

The assassination labyrinth

by Ron Rosenbaum

WASHINGTON, D. C. — The tape from Dallas lies on top of a heap of fat file folders on Bob Smith's desk. The tape arrived in the mail yesterday morning.

It was addressed to:

Mr. Robert P. Smith
Director of Research
The Committee to Investigate Assassinations
Suite 409
927 15th Street, Northwest
Washington, D. C.

Suite 409 lies at the far end of a long corridor lined with doors that look as if they have grown accustomed to being shut. Each door is equipped with a pre-war ground

glass window-inset, lettered in gilt and black with the names and degrees of dentists and real estate brokers. Dark shades have been drawn down behind most of the ground-glass panels, rendering their original translucence opaque. There is a feeling that few cavities are filled, few deeds executed on this corridor.

Inside Suite 409, the ceilings, the walls, the radiators squatting beneath the window sills, have all

been painted a pre-faded pale yellow. The linoleum floor, once black streaked with white, has faded to a chiaroscuro of dark and lighter grays.

It is a tape of a tape of a tape, this cassette on top of the heap of the folders on Bob Smith's desk in Suite 409. The original tape, still in the hands of the Dallas Police Department, is a recording of all Police Band radio transmissions on November 22, 1963, from the moment John F. Kennedy was shot in Dealey Plaza to the moment Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested inside a movie theatre three miles away.

A "researcher" for the Committee to Investigate Assassinations, a Dallas resident with contacts within the police force, obtained a copy of the original

tape, compiled a voluminous transcript of every word, every stutter, every burst of static on the tape, then forwarded tape and transcript to Bob Smith in Suite 409.

That is how the Committee to Investigate Assassinations works. There is a computer expert in Connecticut, a ballistics expert in Boston, an ex-FBI agent in Los Angeles, a journalist in New Jersey, a Jack Ruby specialist here, an Officer Tippit specialist there.

And there is Bob Smith in Suite 409. Bob Smith is a thin, middle-aged, owlish type, who speaks slowly and carefully. He has a Cal Tech degree in chemical engineering, worked for a time as a chemical engineer for a Southern California defense contractor, and still wears the short hair narrow tie

white nylon shirt, and pale indoor pallor of the slide rule life. But he has grown accustomed, in two and a half years of operating out of Suite 409, to dealing with the unquantifiable and the incalculable.

"As 'Director of Research' for the Committee to Investigate Assassinations, I sit at the hub of a sort of wheel of information," Bob Smith has written. "Some may say, perhaps not without cause, that it is a wheel of misinformation. Certainly there are some rickety spokes to it, and it isn't always easy to keep from reeling off the road. After long practice, though, and after having heard a lot of stories, I think I have acquired some skill in avoiding the more obvious tches."

There is the story of the Three Mystery Tramps, for instance. Bob Smith sorts through the heap of file folders, plucks one from the bottom of the pile. Certain news-

paper photographs, purportedly taken shortly after the assassination, show two Dallas policemen hustling three shabbily dressed men away from the vicinity of the infamous "grassy knoll," the site from which assassination investigators have long believed the fatal bullets were fired. Neither the identities, nor the subsequent detention and release of the three "tramps," as

they are called in assassination circles, have ever been fully explained.

Who were they? Over the years there has been considerable speculation in assassination circles

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that the "tramps" were actually members of the assassination team, being hurried into hiding by accomplices on the Dallas police force.

And then after the assassination of Martin Luther King, a whole new wave of attention was focused upon the mystery tramps, especially on the one who had come to be known as "Frenchy" (so named for his vaguely Gallic

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Continued from preceding page features and the seedy "Continental" clothing he wears in the grainy photos). In 1970 a certain assassination researcher published a story in Ramparts pointing out the extraordinary resemblance between "Frenchy" of Dealey Plaza and the FBI Crime Artist's composite sketch—circulated briefly in April 1968—of a man wanted in connection with the shooting of Martin Luther King. The question was then raised: could this mysterious "Frenchy" have any relation to the equally mysterious (and

perhaps non-existent) figure whom James Earl Ray calls "Raoul"—a French Canadian from whom Ray claims he received money and orders in his travels before and after the King assassination?

