

Oswald Plan To Move Here Bared

Voluminous FBI Files Fail to Disclose Why

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Lee Harvey Oswald wrote that he was planning to move to the Washington-Baltimore area a month before he assassinated President John F. Kennedy in Dallas in the fall of 1963, according to newly released FBI files.

This disclosure appeared in a letter he wrote the Worker magazine in New York from New Orleans in September 1963. He wrote that he wanted to know how to contact the Communist Party in this area "as I plan to relocate there in October." The only reply Oswald got was very guarded and indicated he should plan to operate not underground but in the background.

Instead Oswald went to Dallas, and it was there on Nov. 22, 1963, that he shot Kennedy from the window of the building in which he worked. Two days later, Oswald was dead at the hands of a police buff and nightclub operator named Jack Ruby.

The Oswald correspondence was only one page of the 40,001 documents released this week under a FBI under the Freedom of Information Act request. But it illustrates the dilemma created by release of the raw FBI files:

ALL MANNER OF information from the wildest "nut" calls to the serious communications between various officials at every step of the investigation of the Kennedy and Oswald murders are now available, but there is no ready way for the press or public to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Nowhere in the raw FBI files can a reader methodically find out, for example, why Oswald didn't come to the Washington-Baltimore area or what his intentions were if he did. In that sense, the release of nearly half a ton of unindexed, inconclusive documents raises more questions than it answers.

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There are scores, even hundreds, of such mysteries, even if one culls out the "nut calls" from people who contacted the FBI with everything from their dreams and fantasies to conversations they overheard which seemed suspicious to them.

The FBI dispatched agents to track down every report, no matter how added, drunk or just mistaken the listeners were.

ONE OF THE STORIES related in the FBI files, and written with the standard humorless style used by the agents, was that of a woman from Hominy, Okla. She succeeded in getting nine letters written by the FBI to the Warren Commission after charging that the FBI knew all about Oswald's purchase of a rifle and his trip to Mexico before the assassination. She also got the late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's dander up because he wrote that she was conducting a "scurrilous campaign of villification."

Another woman from New York got considerable attention from Hoover when she claimed that an FBI agent who was 10 feet tall and very well built was responsible for the whole thing. Hoover admonished her for making unsupported statements about the FBI and its personnel.

The documents show that the bureau left few stones turned in its investigation of Oswald and his murderer, Ruby. But the raw files also make it obvious that Hoover from the outset was determined to share the investigation with no one.

HE AND HIS AIDES feuded with the CIA, the Dallas police and even the State Department, and they resisted the formation of a presidential commission. And when the Warren Commission was ordered into being by President Lyndon B. Johnson, Hoover made very sure he knew everything the panel was doing as well as controlling most of the evidence that it was given to consider.

As the investigation progressed, the FBI turned up many bizarre and startling leads. Here are some of the more noteworthy:

- Agents learned of an Army captain from Fort Benning, Ga., who was contacted by a North Hollywood, Calif., dentist, ostensibly a member of the ultra-conservative National States Rights Party. The dentist told the captain in early 1963 that the organization needed a group of young men "to get rid of Kennedy, the Cabinet and all members of Americans for Democratic Action and maybe 10,000 other people." The captain backed away from what he regarded as a crackpot idea, but said he had the definite impression the dentist was propositioning him on this matter.

- Another tip sent the New York office of the FBI rushing out to 42nd Street in search of gypsy tea rooms after one caller said a gypsy had predicted the Kennedy murder.

- Priscilla Johnson McMillan, who recently wrote a best-selling book about Oswald's widow, Marina, was actually considered a suspect in the Kennedy case, according to language

in a Telex message from the Washington field office to the New York FBI office just five days after Kennedy's death. The message refers to Johnson as a suspect in the case and tells of two FBI interviews with her on Nov. 23 and 24, 1963.

- Adam Yarmolinsky, then a powerful Defense Department employe and widely known academic, called the FBI — where he was not popular —

to inform the bureau that Oswald's activities reminded him of another individual, a former GI named Nicholas Petrulli. Petrulli had renounced his U.S. citizenship in Moscow, just as Oswald had done in 1959, and then returned to the United States. An FBI official told another in recounting the story, "The director asked if it is accepted practice by the State Department to allow individuals who have renounced their citizenship to return to the United States."

- W. O. Stinson, administrative assistant to wounded Texas Gov. John B. Connally, passed on to the FBI second-hand information about an overheard plot to kill Kennedy that was set afoot three weeks before the assassination by three unnamed oilmen. As Stinson told the story to the FBI office in Dallas after Kennedy was dead, the three oilmen had put up a great deal of money to have Kennedy killed. It was not possible to discover in the FBI documents what the outcome of this startling tale was.

- FBI officials M.A. Jones and Cartha D. DeLoach worked up a statement in Hoover's name in early 1964 rebutting what was called the false statement that Oswald was a confidential agent of the FBI. They prepared a press release that said Oswald had never been employed in any capacity by the FBI, had never received any payments from the FBI and was not a confidential informant. The CIA also formally denied that Oswald was connected with it in any way.

- Hoover was almost perpetually unhappy about the actions of Dallas Police Chief Jesse Curry and wrote an internal memo about it to his top aides in February 1964 that was almost contemptuous of the chief. Hoover said he had told publisher William Randolph Hearst that the police chief was "trying to please everybody and was giving TV interviews most of the time until I sent him word to keep his mouth shut."

