materialize. Instead, moderates in the federal government immediately announced the lone assassin explanation (and clung to it tenaciously for 12½ years) while the major media was content to psychoanalyze the “deranged loner.” Oswald’s “attraction to Marxism” became just another facet of his psychosis; and his executioner, Jack Ruby, became a “patriotic nightclub operator” overcome by grief. The assassination was instantly depoliticized.

The conspirators must have been stunned. Years had gone into manufacturing Oswald’s communist/pro-Cuban cover for it is an old intelligence maxim that the victim of an assassination is less important than who appears to have done the killing. Murdering the President was just a first step. Having it appear to be the work of a communist-Cuban cabal could have set into motion: a “retaliatory” invasion of Cuba; another round of domestic repression (against the re-emerging peace and civil

rights movements); a bolstering of the CIA, which Kennedy had vowed (according to the *New York Times*) “to splinter in a thousand pieces and scatter to the winds.”

THE HENDRIX CONNECTION

To accomplish the desired rollback of the emergent spirit of the 60s, a media blitz was required. The “psy-war” phase of the murder began within an hour of Oswald’s arrest, when Harold (Hal) Hendrix, the Scripps-Howard correspondent for Latin America, called into the Washington D.C. news desk that Oswald was a pro-Castroite. This was split-second reporting by Miami-based Hendrix, a right-wing correspondent who left Scripps-Howard in 1967 to work for ITT in Latin America. As revealed in *The Sovereign State of ITT*, Hendrix became an action officer for the bloody CIA/ITT assassination and military takeover in Chile. Hearings before a Senate foreign relations subcommittee in March 1973 confirmed that Hendrix had been a CIA operative in Chile. On November 5, 1976 Hendrix was charged in federal court with a misdemeanor for refusing to testify accurately before the subcommittee about ITT’s connections with the CIA in Chile. According to ex-CIA official Victor Marchetti, Hendrix was a CIA media friend as early as 1962 when he wrote the Pulitzer Prize winning inside story of the Cuban missile crisis from CIA leaks.

The fact that Hendrix had sprung immediately into

action with the Oswald-as-Castroite line was not generally known until 1975. Scripps-Howard reporter Seth Kantor was in Dallas with the rest of the press at LBJ's swearing-in ceremony. Kantor had not yet learned Oswald's full name when he was instructed to call Hendrix, who already had "biographical" information on Oswald moving on the wires. It was not until 1975 that Kantor retrieved a copy (after two months of Freedom-of-Information haggling) of his November 22, 1963 telephone records, which the FBI had classified and secreted in the National Archives. Apparently the FBI had cooperated in protecting a CIA source, for on Kantor's telephone records one call had been expunged—the one to Hal Hendrix in Miami.

OSWALD AS CUBAN AGENT

Although Miami would continue to be the main source of Oswald-as-Castro-agent stories, some noteworthy events unfolded on the day of the assassination in the Dallas police station. While Dallas district attorney Henry Wade was absent from his office, his assistant, Bill Alexander, prepared to charge Oswald with murdering the President "as part of an international communist conspiracy." When the FBI learned of Alexander's intention, the Bureau notified federal officials who sprang into action to stop the assistant district attorney. Alexander (a Jack Ruby confidant) had already drawn up the indictment.

That night, D.A. Wade held an impromptu press conference and announced that Oswald was a member of the Free Cuba Committee, a rightist CIA-supported group (that Oswald had once offered to help). A voice from the back of the room called out to correct the D.A., "That's Fair Play for Cuba, Henry." A TV camera panned to the shouting face—it was Jack Ruby, the patriotic "police buff."

Back in Miami, a high powered propaganda machine was cranking out stories that Oswald was a Cuban agent. It was largely the work of two Miami-based reporters, brothers Jerry and James Buchanan, who were at the same time propaganda officers for the CIA-supported International Anti-communist Brigade (IAB). The brigade had mob support, too, as explained by an IAB attorney: "[The Brigade] was financed by dispossessed hotel and gambling room operators who operated under Batista."