Bob Smith doesn't go for it. "I listened to this cassette last night," he says, indicating the tape from Dallas. "If you go over the log of transmissions carefully you find four or five transmissions which trace the history of the arrest of the three tramps. And for one thing you find that it happened rather late—not minutes but more like an hour and a half later. It also appears they were taken from a boxcar that may not have come from the

grassy knoll area at all, but rather to the south of Dealey Plaza. The train was coming north and they were taken off. Of course I'm not absolutely sure these were the same tramps. . . ."

But unlike most assassination investigators who have gone before him, Bob Smith habitually prefers to accept the less sinister explanation. "There are enough genuine mysteries about this damn thing without having to make them up," he tells me.

There is the mystery of the Billy G. Harper skull fragment, for instance. Bob Smith picks up another one of the file folders.

"This one is about a bone fragment that was found in Dealey Plaza on the day after the assassination," he tells me, opening up the file to reveal pictures, official-looking documents, and medical diagrams within. He selects a small wallet-sized photo of a pale, mottled piece of bone, about an inch and a half wide.

"This fragment is suspected as being a piece of the President's skull. And it is mentioned in some of the unpublished archives material in a way that suggests that the piece of bone may have come from the back of the President's skull, the occipital region. And if it did come from that region it would be entirely inconsistent with the autopsy report because that report describes only a bullet entry hole in the rear of the skull and no sizeable loss of bone fragment in that area."

The implication is that the bone fragment was blown out by an

exiting bullet, fired from in front of the President. The Warren Commission, of course, insists that the only shots fired came from behind his head.

Bob Smith takes out an eight-by-10 blow-up of the cryptic bone fragment. A certain curvature is evident—as in a shard of pottery interior side up.

"That curvature seems to match the curvature of the occipital protusion you can see in—where is it in here—this anatomy text's diagram of the skull. I have some recordings of doctors, incidentally, pathologists in Dallas, who examined this bone before it was turned over to the FBI, and they all say this thing was from the occipital region."

"How did—?"

"You see the fragment was first found by this young medical student named Billy G. Harper and he had an uncle who was a doctor who brought it to a couple of pathologists. They all examined it and photographed it and decided it should be turned over to the FBI. Now the FBI took it and presumably ran some tests on it. There's a Warren Commission Document Number 1269 containing the FBI reports which has been withheld from the public—it's one of the few remaining documents which the Justice Department still refuses to release. However when I was down in Dallas about a year ago I found the doctors and found out they had duplicates. These are the duplicates. Now look here."

He points to a web of faintly traced lines and occasional tiny perforations upon the inner surface of the skull fragment.

"Now those holes are perforations for the passage of the fluid which bathes the skull, and which makes it, in most cases, self-repairing. Those striations you see are impressions left by the path of blood vessels resting upon the inner surface of the skull."

He removes two labyrinthine anatomical drawings from the file folder.

"Now I have some pictures of the interior of the skull cavity—I got these from a Hungarian anatomy text which, by the way, I've

found to be far more detailed and useful than Gray's 'Anatomy.' You can see that you have quite a complex topographical surface structure to the inside of the skull. Now I would think—I haven't found them yet—but I would think there must be experts in the charting of such things who could tell from those features whether that fragment. . . ."

The charting of such things. . . .

Until lunchtime Bob Smith continues to explicate for me the surface features of three more recalcitrant fragments of the mystery.

It seems there has been a brand new development in The Mystery of the Mexican Oswald. Just one week ago, the Central Intelligence Agency, at the request of Bob Smith, declassified and released four Warren Commission documents previously classified top secret. Attached to one of these documents was a set of three photographs of an unknown man.

Bob Smith removes the declassified document and the three photos from a file folder. He hands me the photos. They show a tall beefy fellow in his mid-30s walking away from a nondescript building, apparently unaware of the camera taking his picture.

"Does that look like Lee Oswald to you?" Bob Smith asks me.

It does not, I tell him.

