

Missing tape still clouds JFK probe

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WASHINGTON — Hours after President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, FBI agents reportedly listened to a tape of a phone call that a man identifying himself as "Lee Oswald" had placed to the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City.

They made a startling discovery: The voice on the tape was not Oswald's, government records say.

This controversial tape has been a question mark in the assassination investigation since Kennedy was killed. The assassination occurred 36 years ago today, and only now have new details about the tape come to light.

The CIA said years ago that the tapes on which it recorded the call were erased. Documents released in recent years said otherwise. The latest and newest of declassified documents offer more evidence that the tapes survived.

The discovery that the voice on the tape was someone other than Oswald was a "disquieting discovery because the man who impersonated Oswald was still at large," said John Newman, an ex-military intelligence analyst, author, and professor at the University of Maryland.

Oswald was in Mexico City in September and October 1963. During his one-week stay, he contacted the Soviet Embassy and the Cuban Consulate, inquiring about visas needed to go to the Soviet Union via Cuba.

It is widely known that the CIA bugged telephones and took surveillance photos at both the embassy and the consulate. But the agency maintained that it had routinely erased and reused tapes of the phone intercepts. A message from the CIA's Mexico City station to headquarters on Nov. 24, 1963, said: "HQ has full transcripts all pertinent calls. Regret complete recheck shows tapes for this period already erased."

It also was known that while he was in Mexico City, Oswald had contact with Valeriy Kostikov — a man that one CIA memo described as a "case officer in an operation which is evidently sponsored by the KGB's 13th Department responsible for sabotage and assassination." It was the caller who is thought to have impersonated Oswald who links him to this Soviet spy unit known as Department 13.

Newly declassified documents — some released in the past six months — say that after the president was shot, a Navy plane carried a top-secret package from Mexico City to Dallas and landed there about 4 a.m. EST the day after the murder.

Former FBI agent Eldon Rudd, later a Republican congressman from Arizona, was aboard the plane.

"There were no tapes, to my knowledge," Rudd said in a telephone interview. "I brought the pictures up [from Mexico], and it was my understanding that it was

just pictures."

Documents contradict Rudd's understanding. A newly released memo dated Nov. 27, 1963, from FBI headquarters to its office in Mexico City, stated:

"If tapes covering any contacts subject [Oswald] with Soviet or Cuban embassies available, forward to bureau for laboratory examination and analysis together with transcript. Include tapes previously reviewed Dallas if they were returned to you."

And a transcript of a telephone call FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover made to President Lyndon B. Johnson just six hours after the plane arrived in Dallas supports the belief that FBI agents listened to a tape that suggested an impersonation.

"We have up here the tape and the photograph of the man who was at the Soviet Embassy using Oswald's name," Hoover told Johnson, according to a transcript of that call released in 1993. "That picture and the tape do not correspond to this man's voice, nor to his appearance. In other words, it appears that there is a second person who was at the Soviet Embassy down there."

While they would not speculate about the identity of the caller, several assassination researchers privately offered some explanations: Oswald could have been impersonated by a CIA officer who called the Soviet Embassy simply

to fish for details about what Oswald was doing in Mexico City. Or, maybe someone was trying to link Oswald to the KGB's assassination unit before Kennedy's murder.

Whatever the answer, there was plenty of reason for worry in Washington about any evidence pointing to Soviets or Cubans as somehow involved in the assassination. Relations with the former Soviet Union were icy. Both sides were armed with nuclear weapons. The Cuban missile crisis was still very much on America's mind.

"The public must be satisfied that Oswald was the assassin; that he did not have confederates who are still at large," Nicholas Katzenbach, then deputy attorney general, wrote in a memo on Nov. 25, 1963.

"Speculation about Oswald's motivation ought to be cut off and we should have some basis for rebutting [the] thought that this was a communist conspiracy or ... a right-wing conspiracy to blame it on the communists."

In a telephone interview last week, Katzenbach said he does not know anything about the FBI listening to a tape in Dallas. "Whether I knew anything about it at the time, or what I knew about it at the time, I don't recall," he said.

Oswald's trip to Mexico City was addressed only briefly by the Warren Commission, which con-



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Lee Harvey Oswald, in police custody, talking to reporters in Dallas on Nov. 23, 1963, hours after President John Kennedy was assassinated.

cluded in 1964 that Oswald was the lone gunman who killed Kennedy.

His activities in Mexico City were investigated vigorously by the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which re-investigated the Kennedy murder in the 1970s. The committee then raised the possibility of an Oswald impersonation, but said there was not sufficient evidence to "firmly" conclude that it happened.

Many more details about the trip, however, have surfaced in CIA and FBI documents released by the Assassination Records Review Board. The board, set up by Congress to amass all assassination-related records, opened tens of thousands of pages before it

closed down in 1998.

The CIA's phone intercepts in Mexico City have been an unanswered question in the assassination case for decades, says T. Jeremy Gunn, former director and general counsel of the review board.

However, he said two assistant counsels on the Warren Commission, William T. Coleman Jr. and W. David Slawson, told the review board that they had gone to Mexico City and not only read transcripts, but listened to recordings.

"We tried to find the tape," Gunn said of the review board's effort. "We were unsuccessful. We tried to get everything we could, and we end up with question marks."