

(First of Two Parts)

Who Killed Malcolm X?

Thirteen Years Later Questions Linger and the Case Is About to be Reopened

BY ALAN BERGER

The assassination of Malcolm X thirteen years ago left in its wake a trail of unanswered questions. Some of these were legal questions and some were larger, political questions. The standing legal verdict on the assassination holds that three men, forming a conspiracy, were guilty of the act. And since two of the three were well-known Black Muslim "enforcers," the public has accepted the obvious implication—that the murder was ordered, planned, and carried out solely by the Black Muslims as the culmination of that group's vendetta against the apostate, Malcolm X.

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John Launois/Black Star

Yet, in the last few days of his life, Malcolm told people close to him that recent events had "led him to believe that the plotters of his death were much bigger than the Muslims." Malcolm had what he considered sound reasons for this belief. The previous summer he had been poisoned in the main dining room of the Cairo Hilton Hotel in Egypt. Malcolm was certain this was not the work of the Black Muslims; he had grounds for attributing this attempt on his life to the C.I.A. Less than two weeks before his death, he was denied entry into France forever as an "undesirable person," possibly because French officials feared he would be assassinated on French soil. Malcolm assumed that these signs of danger were the inevitable consequence of his political effort to "internationalize"

Malcolm's trip to Egypt "concerned" the State Department.

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NATIONAL NEWS

the situation of black people in America by taking their case to the United Nations.

The assassination itself and the trial that followed almost a year later produced a myriad of disturbing indications that two innocent men were convicted and that undercover agents of the New York Police Force and the F.B.I. may have played an instrumental role in the case.

Attorney William Kunstler has recently submitted affidavits to a New York court intended to show that new evidence unearthed since the final appeal in the case constitutes grounds for obtaining a new trial.

One of the three men originally convicted, Thomas Hagan, has now agreed to name four other men who acted with him in the murder. Hagan says that Thomas Johnson and Norman Butler, the two men convicted with him, are innocent.

A first affidavit by Hagan was ruled not sufficiently specific by Judge Rophwax, the judge sitting at the hearing. But Hagan has written a longer, more-detailed confession, *Seven Days* has learned, which gives the last names of two of his four accomplices and the names by which he knew the others. He also names the

and then returned the day before, on both occasions making careful preparations for their escape.

The new deposition even describes the get-away car including where it was parked and where it headed.

A preliminary reading of F.B.I. files—just opened under the Freedom of Information Act—indicates early eyewitness reports, though not all uniform, do support Hagan's statement that more than three men participated in the killing.

Attorney Kunstler has submitted Hagan's affidavit along with another that includes the transcript of testimony given by police undercover agent Gene Roberts, who admitted during a 1971 conspiracy trial of twenty-one Black Panthers in New York City that he had been a bodyguard to Malcolm X and possessed crucial knowledge about Malcolm's murder which had been withheld at the time of the original trial.

A little after three o'clock on Sunday afternoon, February 21, 1965, Malcolm X walked out onto the stage of the Audubon Ballroom on Broadway and 166th Street in Manhattan, across the street from the Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center.

publicly that Black Muslims, under orders from Elijah Muhammad, were out to kill him. Malcolm had heard rumors, he had seen signs, he had received letters. But just before he went on stage he had told his assistants waiting with him in the anteroom offstage that he was going to tell the audience that he had been hasty in accusing the Black Muslims of bombing his home. "Things have happened since that are bigger than what they can do," Malcolm said. "I know what they can do. Things have gone beyond that."

As Malcolm stood beside the rostrum preparing to begin his talk, a scuffle broke out toward the back of the hall. There was an angry shout: "Nigger, get your hands out of my pocket!" All heads turned to see what was happening—and to see who had spoken this unforgivable word. Malcolm's bodyguards moved down from the stage toward the disturbance. Malcolm himself stepped out from behind the podium and toward the front of the stage. "Hold it! Hold it! Don't get excited," Malcolm said. "Let's cool it, brothers."

Then there was a muffled explosion at the rear of the hall and smoke from an incendiary device rose into the air. A woman screamed. A man in one of the front rows held up a sawed-off shotgun and fired into Malcolm's chest.

As Malcolm keeled over, two or three men were seen standing in the front row, "like a firing squad," pumping bullets into him. After he had fallen the gunmen emptied their revolvers into the inert body.

One of the killers, Talmadge Hayer (whom police and court records refer to as Thomas Hagan), was knocked down by a chair thrown at him by one of Malcolm's bodyguards. Hagan shot at the bodyguard and a bullet left a hole near the bottom of the bodyguard's jacket. The bodyguard was called "Brother Gene"; he would admit five years later that he was an undercover agent for the New York Bureau of Special Services, an elite subversion unit of the Police Department, which was sometimes called the "Red Squad."

Another bodyguard, Reuben Francis, fired three shots at Hagan. The second shot hit Hagan's leg, slowing him down so that the crowd was able to catch him as he tumbled down the stairs in front of the Audubon.