"In October of 1963," he begins to explain, "when Oswald was reported to be in Mexico City, a CIA informant whom the agency identifies in this document as a 'reliable and sensitive source,'

reported that an American male identifying himself as Lee Oswald entered the Soviet Embassy and asked for news of a cable he had sent to the Soviet Embassy in Washington. The American was described as approximately 35 years old with an athletic build about six feet tall with a receding hairline. Now these pictures were taken by a hidden camera outside the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City. They are purportedly the man who identified himself as Lee Oswald."

The man in the pictures is obviously not the Lee Harvey Oswald who was arrested in Dallas.

"Has this guy ever been iden-

tified or explained?"

"No. To this day the question hasn't been answered. Makes you wonder: Jesus, what's this guy doing using Lee Oswald's name at the Soviet Embassy?"

There are theories. In assassination circles there are always theories to explain such phenomena but Bob Smith refuses to endorse any of them. It is one more unsolved mystery to him. It has been Bob Smith's experience that

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each time he touches his finger to one elusive circumstance of the assassination mystery, the very touch generates, at his fingertip, two, three, many, equally elusive offspring, each a source of new mystery and no solution.

He spends the entire hour before lunch chronicling for me his epic researches into the origins of a series of gun supply house mail order coupons found scattered among the personal effects of Lee Harvey Oswald after his arrest. He has discovered that on the reverse side of a gun coupon clipped from *Adventures for Men* magazine, there was still another gun company coupon overlooked by the FBI and the Warren Commission, a discovery he made by doing a blow-up of a police photo of the interior of Oswald's suitcase, tracking down back issues of gun magazines, and at one point counting carefully the number of dots—39 of them—in the dotted line surrounding the obverse side of the coupon.

It is this kind of attention to details—obscurities, some might say—which has earned Bob Smith a reputation as a "fact freak" in some assassination circles, particularly among those who claim to already know the whole conspiracy top to bottom—with the exception of a few details.

Bob Smith is a very meticulous man when it comes to appraising conspiracy theories. There are reasons.

I learned one of the reasons late that night. In his aging gray Dodge Demon, Bob Smith and I were driving back into the Capital from an interesting visit to the Maryland home of an ex-intelligence agent: The ex-agent had in his possession a new breed of lie-detecting device, a device said to be capable of determining merely from the sound of a person's voice—either live or re-

corded—whether the speaker was in the process of telling a lie. The ex-agent had expressed an interest in applying the device to the mysteries of the Kennedy assassination. Bob had brought the police tape from Dallas with him, with the thought that the voices of policemen describing certain disputed details of the pursuit and apprehension of suspect Oswald might be subjected to the lie detecting device.

The evening proved to be a disappointment. Bob played a portion of the Dallas tape. Through veils of static the drawls of the radio dispatcher and the men in the patrol cars sounded calm and matter-of-fact as they batted around suggestions for untangling the traffic snarl-up which followed the mad rush of the motorcade for Parkland Hospital. The ex-agent quickly declared that the tape would reveal

nothing when run through his machine, there was no point to it. It was a "third or fourth generation" tape, he explained. Not only were the voices on the original tape distorted and blurred by hisses and snarls of short-wave static, but in addition the subsequent generations of taping and re-taping of the original had added their own layers of subtle hisses and distortions, rendering the original voices far too remote to yield to the machine the nuances of stress produced by a lie.

It was on the long drive back from this disappointing session that I happened to ask Bob Smith if he remembered what he was doing back in 1963 when Kennedy was shot.

He was living in Malibu Beach, California, working for a defense contractor and going through a very bad time in his life, he told me. Something about a veterans

hospital, something about a marriage going wrong, about work growing increasingly theoretical and unsatisfying, about life amidst the early acid-hedonists of Malibu Beach turning sour.

He grew depressed and began entertaining what he now realizes were delusionary feelings, something about hostile conspiracies aimed at him by people at work.

At the same time, he said, he began experiencing certain peculiar mental states which, he

believes, were *not* connected with these delusionary feelings. Instead he became convinced, and still believes, that certain people were somehow slipping him LSD.

He was rational enough at the time, he believes, to be able to separate the delusions induced by his emotional problems from those induced by the LSD. He had never taken acid voluntarily, and so, to test his suspicions, he gave

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the village VOICE, March 3.