The source of the Buchanans' tales was the brigade's leader, a man who changed his name from Frank Fiorini to Frank Sturgis around the time of the assassination. In 1972, as Sturgis, he was arrested inside the Watergate Office Building wearing surgical gloves and carrying electronic spying equipment.

Within days of the assassination, James Buchanan quoted Sturgis heavily in a *Pompano Beach Sun Sentinel* story. According to Sturgis, Oswald talked with Cuban G-2 agents and fraced with IAB members in November 1962 while in Miami. Although Sturgis claimed to have seen Oswald in Miami, not a shred of evidence has surfaced in 13 years to indicate Oswald was ever in that

city. The FBI interviewed Sturgis four times within a half year of the assassination and dismissed the Oswald/G-2 story as a fairy tale.

When the FBI first interviewed him on November 23rd, as Sturgis tells it, "They said, 'Frank, if there's anyone capable of killing the President, you're one guy that can do it.'"

What was in Sturgis' background that would lead the FBI to suspect that this "news source" was behind the assassination? As Fiorini, in 1961, he was elevated to hero status as an anti-Castro guerilla/pilot by Jack Anderson, the columnist, who would use this soldier-of-fortune as a source for later Castro-did-it stories.

But the hero was soon to become a victim of a presidential change of heart. After Kennedy ordered a clamp down on anti-Castro guerillas in the wake of the missile crisis, Fiorini barely avoided arrest when Federal agents raided the CIA's No Name Key camp. In September 1963 the administration issued strong warnings to six Americans to cease their anti-Castro activities. One of the six was Fiorini, who had been piloting B-25 harassment raids against Cuba. The FAA then lifted his authorization to fly.

In a post-Watergate interview with Andrew St. George in *True* magazine (August 1974), Sturgis stated, "The liberals have twisted everything—if I had my way I would kill them all."

On the subject of who killed JFK, he was a strange source indeed, but one who would be heard from again.

This right-wing conspiracy came close to success. Hendrix, Sturgis, and the Buchanans were in motion that very day. Assistant D.A. Bill Alexander was perhaps within a few minutes of instigating international conflict and war. At the time that Alexander was drawing up an indictment, new President Johnson had placed U.S. military forces worldwide on "red alert." Planes waited with engines running on carriers in the Caribbean.

But moderate forces in the federal government prevailed. On two occasions on the night of the assassination, Johnson's assistant, Clifton Carter, telephoned Dallas D.A. Wade to insure that no mention of "international communist conspiracy" be made in Oswald's indictment.

Thus for 12 years, the Warren Report's "one lone nut" theory was officially accepted by the government. But by 1976 popular pressure forced the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence to review the investigation of JFK's assassination. A subcommittee chaired by Senator Richard Schweiker found evidence of an FBI and CIA cover-up. The Schweiker Report echoed the overwhelming sentiment of the American people: "The Warren Commission Report is no longer credible." Faced with imminent exposure, the aging operatives of the original communist-Castro provocation surfaced once again.

THE MEDIA SINGS A NEW TUNE

For 12 years the mass media held solidly to the accepted theory that Oswald had acted alone. It labelled the original Warren Commission critics "scavengers."

Later, those who postulated a right-wing CIA/mob conspiracy were called "kooks" and their theories "irresponsible."

But a curious turnabout took place in 1975. Just at the height of public suspicion that the CIA was involved in the JFK death, the Rockefeller Commission had Raymond Rocca write a memo on the possible Castro role in Dallas. Rocca was no disinterested party. He was a CIA counter-intelligence officer who had acted as the agency's liaison to the Warren Commission. The Rocca memo, dated May 1975, concluded that the commission should have left a "wider window" for the contingency of a foreign conspiracy and that "promising leads" pointing to Castro (actually three items of speculation rejected by the Warren Commission) were not followed up. When the memo was leaked to the AP in March 1976, most of the media ran the story prominently as if the author was a legitimate, disinterested news source.

This story ignited a flurry of conspiracy mongering on the part of the major media. Speculation that had previously been called irresponsible and/or paranoid was now "investigative journalism." As long as the theory pointed at Castro, it was published and circulated.

