Unpersuasive Case Against 'Fedora'

To the Editor:

William Safire's Sept. 17 column, "The Other Shoe," on the supposed double or triple secret agent "Fedora," is seriously in error — as is the information from the Reader's Digest, Edward Jay Epstein and James Angleton, on which the column is apparently ultimately based — at least on one crucial point.

The heart of the matter is the alleged relationship between Epstein's "Fedora" and Yuri Nosenko, a self-confessed K.G.B. agent who told the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. in 1963-64 that he had been Lee Harvey Oswald's case agent for the K.G.B. and that there had been no relationship between the K.G.B. and Oswald, the assassin of President Kennedy.

To put it mildly, there were — and are — well-founded and substantial doubts about the truth of Nosenko's basic story.

As chief counsel for the Select Committee on Assassinations in 1977-79, I directed a comprehensive investigation of Nosenko and his story about Oswald and concluded, along with a unanimous committee, that Nosenko had lied to the F.B.I. and C.I.A. in 1963-64 — and to us in 1978. The details are set out in "The Plot to Kill the President" (Times Books 1981).

Included in that investigation, which had access to the key classified documents as well as F.B.I. and C.I.A. personnel and foreign defectors, was a review of Epstein's allegations about the relationship between a "Fedora" and Nosenko.

According to Epstein, if Nosenko had lied, then the bona fides of his "Fedora" had to be questioned and rejected, too. Unfortunately, it just is not all that simple.

Although the details of the process of reasoning are classified, we concluded that "... contrary to Epstein's assertion[s] .... the bona fides of Nosenko [are] . . . not inextricably intertwined with those of any other defector . . ."

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