

Special Report

Was Fidel on the grassy knoll?

By George O'Toole
and Ron Rosenbaum

What do Lyndon Johnson, E. Howard Hunt and Jack Anderson have in common? They've all speculated in public that Fidel Castro may be connected in some way with the assassination of President Kennedy. Recent disclosures that the CIA may have been operating what LBJ called "a damned Murder, Inc." in the Caribbean have revived speculation that Castro ordered JFK's death to retaliate for repeated attempts on his life.

From a previously unpublished Secret Service report, *New Times* has learned that this theory was first offered to government investigators less than three weeks after the assassination. The report, discovered in the National Archives among Warren Commission documents marked CD 320, states that:

"... on December 12, 1963, Alonzo Heidt Hudkins III, a reporter for the Houston Post, advised the writer confidentially that he had received information from Felton West, the Houston Post Washington Bureau representative, to the effect that citizens of the United States had entered into an agreement or a plot to assassinate Premier Castro of Cuba and that Lee Harvey Oswald, who went to Mexico City on September 26 and allegedly returned about October 1-3, learned of this plot, which infuriated him.

"Mr. Hudkins inferred that this was a possible reason for Oswald assassinating the President.

"... [Hudkins] states that Felton West, Post Washington Bureau, has more specific information as to the plot to assassinate Castro and the fact that President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson were informed of same by a former Cuban premier."

On March 10 of this year Jack Anderson wrote that "sources familiar with the CIA (anti-Castro) conspiracy

can't shake a nagging suspicion—unsupported by the Warren Commission's findings—that Castro may have become aware of the U.S. plot upon his life, and therefore may have recruited Oswald to retaliate against President Kennedy."

Now this Secret Service report suggests that even the Warren Commission may have had reason to consider that "nagging suspicion." But who is this Alonzo Heidt Hudkins III, and do we have reason to take at face value the story he gave to the Secret Service?

Hudkins' name is a familiar one to students of the intricacies of the Kennedy assassination and may well be still familiar to ex-Warren Commissioner Gerald Ford, who described the session at which Hudkins' name first became an issue as the "most tense and hushed" session of the Commission he had ever attended. The Hudkins affair, which Ford describes in detail in the opening chapter of *Portrait of the Assassin*, began on January 1, 1964, when a Hudkins story in the *Houston Post* entitled "Oswald Rumored as Informant for the U.S." disclosed that certain Dallas law enforcement officials suspected that Oswald may have been an informant for the FBI and cited the presence of a local FBI agent's name, address and license plate number in Oswald's address book and FBI interviews with Oswald on several occasions following his return from the Soviet Union.

This Hudkins story, along with a rumor that Oswald had an official FBI informant's "payroll number" (S-172 or S-179) and a \$200 monthly salary from the Bureau, was passed on to the Warren Commission by Texas Attorney General Waggoner Carr. The Commission immediately summoned Carr and several Dallas law enforcement officials to Washington for an emergency briefing for Chief Justice Warren himself. At a subsequent meeting of the full Commission, the Commissioners spent hour upon hour agonizing over

"this fellow Hudkins," how to figure out the source of his story and how to go about investigating it without tipping off J. Edgar Hoover. (They decided they couldn't and didn't, relying instead upon Hoover's blanket denial.)

Ten years after all this fuss, Hudkins revealed to a Philadelphia *Inquirer* reporter that he and two associates had simply "invented" the numbers S-172 and 179 and leaked their existence by discussing them over a telephone they believed tapped. In the 1973 *Inquirer* interview, Hudkins didn't deny that there might be substance to reports of an Oswald FBI link. Regardless of the S-172 hoax, Hudkins expressed belief that "Oswald was either a stoolie for the FBI or the CIA and turned out to be the greatest double agent of all time."

This year, Hudkins backed off further and wrote in the *Baltimore News-American*, "I have no personal knowledge that he was or wasn't a double agent. I have only my suspicions." But back in 1964 Hudkins seemed to have more than just suspicions. He claimed to have a source. According to a letter from J. Edgar Hoover to the Warren Commission, Hudkins told the FBI his source was "a Government official, not a Federal official in Dallas, who had told him that Oswald was on the payroll of either the FBI or the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) with voucher number 179 and that he had received no less than \$150 a month and no more than \$225 a month."

Hudkins' zigzag account of the reported Oswald-FBI link has left many observers in total confusion.

Newsweek magazine, for example, leaped from Hudkins' confession that the number S-179 was his invention to the unwarranted conclusion that the whole question of Oswald's FBI connections was hoax material.

What then are we to make of the Hudkins story of a Castro-Oswald plot link in the Secret Service report?

New Times located Hudkins in Baltimore, where he's now a reporter for the *Baltimore News-American*.

It was no hoax, Hudkins said. "Yeah, I broke that all the way back then, but nobody would listen to me. The CIA knows about it."

Hudkins intimated that he had more than a little familiarity with what the CIA knew and didn't know, a familiarity that he said included personal involvement in Caribbean paramilitary activities, his accounts of which are strange and startling, to say the least.