- The records indicate that both the Secret Service and FBI lost track of the clothes Connally was wearing when he was wounded in the president's card. The documents do not explain how the clothes turned up later and, that when they became evidence, they had already been cleaned and pressed.

- The Texas Employment Commission reported to the FBI five days after Kennedy's death that Oswald had turned down several better paying jobs, presumably in order to retain access to the Texas School Book Depository on Kennedy's Dallas parade route. This is not explained in the FBI's raw files.

THE DOCUMENTS reveal that Hoover and the FBI badly wanted a deathbed statement from Oswald after he was wounded by Ruby but before word reached Washington that

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he was dead. Al Rosen, one of Hoover's top aides, sent a memo to Alan Belmont, another, a few hours after Oswald was shot, saying that the director wanted agents standing by at Parkland Hospital where Oswald was dying. Oswald, as it developed, never regained consciousness. Hoover passed the word that President Johnson wanted the FBI to investigate the second shooting.

FBI agents, therefore, waited at Oswald's bedside until he died while other G-men took part in the first interviews of Ruby even through no federal agents were present when Ruby was captured after the shooting.

Ironically, FBI officials were sending messages to one another that the White House and Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach wanted a full report on the Oswald case, including "everything that may raise a question in the mind of the public or the press regarding this matter."

"IN OTHER WORDS," Belmont wrote to Assistant Director William C. Sullivan, "this report is to settle the dust both from the standpoint that Oswald is the man who assassinated the president and relative to Oswald himself. The director desires it out as quickly as possible. We want to be certain that anything that is put into the report can be backed up as it will be subject to minute scrutiny from the press and public."

The report, the documents emphasize, was for the purpose of assuring the American public and the world as to what the facts were in Kennedy's assassination and setting to rest the many rumors in the United States and the world. That was 14 years ago.

Today, there is more division in public opinion about what really happened in Dallas than there was in 1963. A U.S. official said, "We really shouldn't be surprised. This country is still looking for the truth about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and that was more than 100 years ago."

The FBI documents

It amused us to note that Wednesday's initial dispatches from the reading room of the Federal Bureau of Investigation differed about the weight of the more than 40,000 documents released by that agency about its investigation of the Kennedy assassination. The Associated Press put the weight at "half a ton," while a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* described "a floor-to-ceiling stack of papers, weighing more than 300 pounds."

If it is hard to guess the weight of a stack of documents, it is even harder to see what new light, if any, they shed on President Kennedy's assassination or the way J. Edgar Hoover's agency handled it.

Preliminary trekking through this paper blizzard does, however, suggest a few provisional conclusions:

1. The verdict of the Warren Commission report — that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, shot and killed John Kennedy in Dallas — stands intact.

2. The attention of the FBI to a weird assortment of tips and "leads," many of them perfectly absurd, was exemplary in its diligence — far more so than it needed to be and the more remarkable in view of the FBI's early conclusion that Oswald had been the killer.

3. The FBI, like other administration officials, was less troubled by evidentiary puzzles than by the impossibility of proving negatives. Courtney Evans, reporting to J. Edgar Hoover on a communication with Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, lamented that "we are being called upon, in many instances, to prove the negative (and) Katzenbach notes it is more difficult to prove that something did not happen than . . . to prove that it did happen." "More difficult" does scant justice to the problem. The fretting about proving negatives was to recur in the Warren Commission report. But with little noticeable impact on the amateur sleuths who flocked about the tragic event, making a career (and sometimes profit) out of fanciful games with the web of circumstance surrounding the assassination.

4. The FBI, in a manner characteristic of the Hoover days, was very touchy about intrusions on its turf, whether they involved an ambassador "playing Sherlock Holmes" in Mexico City or the Dallas chief of police making casual pub-

lic remarks about failures of liaison between the FBI and his office — remarks that an indignant Mr. Hoover saw as "lies" but which later proved to be true, or largely so.

This sensitivity prompted FBI lobbying against the mounting consensus in the White House and elsewhere that rampant public doubt and mushrooming conspiracy fantasies ought to be quieted, if they could be, by an independent blue-ribbon inquiry.

The FBI's attempt to avert that inquiry, which even included telephone calls to *The Washington Post* in the hope of heading off editorials, is revealing in view of what people of conspiratorial mind might make of it. Their tendency, as we know, is to attribute esoteric or sinister motives to predictable official behavior. When it sought to head off an independent probe, the FBI was motivated — that is, Mr. Hoover and his top adjutants were motivated — by vanity. It was feared, for no visible reason, that the inquiry might seem to reflect insulting doubts about the diligence or competence of the Bureau. But it is infinitely more thrilling to suppose, however gratuitously, that the FBI must have "something to hide": something more interesting to hide, that is, than a few human slipups in an agency that cultivated an air of infallibility.

In this connection, it is worth recalling that when the House of Representatives last year set up a select committee to review the Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations, its first director (who later quit) defended an outlandish investigative budget by citing the need to go over, again, all the ground the FBI had traversed in 1963-64.

Our own view, to repeat it here, is that Congress could more usefully spend such a sum developing a pill to neutralize the peculiar body chemistry of compulsive conspiracy theorists. Their main symptom is an inability — or unwillingness — to grasp the frustrating truth that in many historic episodes, prosaic or sensational, the role of muddle, confusion, freakishness can never be discounted. We all find it easier to live in an intelligible world, where human motives and acts are both logical and accountable. Ours is not such a world. We do not expect this or indeed the next blizzard of FBI documents to show that it is such a world, either.