Hagan was rescued from a severe beating by patrolman Thomas Hoy, 22, who had been the only uniformed police officer stationed at the door that day. Hoy wrestled the crowd for his suspect until two more officers, Angelos and Araonoff,



Thomas Hagan: The link to a conspiracy?

UPI

contact man who gave the orders as well as the person to whom this contact reported.

The new deposition—which is sealed to protect the principles—describes a previous effort to kill Malcolm at home, an effort not carried out because at the time Malcolm was too well guarded. There is also a precise description of how the killers went to a dance at the Audubon ballroom a few days before the murder

He came up behind the rostrum and gave the crowd of about 400 people the Islamic greeting *As-salaam alaikum*. To those who knew him, Malcolm appeared tense and tired. He was showing the strain of the past few weeks, a time during which his house had been fire-bombed with his wife and four children in it and he had received several warnings of an imminent attempt to assassinate him. For some time he and his friends had assumed and said

NATIONAL NEWS

arrived to help.

Together they got Hagan away from the crowd and into a squad car.

In the confusion following the event, the New York newspapers reported that Hoy had arrested one suspect and that Angelos and Araonoff had arrested another. But F.B.I. files show no evidence of a second arrest, and a widely printed photo shows all three cops grappling with Hagan. The second suspect now appears, in the light of Hagan's confession, to be a product of journalistic haste.

In the aftermath of the assassination, the press gave much coverage to the feud between Malcolm X and his former spiritual leader, the honorable Elijah Muhammad. With only some rare exceptions, the newspaper slant given to the story was of a religious war between two irrational fringe groups composed of dangerous ex-convicts. The *Times* and the *Tribune* both editorialized airily about hatred that turns on itself and the violence that spawns violence, despite the well-known change in Malcolm's ideas after he returned from his pilgrimage to Mecca. In an airport news conference after his return from that first trip abroad, he told American reporters: "In the past, yes, I have made sweeping indictments of all white people. I never will be guilty of that again—as I know now some white people are truly sincere, that some truly are capable of being brotherly toward a black man."

The editorials about hatred may have been either careless or vicious, but what about the widespread assumption that Malcolm was killed for a renegade by his former brothers in the Nation of Islam? Certainly Malcolm, right up until the last few days of his life, believed and said that the Muslims were out to kill him.

"In any city, wherever I go, making speeches, holding meetings of my organization, or attending to other business," he told Alex Haley, "black men are watching every move I make, awaiting their chance to kill me. I have said publicly many times that I know that they have their orders. Anyone who chooses not to believe what I am saying doesn't know the Muslims in the Nation of Islam."

In his epilogue to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Alex Haley reports that on Tuesday, February 16, 1965—five days before the fatal meeting at the Audubon Ballroom—Malcolm told a close associate, "I have been marked for death in the next five days. I have the names of five Black Muslims who have been chosen to kill me. I will announce them at the meeting."

Haley also describes Malcolm being followed and threatened during the last three weeks of his life by Muslims he recognized, not only in New York, but also in Los Angeles and Chicago.

Thus there was ample reason for Malcolm to think that he was marked for death, and to believe that the killers would be acting as agents of the Nation of Islam. But to understand the main thrust of the motions for a retrial that William Kunstler will be arguing in the courts, it is first necessary to understand why Malcolm intended to tell his audience in the Audubon Ballroom that he "had been hasty to accuse the Black Muslims," and why he said, "things have happened since that are bigger than what they can do. I know what they can do. Things have gone beyond that."

The assassination carried out so brazenly by the "firing squad" that gunned Malcolm down in the Audubon Ballroom was not the first attempt on his life. At least two other attempts had already been made.

The first of these took place far from Harlem and far from the reach of Mr. Elijah Muhammad. In July 1964 Malcolm

should arraign the United States before the General Assembly of the United Nations for American violations of the human rights provision of the U.N. charter.

Earlier that year he had told a press conference in Ghana: "All of Africa unites in opposition to South Africa's apartheid, and to the oppression in the Portuguese territories. But you waste your time if you don't realize that Verwoerd and Salazar, and Britain and France, never could last a day if it were not for United States support. So until you expose the man in Washington, D.C., you haven't accomplished anything."

On July 23, 1964, the day before he was to address the summit conference, Malcolm was poisoned while eating dinner in the Cairo Hilton's main dining room. His roommate at the Hilton, Detroit lawyer and civil rights activist Milton Henry, said, "He would have died if he hadn't been able to get to the hospital in a hurry."

The food pumped from his stomach was analyzed and found to contain a "toxic substance." The possibility of gratuitous food poisoning was ruled



After the shooting: Who did kill Malcolm X?

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was in Cairo to address a summit conference of African prime ministers. He had come to the conference to persuade his powerful friends he'd made on a previous visit to Africa—men such as President Nkrumah of Ghana, President Toure of Guinea, Prime Minister Kenyatta of Kenya, President Nyerere of Tanzania, Prime Minister Obote of Uganda, President Nasser of Egypt and President Azikiwe of Nigeria—that their countries

out by doctors. Malcolm told Milton Henry: "Somebody deliberately poisoned me." An effort was made to locate the waiter who had served Malcolm, but the waiter had vanished.

