

# Unraveling the Mystery

## *Inside the JFK Assassination Files, Clues to a Resolution?*

8/27/93

By Jefferson Morley

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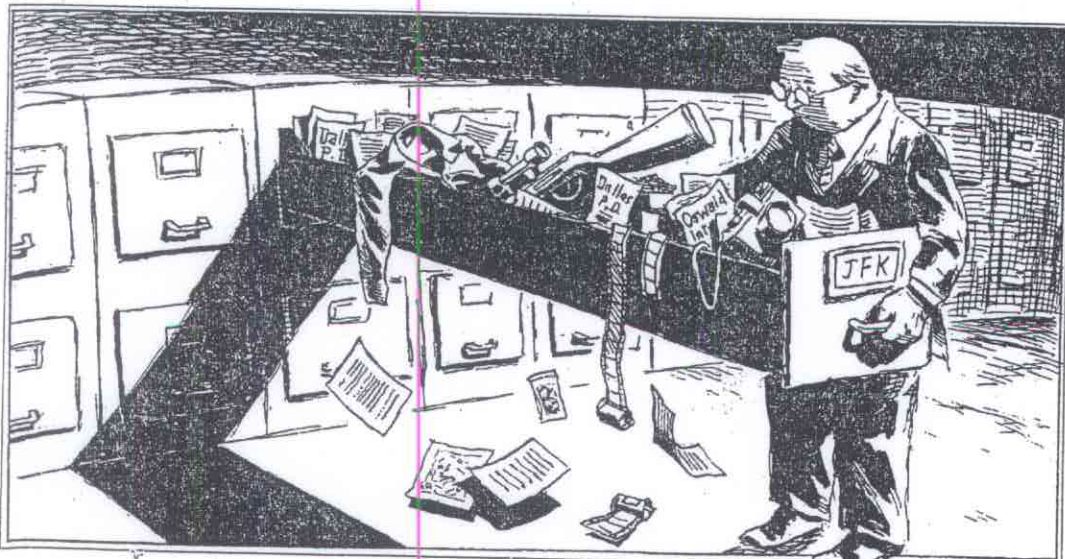
Those who seemed most confident at the Archives last week were the independent researchers—the amateur scholars who have dedicated years to clarifying

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the circumstances of Kennedy's death. One of them was Dan Alcorn, a public interest lawyer and a board member of the private Assassination Archives and Research Center in Washington. Alcorn has litigated for more than a decade to obtain key assassination documents from the CIA; he went straight for the boxes of files that might contain secret congressional testimony given in the mid-1970s by one William Harvey, a ranking CIA official in charge of the agency's anti-Castro assassination programs.

Between 1961 and 1963, Harvey served as a liaison between the agency and organized crime figures who were enlisted to kill Castro. Harvey, who died in 1976, was known to loathe Robert Kennedy and to have defied the directives of the Kennedy brothers during the Cuban missile crisis. Details about the covert operations of would-be assassins, Mafia leaders and Kennedy

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I was there to look for details about another important but little-known episode—a trip that the accused assassin, the mysterious Lee Harvey Oswald, took to Mexico City seven weeks before allegedly committing the crime of the century.

Shortly after the assassination, investigators learned that Oswald had gone to Mexico City seeking a visa to go to Cuba and then the Soviet Union. The FBI asked the CIA if it had a photograph of Oswald. The CIA station in Mexico City promptly sent a photograph to Dallas and showed it to Oswald's mother. The man in the photo was clearly not Oswald. (Who he was has never been determined.) A photograph of Oswald could end the speculation of conspiracy theorists that someone was impersonating Oswald in Mexico City.

It was not implausible to think that Oswald had been photographed. At the time, the Cuban diplomatic compound in Mexico City had two entrances. One was covered by a CIA surveillance photographer, the other by a "pulse camera" focused on the doorknob. Any change in light around the doorknob caused the Robot Star camera shutter to snap automatically. The Soviet Embassy was similarly covered during working hours. With Oswald apparently coming and going at the two offices five times on Sept. 27 and 28 and Oct. 1 and 3, 1963, the CIA thus had 10 opportunities to take a picture of Oswald. The CIA says it never managed to get Oswald's picture.

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elations of CIA assassination plots and popular skepticism about the government's official conclusion that Oswald acted alone, the House of Representatives decided to reopen the Kennedy case. Oswald's visit to Mexico City was an important area of inquiry for the House investigators. A young law student, Edwin Lopez, was allowed to review confidential CIA records. The CIA was obliged to open up its files and make its agents available for testimony. Lopez wrote a 400-page report that was partially declassified last week.

The Lopez report makes a persuasive case that the CIA did, in fact, take Oswald's picture in the fall of 1963. A CIA technician is quoted in the report describing the surveillance operation in detail. If a camera broke one day, he said, it was replaced the next. Several former CIA officers in good standing with the agency recalled seeing or hearing of surveillance photos of Oswald in the '60s. And the top CIA officer in Mexico at the time, Win Scott, stated unequivocally in an unpublished memoir that his subordinates at the CIA station in Mexico City had taken Oswald's picture.

If there was a CIA photograph of Oswald in Mexico City, what happened to it? Whether or not that is relevant to the possibility of an assassination conspiracy, it is the CIA's inability or unwillingness to answer such questions credibly that feeds the public's fear of conspiracy.

The photograph is not the only evidence that is missing or still being kept secret by the government. Most files on the CIA's programs to assassinate foreign leaders have not been made public, nor has all the medical evidence from the autopsy of the president. Some documents, tantalizingly, are missing. For example, U.S. Army intelligence maintained a file on Oswald in 1963. Although some of its contents were shared with FBI investigators within 75 minutes of Oswald's



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Ah yes, you're saying, but 30 years later, does it really matter who killed JFK?

