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Politics

Documents trace smear of Kennedy aide to FBI

MU history professor digging through files of Hoover, Zablocki

By PATRICK JASPERSE
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The FBI leaked derogatory information to Milwaukee Congressman Clement J. Zablocki and President Lyndon Johnson about a political adviser from Wisconsin who was allied with Johnson's rivals, John and Robert Kennedy, newly disclosed records from the 1960s show.

The derogatory information included allegations that the adviser, Paul Corbin, had been involved in communist activities in the 1940s. Some of those allegations may have found their way into Milwaukee Journal articles and a subsequent congressional investigation of Corbin, records show.

The documents provide an intriguing glimpse of the anti-communist fervor and cutthroat politics of the 1960s that played out behind closed doors in Washington, D.C., and worked their way to Wisconsin.

The documents also show that the FBI served as a valuable politi-

cal resource in Johnson's 1964 presidential campaign, because Johnson distrusted Corbin and other holdovers from the administration of John F. Kennedy, who was assassinated in November 1963.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., an aide to John F. Kennedy, said in a recent interview with The Journal that he was not surprised that J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI's longtime director, was providing information to Johnson.

"Hoover hated Robert Kennedy and Johnson was delighted to get the information," said Schlesinger, who now is a historian at City University of New York.

Documents from Zablocki's archives and FBI records were provided to The Journal by Athan Theoharis, a Marquette University history professor. He is an expert on FBI procedures and will publish a book this fall titled "The Secret Files of J. Edgar Hoover."

The Journal has previously reported that FBI records obtained by Theoharis showed that:

■ Former US Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas leaked confidential deliberations to the FBI.

■ Ronald Reagan gave the FBI information on suspected communist activities in Hollywood in 1947.

■ The FBI clandestinely tried to gather embarrassing information about President Dwight Eisenhower at the suggestion of an aide to former Wisconsin Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy.

Theoharis and one of his graduate students, Stephen Leahy, obtained the FBI records about Corbin through the Freedom of Information Act and Zablocki's files in archives at Marquette University.

Most of those involved in the political maneuvering have died, including Corbin, Zablocki, Johnson, Hoover and the Kennedys.

Corbin, who was from Janesville, worked in John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign. US Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy landed Corbin a job as top aide to John M. Bailey, then the Democratic national chairman.

Zablocki was "unhappy it wasn't one of his men being appointed" and tried to get Corbin removed, Theoharis said.

Zablocki obtained a 1959 confidential FBI report on Corbin alleging he was active in radical labor groups in the 1940s and was a dues-paying, card-carrying member of the Communist Party in the '40s. The FBI report is in Zablocki's files, along with an Aug.

Memorandum on Corbin.

A JOURNAL CONNECTION?

Just three days later — Aug. 24, 1961 — The Milwaukee Journal published the first of several stories about Corbin. The story said Corbin had been active in communist activities in Wisconsin in the 1940s, and contained much of the information in the Zablocki memo.

Theoharis believes that Zablocki was the source of the information and the object was to smear Corbin. Two days after the story, Zablocki called for Corbin's firing from his Democratic Party job.

Zablocki also exchanged several letters with Edward Kerstein, the Journal reporter who wrote most of the stories about Corbin.

A September 1961 letter from Zablocki to Kerstein said: "I must say that when you start upon on a project, you are really thorough! More power to you. Please keep me informed of any further developments as you know exactly where I stand on this issue."



KERSTEIN

An October letter to Zablocki from Kerstein said: "I'll keep you informed on whatever additional information I am able to acquire on my assignment regarding Paul Corbin."

Kerstein is retired and lives in Hales Corners. He said that he was assigned to the story by an editor who received a tip about Corbin. Kerstein said he did not know the source of the tip. He said Zablocki was not the source for the initial story, though Zablocki provided information for later stories on Corbin.

Zablocki's motive was opposition "to communists being in the Democratic Party," Kerstein said.

The Journal stories and Zablocki's continuing complaints about Corbin prompted the House Committee on Un-American Activities to hold hearings on Corbin, records show.

Kerstein was one of the witnesses who testified about Corbin's alleged Communist Party activities. Kerstein testified in November 1961.

Corbin said at the time that he had never been a communist, but several committee witnesses testified that Corbin was active in the Communist Party in the 1940s.

The committee reached no conclusion, and Corbin retained his job with the Democratic National Committee.

