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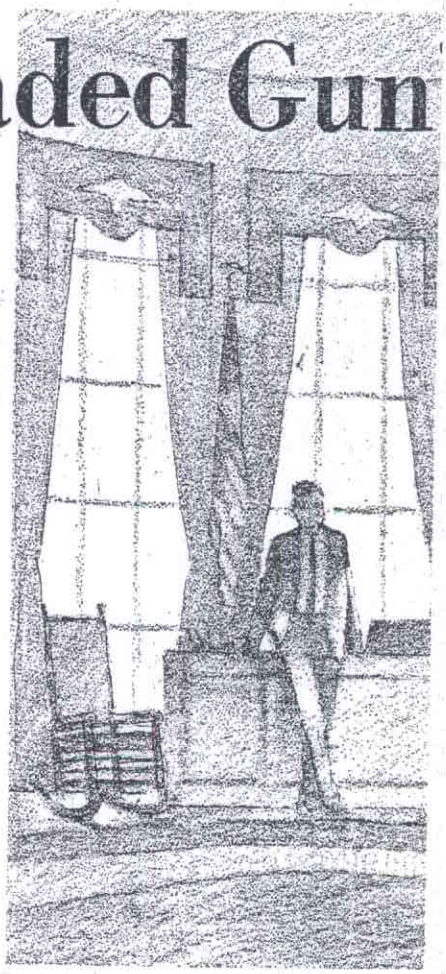
The CIA's 'Loaded Gun



The Life and Hard Times Of 'America's James Bond,' William King Harvey

By David C. Martin

Martin is a Washington reporter who covers the intelligence agencies.

By David Suter for The Washington Post

THERE SHOULD have been more people there when they buried Bill Harvey last June. In a way, when the most controversial clandestine operator in CIA history died of a heart attack at 60, it was the end of an era.

Twelve months before his death, William King Harvey had been a key witness in the Senate intelligence committee's investigation of the CIA's futile efforts to assassinate Fidel Castro. Harvey had not only been directly involved; he perhaps held the answer to whether President Kennedy had ordered Castro's death.

Maj. Gen. Edward Lansdale, whose own covert exploits inspired no less a novelist than Graham Greene, had told the committee of a meeting between Harvey and the President. Some time in late 1961 or early 1962, Lansdale recalled, the President had remarked to him that he was the American James Bond. Lansdale, with all due modesty, demurred, suggesting that the real 007 was to be found at the CIA in the person of Bill Harvey. Fan of Ian Fleming that he was, the President asked to meet Harvey and, before long, the CIA's number one operator was sitting with Lansdale outside the Oval Office.

As they waited to be ushered in, Lansdale turned to Harvey and said, "You're not carrying your gun, are you?" Of course he was, Harvey replied, starting to pull a revolver from his pants pocket. Lansdale, not knowing how the Secret Service would react, quickly told Harvey to keep the damn thing in his pants until he could tell the agents that the gentleman would like to check his firearm. Harvey turned over the gun and was preparing to enter the Oval Office when, suddenly remembering something, he whipped out a .38 detective special from a holster snapped to his belt in the small of his back and handed it to what must have been some very startled agents.

Harvey denied under oath that he had carried any firearms that day to the White House. The guns may or may not be Lansdale's invention, but they are a constant ingredient in the stories that made Harvey's name a household word in cloak and dagger circles for at least two decades before it finally surfaced publicly.

President Kennedy must have been slightly chagrined at the sight of his American Bond — a red-faced, popeyed, bullet-headed, pear-shaped man with a duck-like strut that was part waddle and part swagger. Harvey's deep, booming voice and absolute self-assurance must have restored the President's faith in 007 somewhat, but Ian Fleming would never read the same again. They had a brief but pleasant chat, Harvey testified, with absolutely no mention of assassination.

Triumphs and Troubles

FOR ONE year after his meeting with the President, Harvey operated for the only time in his career at the highest levels of government. As head of the agency's Task Force W, he directed intelligence gathering missions, propaganda activities, paramilitary operations and sabotage raids against Cuba as part of a carefully orchestrated administration effort to overthrow Castro.