It does. The Kennedy assassination has become a sort of Rohrschach test of the American imagination. In the events of Nov. 22, 1963, we see our deepest hopes and fears about the legitimacy of American democracy. To assert that Oswald acted alone is, in that sense, an expression of confidence in American institutions: that the executive branch and mainstream media organizations have uncovered and shared the truth about the assassination with the people. To believe in conspiracy (as a solid majority of Americans do) suggests a profound lack of faith in these institutions. Clarification of the circumstances of Kennedy's death could thus have a significant effect on how many Americans feel about their government.

Of course, many investigative trails have

gone cold since 1963, but is it too late to learn the truth? In terms of great historical crimes, 30 years is not all that long. The full story of the Katyn Forest massacre of 1944 was only revealed when Soviet government archives were opened to the public 45 years later.

This is not to say that truth equals conspiracy. Some of the most careful students of the assassination say only that there is still no satisfactory account. Critics deride the government's "magic bullet" theory, saying that it is implausible that two bullets caused a total of seven wounds in Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connally. But they have not been able to definitively rebut it. Paul Hoch, editor of an assassination research newsletter and a skeptic of the government's findings, acknowledges that the "magic bullet" theory may be "the least bad scenario of what happened."

Whether or not Oswald acted alone, there are good reasons why senior U.S. officials (including Lyndon Johnson and Robert Kennedy), horrified by the assassination, might have stifled their suspicions of conspiracy. In 1963 the Cuban missile crisis was just a year old. There was a legitimate fear the assassination could lead to a nuclear war with the Soviet Union.

If there was a conspiracy, there is good reason why senior U.S. officials, believing they were acting out of patriotism, might have maintained their silence. Government files on the case have been subject to U.S. law forbidding the disclosure of the "sources and methods" of intelligence agencies: The CIA's files on Oswald's Mexico City trip were kept secret on such grounds. In other words, U.S. law and national security policy might have required the suppression of relevant evidence.

Last year, in response to the movie "JFK," Congress passed legislation ordering the release of the vast majority of government files—a bureaucratic *glasnost* that began last week. The implications of this are profound.

As the 30th anniversary of the assassination approaches, public interest in the case remains intense. Media organizations that for years shunned serious investigative work on the case are returning to it. The remaining classified

files are certain to be the subject of litigation. With the end of the Cold War, government claims that information must be withheld on "national security" grounds may be treated with more skepticism by the courts and the media.

The political environment has also changed. Final decisions about what government documents are to be made public will be made by a five-member review panel to be appointed by President Clinton. When asked about the assassination at a "town meeting" in July, 1992, Al Gore said that he believed there was a conspiracy and called for the release of all the files. When Clinton was asked his opinion, he said, "I agree with Senator Gore."

For all of which we may thank the man most reviled by the Washington press corps—Oliver Stone. Stone's movie portrayed the assassination as a "coup d'etat" by right-wing forces in and out of the government opposed to Kennedy's allegedly liberal policies. It was galling to political and media elites because it gave shape to the diffuse popular suspicions of conspiracy. It was galling to many of the field's top researchers because it played fast and loose with the facts. But whether you regard "JFK" as a "cinema of lies" or, as I do, as a slick, subversive masterpiece, it changed the assassination debate forever.

The danger is that the public's understanding of the case will now get stuck between the government's myth of the lone gunman and the popular countermyth of high-level conspiracy. The best available evidence makes clear that the Warren Commission report has grave deficiencies as history. The other "official version" of Kennedy's death is the House Assassinations Committee's report of 1978. The committee's conclusion—that two gunmen fired at the presidential motorcade and that the murder was probably the result of a conspiracy involving organized crimes figures—has yet to be proven.

So now's the time to release all the documents and answer all the nagging questions: Like, what happened to the CIA's photographs of Lee Harvey Oswald in Mexico City in the fall of '63?

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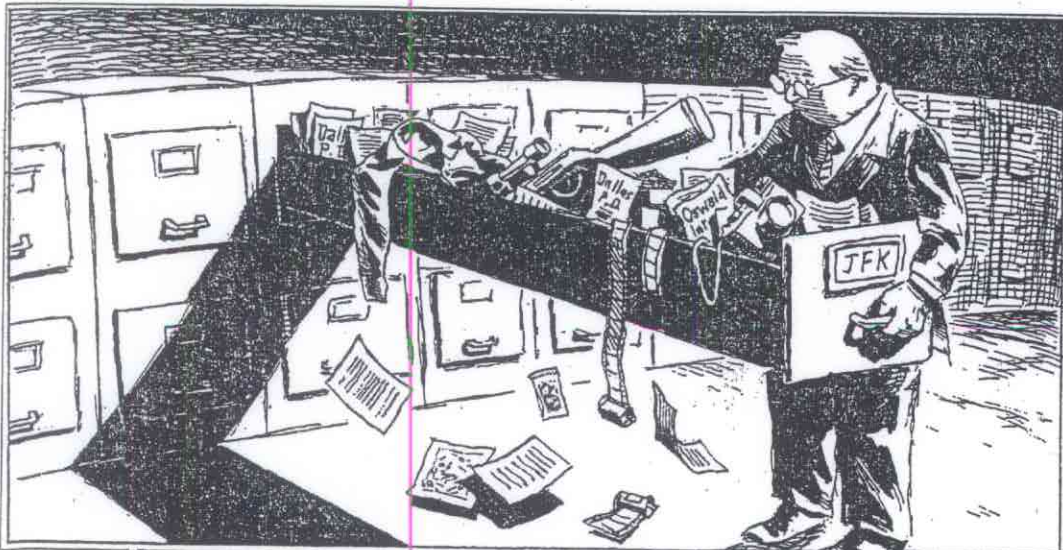
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