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himself a dose and found the trip qualitatively just like those strange intervals he believes were caused by surreptitious dosings of the drug.

Unfortunately, however, he recalls, he was not stable enough at the time to avoid slipping into delusive reactions to his predicament. He began to blame the wrong people. Something about people at his job. He made accusations; there was trouble. He lost his security clearance, then his job, also his wife.

Looking back on the whole affair, Bob Smith is still fairly certain that someone really was slipping him LSD—a fact obscured, he believes, in the confusion aroused by his office-conspiracy delusion. He has become, since

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his recovery, quite discriminating when it comes to distinguishing paranoia from deduction. He has been there and back.

It was a delayed consequence of the Malibu incident that brought Bob Smith to Suite 409. When the Defense Department revoked his security clearance, and rejected his appeal, Bob Smith went to Washington, D. C., and found a sympathetic lawyer to take the Department to court.

The case dragged on for years (he finally won a reversal in 1972), and in early 1970, to help pay his legal fees, Bob Smith took on an unusual assignment for his attorney's law partner. The law partner's name was Bernard T. "Bud" Fensterwald, and Bud Fensterwald was chairman of a brand new group called the Com-

mittee to Investigate Assassinations.

For those amused by the intriguing realm lying between coincidence and conspiracy, a case can be made for tracing the genesis of this Committee to none other than Thomas Eagleton.

Back in the spring of 1969, Bud Fensterwald was working for Missouri Senator Edward Long, as counsel to Long's subcommittee on invasion of privacy matters. Shortly after the King and Second Kennedy murders, Fensterwald and a few investigators attached to the Long committee undertook an unofficial look into the doubts about the story of the First Kennedy Assassination, doubts which had been raised by Warren Commission critics, Jim Garrison, and several law enforcement officials

in Dallas and Miami. Fensterwald relayed his feeling to Senator Long that there was enough genuine mystery to warrant a full-scale committee investigation.

Long, however, was too busy with Thomas Eagleton to do anything about the idea. Eagleton was challenging his re-nomination bid in the Missouri Democratic primary. Long had been badly damaged by a Life magazine story charging him with fee-splitting dealings with the Kennedys. The Kennedys themselves were widely suspected of having leaked the material for the article because Long was believed to have offended them by his criticism of the use of extensive wiretapping and electronic surveillance by their "Get Hoffa" squad. Eagleton, who was known

to have the support of the Kennedys, beat Long in the primary, and the possibility of a Senate assassination investigation, remote from the start, distended to nothing.

Fensterwald retired to private practice, but decided to devote a good portion of his time and money to putting together a private committee to investigate the Kennedy assassinations.

All of them. Fensterwald himself was included in the Martin Luther King case, Travelling to Cuba, England, and France on assignments, and to return to the United States. He had enough knowledge in New Orleans to have him approached at

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torney of record in 1972. Fensterwald is in the process of getting Ray a hearing on his petition for a new trial, a petition, Fensterwald says, based on his brief that Ray was tricked into a guilty plea by a prosecution without the evidence to convict him, and by a defense lawyer with irreparable conflicts of interest. Harold Weisberg, the prolific investigator of the First Kennedy Assassination (five books beginning with "White-wash" I and II), has also begun working on the King case.

Others are checking into the Second Kennedy murder, although there is some skepticism about the case being pushed by Los Angeles attorney Theodore Charak that it was not Sirhan Sirhan, but a hotel security guard, who fired the fatal shot.

A computer expert in Connecticut is currently investigating links he believes exist between certain of the Watergate defendants and the netherworld of Cuban exiles, gun runners, and underworld adventurers which spawned, he believes, certain figures in the First Kennedy Assassination. The computer man told me he may have uncovered a connection centering around No Name Key, a barren Caribbean islet, said to have been a training base for para-military anti-Castro groups.

Bob Smith himself discovered a curious story in the course of his hours of research into the mountains of unpublished assassination documents housed in the National

Archives, a story involving Watergate defendant Frank Sturgis and a man identified as Lee Harvey Oswald.