It was known as Operation Mongoose, a plan drafted by Lansdale and approved by the President in writing Harvey took his orders from the Special Group (Augmented) which was chaired by Gen. Maxwell Taylor and "augmented" by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.

It would prove Harvey's undoing, for he was strictly an operator, ill-suited to the corridors of power. As John McCone, who headed the CIA at the time, would later say, "When you take a plant supervisor and make him president of the company, it doesn't always work out."

But the Kennedy administration could not abide the bearded spectre of communism 90 miles off its shores "We were hysterical about Castro," Robert McNamara would tell the intelligence committee. Sabotage became policy, and covert operators like Harvey and Lansdale became in effect special assistants to the President's brother. As one Senate investigator put it, Harvey's elevation was "archetypal of the overemphasis on covert operations."

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Harvey's reputation as an operator stemmed from his service as the CIA's man in Berlin during the 1950s. There he engineered one of the great intelligence coups of the decade — a 600-yard tunnel into East Berlin which allowed the U.S. and Britain to monitor more than 150 phone lines, including those linking the Russian command post with headquarters in Moscow.

It was a mammoth project. Using the construction of a new radar station as cover, Harvey and his men sunk the tunnel 24 feet beneath street level, hauling the dirt away in large wooden boxes labeled as containing electronic equipment. Harvey himself gave the finishing touch to the project — a sign placed at the point where the tunnel burrowed its way from West into East Berlin. In anticipation of the inevitable day when the Russians would come storming down the tunnel, the sign read: "You Are Entering the American Sector."

The tunnel was in operation for nine months and provided enough tapes to keep transcribers, translators and analysts busy for years. When the secret was finally blown by a Soviet agent inside British intelligence, the tunnel was an overnight news sensation. Despite all the Soviet blustering about American provocation, it was clear the Russians had been duped on a grand scale. Allen Dulles, then head of the CIA, would later call the tunnel "one of the most valuable and daring projects ever undertaken."

For Harvey, the tunnel was a natural. Intercepts were his specialty. He had founded Staff D, the division of Clandestine Services in charge of electronic surveillance operations, starting there in 1947 after a wartime career with the FBI.

His departure from the bureau stemmed from a drinking incident that presaged Harvey's later troubles with the bottle and also serves as testimony to the Draconian rule of J. Edgar Hoover. On his way home from a party celebrating the promotion of a fellow agent, Harvey had pulled over to the side of the road and gone to sleep. He slept through the morning and arrived for work late. When asked where he had been, Harvey responded truthfully. The result: He was ordered transferred from his supervisor's post to that of a field agent.

Harvey resigned instead and joined the newly created CIA where he immediately began plotting revenge with a bureaucratic scheme to circumscribe the then considerable powers of the FBI overseas. It didn't take Hoover long to find out, and the first of many confrontations between the CIA and FBI bloomed.

As a peace offering, the CIA director, Walter Bedell Smith, invited Hoover to lunch. Lyman Kirkpatrick, then Smith's executive assistant, was present and remembers Smith saying, "Edgar, suppose you tell us what's wrong. Why can't we seem to get along?"

"Well, General," Hoover replied, "the first thing wrong is all these ex-bureau people over here sniping and proselytizing and in particular Bill Harvey." Another who was present recalls no mention of Harvey but confirms Hoover's strong dislike for his former agent.

It is not surprising that Hoover should single out Harvey. Harvey stood out. By all accounts, he consumed more alcohol than any other person in the United States government. One former associate still shakes his head in disbelief at the seven double martinis Harvey downed one night before dinner at the Hotel d'Angleterre in Copenhagen. The intelligence committee staff heard so many stories about Harvey's three and four martini lunches that they briefly considered discounting his testimony about events which took place in the afternoon.

But no one had ever seen Harvey drunk. His capacity, like his bulk, was enormous. The only effect ever attributed to those lunchtime martinis was that he tended to doze off during afternoon conferences. There was, however, no way of knowing whether the sleep was induced by martinis, the medication he took for the thyroid condition that made his eyes bulge or simply the torpor of an afternoon gathering of bureaucrats.

