

WASHINGTON OFFBEAT

Visiting the Master Decoder

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The revelation that New Orleans Dist. Atty. Jim Garrison's sleuths had cracked Lee Harvey Oswald's secret code has left Washington understandably aghast.

The question in many minds is, "If Oswald's clever telephone-dial system could be cracked, are any of the private codes long favored by top officials safe?"

In a nutshell, Garrison's decoders translated the Oswald notebook entry "P. O. 19106" into Jack Ruby's unlisted 1963 telephone number. They did this by simply running the initials through a phone dial to get numbers, converting the initials of a Dallas telephone exchange, correcting the 19106 to 16901 by means of Oswald's secret "scramble" system, and finally subtracting the secret Oswald "key" number, 1300.

To the untutored layman, this may seem awfully complicated, even for a nutshell, but not in Washington, where double-, triple-, even quadruple-entendres are the normal means of communication, and where every simple statement by a public figure is closely studied for its true meaning, if any.

The acknowledged master decoder in Washington — and probably the world — is Dr. Stafford Cryptz, a limelight-shunning, pipe-smoking little man who operates in a closely guarded hideaway in mysterious Langley, Va. He granted a rare interview the other day.

A native of Tiflis — he is known in decoding circles as the Georgia Cracker — Cryptz first won his reputation by proving that an entry in Czar Nicholas II's address book, widely assumed to be the private phone number of his favorite masseuse, was actually the number of V. I. Lenin's Swiss bank account.

"Tell me," I began, "what was your favorite case?"

"The unmasking of Everett Dirksen," he replied without a moment's hesitation. "It started innocently enough. One of my agents brought me a leaf from Dirksen's June 1940 appointment calendar, on which was scribbled simply, 'Win With Wilkie.'

"Now, everyone knows Dirksen was for James G. Blaine that year, so it was obvious this was a code. Using the senator's private scrambling system — reverse the consonants and drop every second vowel — I arrived at 'Niw Htw Ekliw.' This I played through a telephone dial to get the numerical equivalent, and then added 1897, the year of the senator's first public address. The result was 746363363766. Try that on a telephone dial. What do you get?"

"Let's see, P-G-M-D. . . ."

"No, no, no," snapped Cryptz crossly. "Never mind. I'll tell you. It works out to R-H-O-D-O-D-E-N-D-R-O-N. You see? I had exposed him! All these years of lip service to the marigold, and here he has been a cryptorhododendronist since 1940!"

"But let me tell you of my latest triumph," said the little cryptographer, his goatee wagging excitedly. "I have discovered the secret master of the White House itself — the man Johnson takes his orders from."

"No!"

"Da! Listen. I came into possession — never mind how — of a memo in the President's own handwriting. All it said was '6 in brk on trsr.' At first glance, it appeared to be instructions to the President's tailor.

"But I suspected a code, and went to work at once. The Johnson code proved to be a tricky one, involving elements of the Martingale System, the Huhn-Eier Scramble, New Math and Geechee Dialectic, as well as the standard telephone dial. I won't bore you with details. Suffice it to say, I cracked the code. The notation, translated, turned out to be an unlisted phone number, naturally."

"Yes! Yes!" I cried. "Whose was it? Who is the mystery man, the Rasputin of the White House?"

The door crashed open and a white-coated attendant entered. "Visiting hours are over," he said.

As I was led down the corridor, I could hear Cryptz's muffled voice calling after me. I can't be sure, of course, but it sounded like, "Hubert Humphrey!"

Probably some sort of a code.