Sturgis, a Bay of Pigs operative for the CIA, was living in Miami in 1963, using the name "Frank Fiorini," working as a used car salesman, and maintaining an organization called "The International Anti-Communist Brigade." Two months after the assassination, the FBI visited Sturgis/Fiorini and questioned him about an incident one of his Brigade members said took place in March of 1963 in Miami's Bayfront Park. The Brigade member claimed that Oswald had attempted to "infiltrate" the Brigade back in March, that Oswald had subsequently been involved in a fight with Brigade members in Bayfront Park, and that Fiorini/Sturgis had knowledge of this. Fiorini/Sturgis denied he had any such knowledge of Oswald, and Bob Smith is not sure if the tenuous connection means anything, although others in assassination circles see the incident as another one in a pattern of "Second Oswald" appearances.

(On our way back from lunch, Bob Smith stopped off at the Washington Post building to retrieve the Fiorini/Sturgis/Miami Oswald file which he had loaned to Carl Bernstein, one of the two-man Post team continuing to investigate Watergate. At Bernstein's request, Bob Smith agreed to continue compiling a file about the case for him.)

While Bob Smith spends most of his six-day 60-hour work week on the first Kennedy Assassination, he has found time, on the side, to work on another, infrequently discussed assassination.

He believes that John Patter, the convicted assassin of George Lincoln Rockwell, is innocent. He has worked with several parties to the case, and feels they will ultimately prove Patter's innocence in court.

Before we left the office for lunch, he handed me a brief summarizing the facts and the doubts in the Rockwell assassination case.

"Of course if Patter didn't do it, you have to assume the people who did do it are still around somewhere," he told me as he shut off the lights in Suite 409 and we headed out the door. "And of course if they're around, well, it's interesting—there was a lot of internal factionalism in the Nazi party around the time of his death. . . . This Rockwell one is

the only one that gives me an occasional feeling of physical danger. The Kennedy thing is a lot more remote," he said, locking the office door behind him. "You have to wonder if you're a threat to anyone in that one."

There was one incident of threatening behavior. "We'd hired a private detective," he recalls, "to track down this guy who used to live in Dallas, but who'd dropped out of sight after the assassination. He was a car salesman and he had a connection to one of those strange 'Second Oswald' stories—this one where some guy using the name Lee Oswald had come into this guy's Lincoln showroom in Dallas a month before the assassination, took a test drive, bragged about coming into some money soon, and disappeared. So our detective tracks the guy down to this tough West Virginia coal town and he literally gets scared out of town by the guy."

"Your detective got scared out of town?"

"Yeah, and you wouldn't think experienced private detectives would get scared very easily either. But this guy was scared. He wouldn't go back."

Over lunch I asked Bob Smith about Mr. _____, the man Jim Garrison told me was one of the two triggermen firing from

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the grassy knoll, the man Garrison believes may well have fired the fatal bullet.

Bob Smith has reservations about what he believes are Jim Garrison's more than occasional confusions of theory and fact. Nevertheless he acknowledged that _____ was considered something of a mysterious character in assassination circles.

"If you read _____'s testimony to the Warren Commission, you do begin to wonder about him. Of course he is a friend of _____'s and he has what you might call an interesting explanation of some of his activities on the day of the assassination and the morning after. There has been some talk that because of his appearance he might be responsible for some of those 'Second Oswald' stories."

"Is he a big item in the Warren Report?"

"Well, he's got some 80 or 90 pages of testimony and then there's pictures and exhibits."

Back at Suite 409, Bob picks out two thick volumes from the Committee's 26-volume set of Warren Commission material.

When I left to spend the afternoon reading about _____, Bob Smith returned to the tape from Dallas. He is going to play it again. Using the tape, he has compiled tables of the 11 separate physical descriptions of the hunted suspect broadcast over the police short-wave band in the

hours before Oswald's arrest. Somewhere within those matrices of physical descriptions (estimated weights ranging from 130 to 180; estimated heights from five feet six inches to six feet two inches; hair straight and wavy; short and long; complexions light and dark), somewhere lurking behind these evanescent short-wave suspects, there might be a clue, perhaps to the mystery of the second Oswald, or the third, or even the first; there just might be a pattern of some sort to be teased out with one more hearing. Then again there might not. And Bob Smith is one of the few people in the assassination business with the courage to admit it.