His CIA collegues seemed much more concerned about his guns than his drinking. He was the only officer in anybody's memory who carried a gun around headquarters. His standard response to anyone who asked why he felt it necessary to arm himself was, "If you ever know as many secrets as I do, then you'll know why I carry a gun." Within the agency, Harvey's love affair with guns was seen as a hangover from his FBI days; it did not fit in with the more sophisticated world of intelligence (as opposed to drinking, which somehow came with the territory). The Ivy League set at the CIA regarded the bureau with disdain and saw "rough edges" in Harvey. "That fellow Harvey is a conspiratorial cop," Dulles is said to have remarked. "The only trouble is I can't tell if he's more conspiratorial or cop."

Harvey was not unmindful of his image and seemed to delight in cultivating it. Once in Berlin, he thoroughly unnerved a visitor from headquarters by taking a loaded revolver from his desk and toying with it as they spoke, spinning the chamber and squinting down the barrel.

"Executive Action"

AS HARVEY'S star began to pale, the guns and drinking would become less and less of a joke and more and more of a problem. But when he returned to Washington from Germany in 1960 after eight years of walking point against the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe, he seemed destined for still greater covert achievements.

Richard Bissell, whose own star was in ascendance as a result of his brilliant management of the U-2 project, quickly put Harvey in charge of a special project — Executive Action. As the intelligence committee described it, "'Executive Action' was a CIA euphemism, defined as a project for research into developing means for overthrowing foreign political leaders, including a 'capability to perform assassinations.'" Harvey's project was given a code-name, ZR/RIFLE, and a single "asset," a thug from the European underworld known as QJ/WIN.

But QJ/WIN's talents were of little use to Harvey when it came to killing Castro. For that, he turned to the Mafia; because of its contacts in the remnants of the Cuban underworld, the Mafia already had been used by the agency in an unsuccessful scheme to kill Castro at the time of the Bay of Pigs invasion.

When Harvey stepped in, he found an operation straight out of "The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight" — mobsters Sam Giancana, John Rosselli and Santos Trafficante running around Miami under the supposed direction of an ex-FBI agent named Robert Maheu. The bungled bugging of Giancana's girl friend's boy friend's hotel room and a

long-distance phone call in which Maheu blabbed the real reason he was in Miami to billionaire Howard Hughes were just part of what one CIA officer conceded was a "Keystone Comedy act."

Harvey put a stop to all that. He cut out everybody but Rosselli and ran the operation himself.

Too Much Talk

BUT MURDER was only a collateral duty for Harvey. By then he had been named head of Task Force W and its 400 men. As with assassination, things were not working out. The Special Group was looking over his shoulder at every step, requiring him to submit plans in what he would later call "excruciating detail" for every team of raiders or spies he proposed to send into Cuba. According to Harvey's assistant, the plans submitted to the Special Group "went down to such things as the gradients on the beach and the composition of the sand."

Harvey complained to McCone. "To permit requisite flexibility and professionalism for a maximum operations effort against Cuba, the tight controls exercised by the Special Group and its present time-consuming coordination and briefing procedures should, if at all possible, be made less restrictive and less stultifying," he wrote in a memo to McCone.

The memo's rhetoric suggests another problem Harvey was having with the Special Group. He talked too much. A curious habit for a consummate spy, and one which didn't go down well with the Kennedy men. McGeorge Bundy, the President's assistant for national security affairs, came away from one long-winded session with Harvey and remarked to another CIA man, "Your friend doesn't inspire confidence."

It wasn't that Harvey was loose-tongued — he never let drop the slightest hint that all the while he was scheming to kill Castro. It was just that he tended to be thorough, droning on and on in that deep, booming voice of his, oblivious to the fact that the Attorney General was drumming his fingers on the table. During one meeting, Kennedy rat-

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By James K. W. Atherton — The Washington Post

Sen. Frank Church and Gen. Edward Lansdale before his Senate committee testimony.

tled off a series of questions to Harvey, finishing with "and I've got 10 minutes to hear the answer." When Harvey exceeded his time limit, Kennedy walked out. Harvey kept talking.