A March 1, 1976 copyrighted story of *Las Vegas Sun* publisher Hank Greenspun charged that Castro instigated the murders of both Kennedys. Greenspun's confidential source turned out to be a leaked copy of the Rocca memo.

Then writer George Crile III took absurdity to the limit in a major two-part series in the *Washington Post* (May 2 and 16, 1976). Crile amplified on the CIA memo and conjectured that the Mob conspired with Castro to kill JFK! A month later Crile switched hats to become one of the objective, unbiased interviewers of Senator Schweiker on *Face the Nation*.

ABC anchorman Howard K. Smith used the occasion of the release of the Schweiker Report to add his voice to the chorus. Smith claimed that LBJ told him in confidence in 1967 that "Kennedy was trying to get Castro, but Castro got to him first." Smith's recollection reached millions more people than did a contradictory story syndicated by the North American Newspaper Alliance (NANA). The well documented NANA story written by Seth Kantor asserted that Johnson suspected in April 1967 that the CIA may have been involved in the JFK murder and that Johnson had ordered the FBI to look into it. Kantor's article was based on sections of the Schweiker Report which were deleted on CIA orders.

One of the wildest theories to be given mass media circulation is that Jack Ruby met with Castro in Cuba in September 1963 to plan John Kennedy's death. Ruby, an FBI informant, anti-Castro gun runner, and Mob operative, was the man who had reminded the Dallas D.A. that Oswald was a member of a pro-Castro group (hardly the act of a pro-Castro conspirator). In addition, Ruby's whereabouts in September, which have been accurately traced, rule out a visit to Cuba.

The source for this Ruby/Castro story published originally in the *New York Daily News* is once again Frank Sturgis. Although not exactly disinterested, Sturgis has

been used repeatedly as a news source on this issue. Sturgis claims to have given the Ruby information to the FBI in 1964, but no record of this exists. Perhaps Sturgis saw that during the current anti-Castro political climate, the media would buy anything—fact or fiction.

Sturgis has toured the national talk show circuit telling and retelling his unsupported Ruby/Castro tale. In July 1976, he concluded a widely covered series of interviews with Los Angeles newsmen Charles Ashman. Despite his reputation as a liberal investigative reporter, Ashman showed remarkable naïveté in accepting the Sturgis yarn uncritically. Investigators have learned that Ashman, a now disbarred lawyer, represented Sturgis in Florida during the height of the CIA-Cuban exile war against Cuba.

Not to be outdone, Jack Anderson released this convoluted theory in September 1976. Citing the late mobster John Roselli as his source, Anderson theorized that Castro uncovered a CIA-inspired underworld plot to kill him in Havana and that Castro had the mob plotters tortured and then recruited them in a counter-plot on Kennedy's life. This scenario is even more imaginative than the ones based on information from Frank Sturgis, Anderson's frequent source on the JFK murder.

The *Washington Post* marked its 13th year of vacuous coverage of the JFK assassination by releasing two stories in November of minor substance that resulted in disproportionately large headlines across the country. The first story quoted informed sources who had seen a 1964 memo from J. Edgar Hoover to the Warren Commission which quoted "a highly reliable (FBI) informant" close to Fidel Castro to the effect that Oswald told Cuban officials of his plans to kill Kennedy. Assassination researchers wondered why the *Post* saw fit to print this third-hand account about a memo, when Castro had stated as much in a 1967 interview with a British journalist. Castro said that Cuban officials at the embassy in Mexico City had heard Oswald threaten the President's life, but had discounted the remarks as those of an unbalanced person. Although the memo added nothing new to the inquiry, the *Post* story grabbed nationwide headlines like the one in the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*: "OSWALD TOLD CASTRO OF PLOT, MEMO SAID."

The second *Washington Post* story discussed the secret transcript of a CIA-intercepted phone conversation between Oswald and the Russian Embassy in Mexico City. The *Post*'s main source is David A. Phillips, a "retired" CIA official, once director of "dirty tricks" for all of Latin America and presently a leading defender of CIA covert operations. According to Phillips, the transcript has Oswald offering information to the Russians in exchange for a free trip to the U.S.S.R. In one of its most fruitful inquiries in 13 years on this case, the *Washington Post* sought to determine why the CIA concealed the transcript from the FBI and the Warren Commission. "Some CIA officers stationed at the time in Mexico City said the CIA might have had a relationship with Oswald that it sought to conceal," the *Post* reported.