In discussing the poisoning with Henry, Malcolm emphasized "the fact that C.I.A. men were all around him in Cairo." Malcolm's half-sister, Mrs. Ella Collins, who paid for his first trip to Mecca and Africa, said Malcolm told her

NATIONAL NEWS

that he felt that the C.I.A. was definitely responsible for it.

Malcolm's certainty that the C.I.A. was responsible for the poisoning was not founded on mere intuition. For some time before the conference, the American Embassy in Cairo tried by quiet diplomatic means to prevent Malcolm from addressing the delegates. The Embassy's diplomatic requests were rebuffed, however, both by the Egyptian government and by the conference organizers. In a *New York Times* article of August 13, 1964, while Malcolm was still in Cairo discussing his U.N. project with the African ministers, reporter M.S. Handler wrote: "The State Department and the Justice Department have begun to take an interest in Malcolm's campaign to convince the African states to raise the question of persecution of American Negroes at the United Nations...."

"Malcolm's eight-page memorandum to the heads of state at the Cairo conference requesting their support became available here only recently. After studying it, officials said that if Malcolm succeeded in convincing just one African government to bring up the charge at the United Nations, the United States government would be faced with a touchy problem.

"The United States, officials here believe, would find itself in the same category as South Africa, Hungary and other countries whose domestic policies have become debating issues at the United Nations. The issue, officials say, would be of service to critics of the United States, Communist and non-Communist, and contribute to the undermining of the position the United States has asserted for itself as the leader of the West in the advocacy of human rights."

The incident that persuaded Malcolm in the final days before his death that someone other than the Black Muslims was out to kill him was not the Cairo poisoning, but rather another ominous event that took place beyond the borders of the United States.

Twelve days before he died, Malcolm flew to Paris, where he was scheduled to address the Congress of African Students. In his epilogue to Malcolm's autobiography, Alex Haley recounts the unexpected reception Malcolm got from the French officials. "He was formally advised that he would not be permitted to speak and, moreover, that he could consider himself officially barred forever from France as an 'undesirable person.' He was asked to leave—and he did, fuming with indignation."

John Launois/Black Star



Malcolm's wife Betty Shabazz and family.

The day before he was murdered, in the last conversation the two men were to have together, he told Alex Haley, "You know, I'm going to tell you something, brother—the more I keep thinking about this thing, the things that have been happening lately, I'm not all that sure it's the Muslims. I know what they can do, and what they can't, and they can't do some of the stuff recently going on. Now, I'm going to tell you, the more I keep thinking about what happened to me in France, I think I'm going to quit saying it's the Muslims."

Two months after Malcolm's death "a highly placed North African diplomat" told American journalist Eric Norden something about the incident at Orly which, if true, would confirm Malcolm's last-minute suspicions. According to Norden, "This official, who insists on anonymity, said that his country's intelligence apparatus had been quietly informed by the French Department of Alien Documentation and Counter-Espionage (the famous *Deuxieme Bureau*) that the C.I.A. planned Malcolm's murder, and France feared he might be liquidated on its soil.

"Your C.I.A. is beginning to murder its own citizens now," he commented in elegantly modulated French."

By February 1965, Malcolm had developed what amounted to diplomatic relationships with several African delegations to the United Nations. He frequented the U.N. delegates' lounge in the manner of a working diplomat, the self-appointed ambassador of Afro-America

to the United Nations. Not only had he made progress in promoting his plan for having America condemned for violations of human rights, but in November 1964, at the time the United States intervened in the Congo's civil war, Malcolm lobbied with his African contacts to convince them to condemn the American intervention. He was regarded as being partly responsible for the vituperative attacks mounted against the United States during the General Assembly debates that took place toward the end of 1964. On January 2, 1965, M.S. Handler, writing in the *New York Times*, reported that Malcolm had pressed African delegates to condemn America's role in the Congo and also to use "the racial situation in the United States as an instrument of attack in discussing international problems" since "such a strategy would give the African states more leverage in dealing with the United States and would in turn give American Negroes more leverage in American society.

"The spokesmen of some African states acted precisely within the framework of these recommendations last month in the Congo debate at the United Nations," the article said. "They accused the United States of being indifferent to the fate of blacks and cited as evidence the attitude of the United States government toward the civil rights struggle in Mississippi.

"The African move profoundly disturbed the American authorities, who gave the impression that they had been caught off guard."

The *New York Times* could not, of course, measure nor say just how "profoundly disturbed" the American authorities were. But Malcolm knew that as a result of his role at the United Nations, as a result of his conscious political decision to internationalize the problems of American black people, he was under constant surveillance. His phones were tapped and at times he found himself shadowed by as many as three different agents. His friends and family were concerned about the effect of his interference in the functioning of American foreign policy. His half-sister, Ella Collins, "told him that to take a step of this kind he needed protection, real protection that he felt secure with. But he couldn't even trust his own bodyguards. I've been informed by reliable sources that there were C.I.A. agents right in the Organization [the Organization of Afro-American Unity], and I've been given their names. Malcolm knew the dangers, but he said he had to go ahead."