It wasn't all Harvey's fault. Mongoose was Landsdale's idea, not his. The President had approved it. As originally conceived, Mongoose had aimed at overthrowing Castro by October 1962. It was an impossible task. As long as the Russians were willing to support Castro, no amount of covert activity, short of assassination, would oust him.

As October approached and Castro seemed more entrenched than ever, the recriminations began. Kennedy criticized Harvey for not being sufficiently imaginative and aggressive in his proposals. Harvey fought back, saying it was the timidity of the Special Group in keeping him on such a short leash that was the real problem. "He didn't hesitate to give shot for shot," one participant in those meetings said of Harvey. "He hated Bobby Kennedy's guts with a purple passion," said a fellow CIA officer.

The photographic evidence that Soviet nuclear missiles were being installed in Cuba added injury to insult. On Oct. 16, the day Bobby Kennedy first saw the U-2 photographs of the missile sites, he lambasted the Special Group. As Richard Helms described it in a memo for the record, the Attorney General began by expressing the "general dissatisfaction of the President" with Mongoose, and then "pointed out that [Mongoose] had been underway for a year . . . that there had been no acts of sabotage and that even the one which had been attempted [against a copper mine] had failed twice."

As the missile crisis heated up, Harvey ordered the infiltration of 10 intelligence collection teams into Cuba to be in place in the event the President ordered a military invasion. Bobby Kennedy found out about it on Oct. 26, a day of which he would later write, "Each hour the situation grew steadily more serious. The feeling grew that this cup was not going to pass and that a direct military confrontation between the two great nuclear powers was inevitable." In that atmosphere of extreme anxiety, Kennedy, in Harvey's words, "took a great deal of exception" to his dispatch of the teams. The value of whatever intelligence they might provide simply was not worth the risk of further provocation.

A quick check with Defense and State revealed that no one had authorized Harvey to send the teams in. McCone immediately ordered Harvey to call them off, but three of the teams were beyond the point of recall. The incident had no bearing on the outcome of the crisis, but Harvey had "earned another black mark," as McCone's assistant put it. McCone became convinced that Harvey would have to go.

A Roman Exile

HARVEY was sent to Rome as CIA station chief — an assignment that seemed stunning in its incongruity. The hard-drinking, gun-toting operative who had managed to offend almost every top-ranking national security official in the Kennedy administration, assigned to one of the CIA's most visible posts where his chief duties would be to get along with the ambassador and the local intelligence services. "They couldn't have picked a bigger bull for a better china shop," one CIA officer remarked.

Some attributed the appointment to a desire to get Harvey out of the country as soon as possible, never mind where. Others claimed it had more to do with the fact that the Rome station was in need of a shakeup and the knowledge that relations with the Italians were so well cemented that things wouldn't come unstuck no matter what Harvey did.

Harvey had wanted to go to Laos, which was just beginning to heat up, but that had been denied him. He would never again be allowed near an operation in which the brothers Kennedy were likely to take an active interest. The combination of his sacking from Task Force W and his assignment to Rome "broke Bill," according to one longtime colleague. "He seemed to be at a low point in his career," said one low-ranking officer who worked under him in Rome. Put more bluntly, he was a burnt-out case.

The drinking started in the morning with a Campari and soda and the lunchtime martinis had grown to five. One evening McCone, a devout Catholic and a regular visitor to Rome and the Vatican, came to dinner at the Harveys'. Harvey, pistol jammed into his belt, kept nodding off at the table while McCone's assistant kicked desperately at his shins. "He was sick and coming apart at the seams," one of Harvey's superiors said.

Finally, he was hospitalized. Two CIA doctors were sent from Germany to care for him. He was placed on a strict regime which he followed only briefly. A simmering feud within the station broke into open warfare when a subordinate refused to obey an order given by Harvey. Desmond FitzGerald, head of Clandestine Services, arrived to examine the situation. In the name of discipline, the disobedient officer was relieved, but FitzGerald was shaken by what he had seen of Harvey. He cabled a lengthy report to Helms, who by then had risen to the directorship. Helms personally ordered that Harvey be relieved.