Referring to recent disclosures of CIA assassination attempts, Hudkins said: "They've left one key person out of the list; that was Cheddi Jagan. I was on a team approached to knock off Castro and to knock off Cheddi Jagan."

Hudkins said he had been approached in late '62 or early '63 while working as an engineer for Hunt Oil in Houston and asked to join two other people on what he called a CIA "contract team." According to Hudkins, this "team" decided that a Castro attempt would be too risky, but was actively proceeding with a plot to get Jagan, the Marxist former prime minister of Guyana.

"We figured we couldn't knock off Castro without forfeiting our own lives. We said to hell with that—money doesn't do you any good if you're dead . . . We wondered why in hell knock off somebody like Jagan. I still haven't figured out why except Kennedy hated his guts . . . Johnson knew about it. He said with a wink, 'It's all right but it's unofficial.' But they called it off when it got close to the nutcracking."

In addition, Hudkins claimed his career as a sometime soldier of fortune included an attempt to smuggle "a thousand guns" to anti-Castro forces in Cuba around the time of the Bay of Pigs. He said that one of his close friends was killed during the CIA-directed hunt for Che Guevara in Bolivia and that he, Hudkins, was a source for "part of" Jack Anderson's sensational disclosures in 1971 that the CIA had employed Mafioso such as the late Sam Giancana to engineer some of its assassination attempts on Castro.

Questioned about the reference in the Secret Service report to a "former Cuban premier" who purportedly informed Kennedy and Johnson of the plot against Castro which Oswald purportedly ran into in Mexico City, Hudkins said, "He's not a premier or even an ambassador. He was a high-ranking minister in Castro's organization who barely got out with

his life . . . I can't tell you his name because he lives up here in Maryland now."

New Times contacted Felton West, onetime *Houston Post* Washington bureau reporter whom Hudkins had identified to the Secret Service as someone with "more specific information" about the Castro plot. West said, "I don't know where he got the idea. At that time the Secret Service called me and asked me about it. I couldn't explain it to them either." Hudkins told us that he didn't specifically remember telling that particular Secret Service agent the story, but that the agent may have misinterpreted what he'd said. Hudkins maintains he did have a source other than Felton West and stands by his story. He claims that still secret Warren Commission documents in the National Archives will corroborate his story.

Right or wrong, Hudkins certainly deserves credit for being the first reporter to promote the speculation that U.S. assassination attempts against Castro somehow led to JFK's death in Dallas—a speculation that has become increasingly popular with certain political and governmental interests in recent days. One of the most fascinating examples of such speculation seems to have been prompted by a leak from the CIA itself.

In a copyrighted story on June 15 of this year, the *Chicago Tribune* said that according to "preliminary information furnished congressional leaders by a Central Intelligence Agency liaison man," the Warren Commission "may have been denied crucial information about the assassination of John F. Kennedy by two aides of the slain President who were advised by high officials of the Federal Bureau of Investigation to withhold certain data." The *Tribune* story indicates that, according to the CIA source, JFK aides Kenneth O'Donnell and David Powers, who were in the fatal Dallas motorcade, told investigators that they observed shots being fired from a location "other than the Texas School Book Depository from which Lee Harvey Oswald is accused of having gunned down the President."

According to the *Tribune*, the CIA liaison man alleged that the FBI told the JFK aides to keep quiet about what they saw because "testimony to

that effect could lead to a possible international incident and inflame public passions fed by other secret information then known to the FBI."

The *Tribune* quotes O'Donnell as calling the story "an absolute outright lie," but goes on to speculate that this "secret information" known to the FBI may concern Oswald's involvement in Mexico City with Cuban and Russian embassy officials and the possibility that he was part of a communist-sponsored assassination conspiracy to retaliate for anti-Castro plots.

Stories such as this either ignore the considerable body of evidence which suggests that Oswald's so-called pro-Castro activities were attempts to infiltrate such groups on behalf of some government agency, or else theorize that Oswald may have been such an infiltrator, but only as a double agent for Castro.

Hudkins takes the latter route. "The nuts are on the right track," he says. "Oswald may have had help." But Hudkins believes the help came from agents of Havana or Moscow. (Hudkins even claims he knows the name of the pilot and the number of the plane that supposedly waited to help Oswald make his escape.)

One result of all this talk of possible Castro links to the assassination is that voices are being raised to question the continued relaxation of U.S. relations with Cuba, a process that seemed—a few short months ago—on its way to restoring full U.S. diplomatic recognition to the Castro government. Recently, President Ford reversed the trend when he announced that the U.S. would not necessarily abide by an Organization of American States action to drop the decade-old economic boycott of Cuba.

Alonzo Heidt Hudkins III is one of the people who takes credit for that reversal and attributes it to the Castro-Oswald links.

Asked by *New Times* why he hadn't written about his Castro plot information earlier, Hudkins said, "At that time they convinced me that maybe I shouldn't write all I know, but now in recent months, we've been the ones that slowed them down on resuming relations with Cuba. I mean, I and others raised the question: Should we go ahead and do this before we know whether this guy knocked off one of our presidents?" ●