The Warren Commission concluded that the Cubans and Russians were not impressed by Oswald's visits to



Leavenworth Jackson

their embassies in Mexico City. The Cubans were downright suspicious of Oswald, especially after Oswald engaged in a shouting match with the Cuban Consul over their refusal to provide Oswald with a visa. Assassination researchers have long suspected that Oswald's bizarre activities at the Mexico City embassies was part of a plan to connect Oswald and the murder, eight weeks away, to Castro.

It is ironic that after 13 years the conspirators' plan to link President Kennedy's murder to Castro is closer than ever to success. In 1963, CIA media operatives like Hendrix and the Buchanans were foiled in their attempts to provoke an invasion of Cuba in the wake of the assassination. In 1977, having failed in 13 years to probe beneath the cover stories, the mass media has become a disinformation tool in the hands of the government's covert operators.

A THEORY AT ODDS WITH THE FACTS

But 13 years of independent research and historical study has revealed the absurdity of the Castro-did-it scenario. It is a theory riddled with contradictions.

This scenario has the "hotheaded Latin," Castro, killing Kennedy in favor of Johnson, a man who sided with the hawks during the missile crisis. The theory rests on the contradiction that while Castro's intelligence apparatus was efficient enough to ward off a dozen CIA-inspired murder plots, it was negligent in analyzing public information on the vice president.

It is common knowledge and should be known by the major media that between September 1963 and that last day in Dallas, Kennedy and Castro had actively begun the process that could have led to diplomatic relations between the two nations. William Attwood, the President's friend and UN diplomat, had been acting as the intermediary. At the time of the assassination, he was preparing to fly to Havana. As Attwood described the affair in his book, *The Reds and the Blacks*, soon after

the assassination, "The Cuban exercise was put on ice" —permanently. Attwood said, in an interview with the Assassination Information Bureau, that the recent attempts to blame the Kennedy murder on Castro are "ludicrous." If any Cubans were involved, Attwood says, they were anti-Castro Cubans.

Besides infuriating the anti-Castroites with his diplomatic moves, JFK had taken forceful action against the out-of-control Cuban Desk wing of the CIA. On July 31, 1963 the FBI, on Robert Kennedy's orders, had raided a Cuban exile training camp near New Orleans. On August 30, 1963 federal and local officers launched a second raid against No Name Key, the camp of Sturgis' brigade.

Certain media organizations have recently made much of a so-called Castro September 1963 retaliation threat: "If U.S. leaders... are aiding terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders, they themselves will not be safe." (Similar death threats against JFK made by Jimmy Hoffa, mobster Carlos Marcello, and CIA contract agents like David Ferrie are not given such attention.) More importantly, the press has totally ignored Castro's documented statements, including his telling comments to French journalist Jean Daniel on November 20, 1963, two days before the assassination:

[Kennedy could] be an even greater President than Lincoln. I have gotten this impression from all my conversations with Khrushchev... Personally, I consider him [Kennedy] responsible for everything, but I will say this: he has come to understand many things over the past few months, and then, too, in the last analysis I am convinced that anyone else would be worse.

The old/new disinformation myth has Castro's intelligence service choosing a fall guy who had gained notoriety as a *pro*-Castroite through several clumsily staged stunts in New Orleans. Finally, this scenario has Castro orchestrating the coverup from his Havana penthouse

through his friends in organized crime, the Dallas Police Department, the FBI, and the CIA, at a time when substantial sectors of the American intelligence establishment saw Kennedy as a traitor because of his softness on Cuba. Why did the FBI destroy Oswald's "threatening" note? More likely to obfuscate its own relationship with him, not Castro's. It was not Castro who paid Oswald's return fare from the U.S.S.R., it was the State Department. Nor was it Castro who violated regulations by issuing a second passport to this "Red defector"; it was the passport office of the State Department. Castro's intelligence operatives were obviously talented and daring... but had they penetrated the United States passport office?