FitzGerald dispatched an aide to perform the unpleasant task. "It was a night I shall not soon forget," says the aide, a man who knew Harvey well. For seven hours the aide sat across from Harvey explaining that he was through. Harvey was drinking brandy, the aide remembers, and he held a loaded revolver in his lap. Harvey never threatened him, the aide says, but the barrel was always pointing at him.

Helms convened a meeting on the seventh floor at Langley to decide what to do with Harvey upon his return. The idea was to find "something he could work at on his own time where he wouldn't have anybody to supervise or any operations to run," one of the participants in the meeting later said. Harvey was placed in charge of something called the Special Security Unit, where his job was to study possible countermeasures against the threat of electronic sur-

veillance. FitzGerald gave a little speech expressing the hope that this was only an interlude until Harvey could regain his health and return to the operational side of things.

But the drinking continued. Lawrence (Red) White, the agency's executive director-comptroller, would call him in and Harvey would grow apologetic, promising it would never happen again. But it did. He was hospitalized, took nearly a year of accrued sick leave and finally retired in 1969.

It is surely just coincidence that the drop-off in the level of covert operations corresponds almost exactly in time with Harvey's demise as an operator. The principal factor in the cutback — the exposure by Ramparts magazine of the secret funding of the National Student Association — was totally unrelated to Harvey. But with Harvey out of commission, the agency had one less weapon in its arsenal. Having Harvey at the ready, as Sen. Gary Hart (D-Colo.) said, was like "having a loaded gun on the shelf."

No Photographs

HARVEY IS gone, but the CIA still has its loaded guns — men the old-timers call "activists." But these men now must weigh the chances and consequences of exposure. The beauty of Harvey's tunnel was that it was almost as good a propaganda weapon when exposed as it had been an intelligence tool when secret. In the present climate of distrust, the Glomar Explorer, the space age equivalent of Harvey's tunnel, is criticized as a waste of taxpayers' money. For the moment at least, the CIA cannot pay the price of exposure, which, given a free and suspicious press, is all but inevitable sooner or later.

As a result, covert operations are at their lowest level in the CIA's 28-year history. Depending upon your point of view, this means either that the agency is for the first time being forced to operate within the law, as Sen. Frank Church (D-Idaho) would say, or that "the show today is a shadow of what it used to be," as a long-time associate of Harvey's put it.

Harvey never expressed himself publicly on the subject. His lengthiest conversation with a reporter occurred in 1971 when Jack Anderson's associate Les Whitten called him in an effort to confirm a seemingly incredible story about assassination which Rosselli had confided in an effort to avoid deportation. According to Whitten's notes, Harvey acknowledged knowing Rosselli but wouldn't confirm anything else. "This is a long story," he told Whitten. "I don't think it ought to be printed." That was about as close as Harvey ever came to publicly revealing either himself or his secrets.

Harvey, in true spy fashion, was the only major witness to testify before the intelligence committee who managed to get in and out of Washington without having his picture taken. Rosselli went to great lengths to avoid photographers only to find his picture on page one the next morning. The Justice Department and Florida police are now trying to determine whether Rosselli's appearance before the committee had anything to do with his grisly death.

Harvey had good reason for not wanting his picture taken, according to his wife, C.G. Matching the name with the face would stir up "too many things still alive," she said. That may be a slight exaggeration, but it is almost certainly true that anybody who saw Bill Harvey once would recognize him a second time. An investigator for the committee says, "Harvey made the greatest impression on me of any man I ever met in my life."

His secrets are safe with C.G. "I can't," she said when asked for an interview. "Bill's policy was never to talk to reporters . . . and right up until his last breath he told me never to talk to anyone." But the reporters keep calling, trying to uncover a link between his death and Rosselli's murder. Worse, she said, there have been two attempted break-ins. "They're after his papers," she said. "But I burned everything."