

FBI Kennedy Probe: Vast

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Files Show Agency's Wide Contacts

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Washington — The Kennedy assassination files provide a rare look into the closed world of the Federal Bureau of Investigation — its thoroughness and concern for its image, its fascination with files and surreptitious sources, its wary relationship with the outside world.

The bureau's agents seem in these documents to have access everywhere.

There are references to information from files of the Mexican government and to foreign intelligence sources

that can be tapped in Spain and Canada, to cooperative clerks in American credit rating bureaus and to a helpful supervisor in an Arizona state motor vehicle bureau. No one is named.

There is even one mention of "sources" in the giant American wire services, Associated Press and United Press International.

The files also betray a deep-seated skepticism of other law enforcement agencies and the rest of official Washington, even of the Justice Department which oversees the FBI. The late J. Edgar Hoover, FBI director at the time, succeeded in having Presi-

dent Johnson overrule a Justice Department decision to announce early in the probe that Lee Harvey Oswald had no foreign assistance in the assassination.

And, prophetically, Hoover himself warned FBI agents "not to assume the police are going to handle this (the assassination) properly."

The bureau's relationship with other agencies and with the public emerges in the files as mostly a one-way street — with masses of memos, reports, complaints and tips pouring into the huge Hoover building on Pennsylvania

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avenue but with little information leaking out.

Everything Filed

Nothing, it seems, is thrown away. The bureau's files are a prodigious maze of fact and fiction, the product of both painstaking investigation and pure fancy.

If you have ever written to the FBI, your complaint or compliment, tip or request is probably on file. And so are you.

Official bureau conduct is unfailingly courteous, as the Kennedy documents make clear. The requests for information that flooded the bureau in the days after Kennedy's death were answered promptly and in some cases by Hoover himself.

But the replies were not always candid. For example, when asked by Eli Chamberlain of Norwood, Mass., to characterize the politics of an Illinois University professor, Revilo P. Oliver, Hoover replied that the FBI "is strictly an investigative agency . . . and neither makes evaluations, nor draw conclusions as to the character and integrity of any organization, publication or individual."

However, a memo attached to the file copy of Hoover's letter notes that Oliver is described as a University of Illinois professor who is anti-semitic and a rightwing extremist" and that his publication is "anti-Communist in tone."

It also adds that a check of Chamberlain turned up nothing.

The bureau's almost obsessive con-

cern for its public image was tested early in the Kennedy investigation when Dallas police chief Jesse Curry told a news conference that the FBI had had Oswald under surveillance but never informed the Dallas police.

Cartha (Deke) De Loach, Hoover's deputy, promptly told the FBI agent in Dallas to have Curry retract the charge because the bureau is not obliged to notify local police about suspected subversives.

Press Sources

In a three-page memo on the incident, De Loach recalled the "we called our sources at both United Press International and the Associated Press" and also "Jerry O'Leary of the Washington Star" and had them contact Curry. O'Leary later called back, the memo added, and said he has "prepared an article putting Curry on record as stating there was a misunderstanding."

Throughout the Kennedy probe, the FBI fought jealously to protect its position as the principal investigative arm. Its major victory was in fending off early sentiment among some of the Warren Commission staff for an investigative force of its own.

The bureau's role did, in fact, appear to produce one conflict when its failed to provide the commission with the information that Oswald's address book contained the telephone number of John Hosty, a Dallas FBI agent.

J. Lee Rankin, the Warren Commission counsel, demanded "a full explanation," the Kennedy files show. However, Hoover's explanation and affidavits from bureau agents who supplied the reports on Oswald's address

book apparently were not included in the Kennedy files made public.

The overwhelming impression left by the 40,001 file pages released last week — another 40,000 will be made public in January — is the exhaustive lengths the bureau went to pursue even the least promising leads.

More than 25,000 separate interviews were conducted, including over 3,300 made public in the probe of Jack Ruby, the slayer of Oswald. A total of 1,300 pages dealt with tips from sources who seemed to have only a faint grip on reality, including many whom the FBI found to have serious drinking problems or histories of mental illness.

Obscure Leads

The bureau's agents tracked down a hobo who had idly scrawled Oswald's name in a boxcar, a group of Jews in Winnipeg, Canada thought possibly to have some information, an obscure minister of something called the Church of the Firstborn of the Fullness of Times, and even the author of a letter signed simply, "Chicago housewife."

An American columnist working in Rome, Italy, supplied a tip through the U.S. embassy there that Sanchez Bella, the Spanish ambassador to Italy, had shown him a report prepared by the Spanish intelligence service implicating Cuba's Fidel Castro in Kennedy's death. The FBI directed that Spanish intelligence be contacted.

A traveler reported that he had found the names John Wilks Booth and John F. Kennedy scribbled into the front cover of a phone book in a Scottsdale, Ariz., gasoline station. The middle name of Booth, killer of the President Abraham Lincoln, had been misspelled.

The FBI questioned the owner of the station and others in the area.

Another traveler reported overhearing a conversation in Spanish among a group of men he believed to be Mexicans during which one man commented that, after Kennedy, Earl Warren, then chief Justice, would be next. The FBI's pursuit of this faint clue involved an Arizona license plate and sources in the Mexican Government.

All these tips and countless others — often involving nothing more than snatches of conversation about the killing or random comments critical of the late President — became part of the massive search that sent FBI agents across the country, into police departments, the underworld, private homes and foreign embassies.

In the end, the Warren Commission's conclusions that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone rested on this exhaustive effort by the FBI. Today, the FBI's own reputation rests largely on whether history will support that conclusion.