

[BBC] President Kennedy may have been assassinated 17 years ago in a conspiracy by members of his own CIA. That is the startling conclusion of a new book out today called 'Conspiracy,' and its author, Anthony Summers, suggests that a rogue element in the CIA decided to act because of President Kennedy's move to improve relations with Russia and Cuba after the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Cuban missile crisis. That there was a conspiracy is now, according to a Congressional Committee, official. But what kind of conspiracy?

The evidence that Summers now asks us to take seriously is that Lee Harvey Oswald was seen with a senior CIA agent before he was involved in the killing of the President and this agent was code-named Maurice Bishop. Peter Hobday has been to America to look at the mystery of Mr. Bishop, and here is his report:

[Hobday] In a world where spies flourish, anything is possible. But is it really credible that a group within the CIA should be so angered by what they believed to be a betrayal by the man in the White House that they should set up an elaborate conspiracy that could lead to his assassination? Twelve thirty, the time of death and a moment in American history when certainty vanished. Experts have analyzed every frame of the now famous film taken by an amateur cameraman. Did the President fall forward or backward? How many shots were fired?

The confusion of those moments in Dealey Plaza has remained, despite all the attempts, both official and unofficial, to establish the truth. In the National Archives in Washington, all the available information surrounding President Kennedy's assassination - and it runs into many millions of words - has been meticulously filed away. In 1964, the Warren Commission produced the comfortable theory that Lee Harvey Oswald, a known Communist sympathizer, had indeed assassinated the President, and what's more he had acted alone. But the final report from the Warren Commission, which fills nearly 30 volumes, has been heavily criticized. First, they say, it was a rush to judgment. And, secondly, that the Warren Commission had not properly evaluated all the available evidence at the time.

Well, as this criticism mounted, so Congress felt moved to set up a new inquiry in 1977. This latest inquiry, by the Select Committee on Assassinations, ended last year and added another dozen volumes or so to the shelves of the National Archives. And in their final report, they say that there probably was a conspiracy. Now they base this partly on new scientific evidence involving the recorded sound of the gunshots on the day of the assassination. This, it said, proves that there must have been more than one gunman.

They rule out Soviet involvement [!], Mafia involvement [!!], and the FBI and the CIA too, though these last two agencies are criticized for the way in which they handled the initial investigation.

So, who was involved? Well, the Committee have asked the Justice Department to carry out a thorough investigation of all this new evidence to find out once and for all, and one of the most pertinent areas of evidence that they heard is that they took from Antonio Veciana Blanch. What Veciana, who ran one of the most active anti-Castro groups, says in his testimony implies that a rogue element in the CIA could have been involved because he alleges that his CIA contact, Maurice Bishop, was also in touch with Oswald just weeks before the assassination.

[Veciana (translated)] I encountered Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas at the end of August or in the first days of September of 1963, a few weeks before Kennedy was assassinated. I was asked to go to Dallas at the request of my contact with the intelligence service in this country, Maurice Bishop. We fixed the meeting downtown in Dallas, in a bank or an insurance company building, I can't remember exactly. Maurice came with a young man. He seemed to be very quiet, a very strange and preoccupied person. Shortly afterwards I recognized him from his photograph in the newspaper; he was without any doubt the Kennedy assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald.

I have no doubts that the person who was with Maurice Bishop was Lee Harvey Oswald because I had been trained to identify individuals I met by noting their physical characteristics.

[Hobday] The Assassinations Committee accepted some of Veciana's testimony, but in their final report say they could not credit Veciana's story of having met with Lee Harvey Oswald because of lack of supporting evidence. The Committee accepted

the existence of Maurice Bishop, but could not positively identify him.

One man they considered was David Atlee Phillips, a former top CIA agent. I talked to him at his home outside Washington last week. Are you Maurice Bishop? You've been accused of being Maurice Bishop.

[Phillips] No, I am not Maurice Bishop.

[Hobday] Other CIA officials, though, have said that they know of the existence of Maurice Bishop, either as an individual or indeed as a code name which has been used.

[Phillips] Other CIA officials, unidentified. Philip Agee? I don't know who those officers were. I think I am in a better position to know whether he existed or did not. I served two tours on the island of Cuba. I was in Cuban operations in Mexico City. I was for two years the chief of Cuban operations for the CIA and for two years the chief of all Latin American operations. I can assure you that I never heard of or never knew a Maurice Bishop.

[Hobday] Given your career in the CIA, the Assassinations Committee expressed surprise that you should not have come across in the course of your work one Antonio Veciana who was so prominent in Alpha 66 and so prominent in those years in anti-Cuban and anti-Castro activities.

[Phillips] If you check very carefully the record I think you will find that the Committee was not surprised. That surprise was expressed in the findings of the Committee in a footnote. I believe the explanation of the footnote is the fact that the man working for the Committee concerned with Antonio Veciana, the Cuban exile to whom you refer, was a man named Fonzi. In 1971, long before the most recent investigation, Mr. Fonzi wrote a magazine article in which he described himself as paranoid on the subject of the Kennedy assassination. There are thousands of anti-Castro Cubans and I suppose there must be hundreds of Cuban exile groups. Many of these groups were supported by the CIA and consequently I was involved in many cases. Alpha 66, the organization that Mr. Veciana was associated with, was not supported by the CIA.

[Hobday] He says that it was and indeed there is evidence to suggest that there was a link between the CIA and Alpha 66, a small sum of money was transferred.

[Phillips] He says that he believes it was. He said that he believes that Maurice Bishop was from the CIA but there's no evidence there as to what his belief is.

[Hobday] The Assassinations Committee was suspicious of Phillips' testimony and any role Bishop might have played remains a mystery. There was considerable dissent among Committee members but in the end the report does not suggest that CIA agents were involved even as individuals, a view not shared by many private investigators. The Committee didn't rule out individual Mafia or anti-Castro Cubans taking part in the conspiracy, but what kind of conspiracy?

[?] Well, it involves more than one gunman and that is about all we know as a fact, and I am very convinced that those facts are strong, that there were two men shooting there. Beyond that, all is pretty vague, and that is why we are asking the Justice Department to follow up on it.

[Hobday] How soon do you think it will be though before the Justice Department can actually come up with names of likely coconspirators of Oswald's?

[?] Well, it's very hard to know how you can complete that investigation or what the time frame would be. It might take a year or more. I think the important thing is, though, that we will insist, those of us who are interested in it, that the Justice Department proceed immediately with an investigation, shortly after the election. I think they do need to follow up on particularly Oswald's period of life in New Orleans; how long it will take to develop those facts would be hard to estimate.

[Hobday] It's now 17 years since the assassination in Dallas. As time passes, so fewer of the key witnesses survive. The truth becomes more elusive. At the graveside in Arlington National Cemetery, a new generation of Americans is coming to pay its respects. Even if the Justice Department do come up with the names of people they believe to be involved in the conspiracy, can we ever be sure that they are the only ones involved? Indeed, can we ever know the truth now?

[BBC] Well, Tony Summers, who wrote this latest book on President Kennedy's death, is also working on a cinema documentary on the subject called 'Conspiracy,' and that interview with Antonio Veciana Blanch comes from that film.

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