When reduced to its particulars, the Castro-did-it theory seems preposterous. So preposterous, in fact, that it is hard to believe that the mass media can actually believe it. Could these leaked stories and disinformation be laying the basis for the new coverup line, in succession, from "lone nut" to "Castro's revenge" to the "agnostic theory." The agnostic line can be stated simply: since Oswald and Ruby were such confused and confusing individuals with ties to the Right and the Left, to U.S. agencies and foreign governments—"we will never really know who was behind the murder...so let's just forget it."

THE NEW INVESTIGATION

After years of public pressure, the House Select Committee on Assassinations was established in September 1976 to re-investigate the murders of JFK and Martin Luther King. In its first three months, the committee compiled a list of hundreds of unanswered questions in both cases. But when the committee formally expired in January, a bipartisan campaign was mounted in the House to prevent the committee from being recreated in the new session. The *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* led the assault in the press, ridiculing the request for a \$6.5 million budget and making personal attacks on the committee's staff director, Richard A. Sprague. Jack Anderson reported that "the FBI and CIA are directing an undercover campaign against the committee...[by] spreading derogatory stories about the committee."

The target of much abuse is Staff Director Sprague, a man whose 16-year career as a tough prosecutor in the Philadelphia D.A.'s office was highlighted by his four-year probe that netted the conviction of United Mine Workers President W.A. (Tony) Boyle in the murder of union insurgent Joseph (Jock) Yablonski. After gaining convictions against the triggermen, Sprague climbed the ladder to the higher-ups in the conspiracy. To many assassination researchers, Sprague is under attack for one reason: he gets results.

As the attacks on Sprague became more vociferous, Committee Chairman Henry Gonzalez arbitrarily announced on Feb. 11 that he was firing the chief counsel. When every other committee member stood behind Sprague, the divided committee was at a standoff. Gon-

zalez said Sprague would not receive another penny; Sprague said he was not leaving his office; and the committee talked of replacing Gonzalez as chairman. The mass media accelerated its ridicule of the new investigation. After three weeks, Gonzalez resigned under pressure.

Because of the internal bickering, it is very possible that the committee will be terminated when it comes up for refunding on March 31. In that case, activists will demand that a new committee be established.

If Sprague survives as chief counsel, he will encounter many obstacles. He will not receive the full cooperation of the FBI as he did in the Yablonski case. Potential staff members are being screened by the FBI, as is the procedure on Capitol Hill.

But Sprague's biggest problem will be in steering clear of "disinformation" from the intelligence agencies. The Castro-did-it solution to the JFK case, of course, will be offered to Sprague at every turn. Just as the committee was assembled, the *Washington Post* ran its two Oswald stories based on a memo and a tape transcript, neither of which the newspaper had ever seen. These stories have made their mark in Washington; one Republican on the original committee has indicated that he believes Castro was involved in the JFK murder, and another (with a reputation as a red hunter) has set out to keep "left subversives" off the committee staff.

Although Sprague has taken precautions to keep FBI/CIA friends off the staff, he will have his hands full. If the committee works in the same manner as the Watergate Committee by proceeding upward through those who covered up, the committee will be dealing with some high and mighty FBI and CIA officials.

With most eyes on Washington, the activists who brought pressure to get the committee established are not relaxing. They continue to push for adequate funding and also for televised, Watergate-style hearings so that the public can directly observe this most crucial of national inquiries. After 13 years of inaction and obstruction, Congress does not have the best track record.

If enough pressure is brought to bear, perhaps we will soon learn the truth about "All the President's Murderers"!



Leavenworth Jackson

Jeff Cohen is an investigative writer. His study on the Martin Luther King assassination was published in the *Signet* anthology *Government by Gunplay*. He is an associate of the Assassination Information Bureau. Donald Freed is the author of *Executive Action* (written with Mark Lane), *Agony* in New Haven, and *Inquest*. He is an executive board member of the Citizens Commission of Inquiry.