FBI records indicate the agency again provided information about



Journal photo by Jim Gehrz

MARQUETTE PROFESSOR Athan Theoharis is doing research for a book to be titled "The Secret Files of J. Edgar Hoover."

Corbin and other Kennedy aides, this time in 1964 to President Johnson.

Johnson distrusted Corbin and several other former advisers to John F. Kennedy. Johnson believed them to be loyal to rival Democrat Robert Kennedy.

A January 1964 memo to Hoover from one of his top aides, Cartha De Loach, said Johnson would get Corbin removed from his Democratic Party job.

Corbin was forced out of his job with the Democratic National Committee in February 1964. A memo to Hoover from De Loach a month later indicated that information "specifically furnished at the direction of the president" got Corbin and another Democratic adviser fired.

Another March 1964 memo to Hoover from De Loach said the FBI also gave Johnson information about several other former Kennedy aides — including press secretary Pierre Salinger — whom John-

son had retained.

Salinger, now a reporter for ABC News in London, said through a spokeswoman that he was not aware that the FBI had turned information about him over to Johnson.

De Loach, who now is retired and lives in Hilton Head, S.C., said, "I recall nothing. It's been 21 years ago since I left the FBI."

De Loach said, however, that the FBI sometimes did background checks at the request of the president. "While some people may think it's political, other people may realize it comes within the jurisdiction," he said.

Schlesinger said the newly disclosed records further confirmed how politicized the FBI was during Hoover's reign.

"When Hoover ran it, it certainly wasn't non-political at all, and Johnson wanted it that way," Schlesinger said. "God knows why Johnson wanted this stuff. Johnson just liked to have stuff on people."

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Corbin described as a wild card

Paul Corbin was an intelligent, aggressive, opportunistic political operative whose associates ranged from Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy to President John F. Kennedy to CIA Director William Casey, according to those who knew Corbin.

"Corbin was a totally uncontrolled missile and sort of an entertaining rogue," Arthur Schlesinger Jr. said in an interview with *The Journal*.



CORBIN

Schlesinger was an aide to John F. Kennedy and wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book about the slain president. He also wrote a biography of Robert Kennedy, and now is a historian at City University of New York.

A January 1964 memo to former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover from Cartha De Loach, a top-Hoover aide, described Corbin as "the former member of the Communist Party in Wisconsin who has quite a big mouth and throws his weight around considerably."

An article by Ken Bode in *The*

New Republic, printed shortly after Corbin's death at 75 last year, said: "For more than 30 years, Corbin operated as the wild card of American politics, behind the scenes and at the margins.

"With his tailored suits, broad-brimmed fedoras, raspy voice and unparalleled nerve, Corbin was the Billy Martin of politics, not because he was a brawler, but because, like the spiky Martin, where Corbin went, havoc was sure to follow," wrote Bode, a former NBC political correspondent.

Corbin, who was born in Canada; immigrated to the United States in 1936 and settled in Janesville. For a time, he was a business partner in a flag-selling business with Wisconsin Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy, the anti-communist crusader.

FBI records and *Milwaukee Journal* stories alleged that Corbin was active in the Communist Party of Wisconsin in the 1940s, something Corbin denied.

In 1960, Corbin worked in John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign and afterward was hired as a staff member at the Democratic National Committee, where he served as Atty. Gen. Robert Ken-

nedey's "ears and eyes," according to Bode's article.

Robert Kennedy became Corbin's godfather when Corbin converted to Catholicism.

President Lyndon Johnson forced Corbin out of the Democratic National Committee job in 1964 after Corbin worked in the New Hampshire primary to promote a movement to draft Robert Kennedy for vice president.

After Robert Kennedy was assassinated in 1968, Corbin became the curator of the Country Music Wax Museum in Nashville, Tenn. He later returned to Washington and worked as a political consultant.

Corbin's name last surfaced after the 1980 presidential election, when he was accused of delivering former President Jimmy Carter's debate briefing book to William Casey, the director of Ronald Reagan's campaign who was later named CIA director.

A 1984 House subcommittee that investigated the matter said testimony that Corbin had given the book to the Reagan campaign was credible, but not absolutely definite.

—Patrick Jaspere

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In 1964, Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy (left) chats with US Rep. Clement J. Zablocki (second from right) and Wisconsin Gov. John Reynolds (third from right) at the Jefferson Hotel in Atlantic City.

Reynolds later was appointed a federal judge and is now on senior status as a federal judge in the Eastern District of Wisconsin. Kennedy was assassinated in 1968 and Zablocki died in 1983.

Journal file photo