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The Washington Merry-go-round

LBJ asked Hoover to quell conspiracy furor

WASHINGTON — One of history's strangest attempts at literary collaboration is described in an internal FBI memo that tells how President Lyndon Johnson tried to get FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to write a book on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

The time was October, 1966, three years after the assassination in Dallas. Every conspiracy theorist in the country seemed to have a scenario contradicting the Warren Commission's conclusion that the accused assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, had acted alone.

Johnson was dismayed at the public's fascination with the Kennedy assassination and the persisting conspiracy theories. He had tried to close the door on the conspiracy idea by appointing a bipartisan commission of prominent, credible public figures to investigate the assassination.

Yet I later learned from sources close to Johnson that he had his own suspicions about a conspiracy.

From his earliest intelligence briefings on the assassination, he privately suspected that Cuban President Fidel Castro may have ordered it. He feared that if the American people learned of this, they would demand military reprisal against Cuba, and this could lead to a dangerous confrontation with the Soviet Union.

To prevent this, Johnson appointed the Warren Commission. I don't know whether he tried to influence its deliberations, but he was clearly distressed that the commission's verdict was still under attack three years later.

Johnson wanted to do something to re-establish the commission's credibility and lay to rest the conspiracy talk. He decided that Hoover, then still a formidable figure, had the credibility to persuade the American people, once and for all, that Oswald was the lone assassin.

So LBJ, using the best behind-the-scenes technique, got his close friend, Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas, to approach Hoover. Fortas was skeptical but made the overture through Hoover's trusted assistant, Cartha D. DeLoach.

DeLoach conferred with Hoover, who rejected the book idea as Fortas had expected. According to an internal memo that DeLoach wrote on Oct. 10, 1966, he broke the news to Fortas and explained "the many reasons why the director could not accede to the president's and Justice Fortas' request."

Fortas then confided, states the memo, that "he had argued with the president that it was not logical for the director to prepare this book inasmuch as the director in doing so would necessarily have to substantiate the investigative efforts of many other agencies."

But Johnson had a fallback position, which Fortas then presented. He asked that Hoover at least issue a statement on one point the critics had raised: the discrepancies between FBI reports and the Warren Commission concerning the Kennedy autopsy.

DeLoach told Fortas he "felt certain" Hoover would agree to this modest proposal and immediately set to work drafting such a statement. The files contain a handwritten note from Hoover about the statement, saying simply: "Let me see it. H."

DeLoach, now retired, told my associate Les Whitten that the matter was resolved by issuing the Hoover-approved statement in response to an inquiry from The Washington Star. As DeLoach remembered it, the statement reiterated the FBI's view that Oswald acted alone.

DIPLOMATIC DIGEST: Czechoslovakia's communist government is struggling with a problem that supposedly afflicts only decadent capitalist countries: drug addiction. A report on a hush-hush conference in Prague estimates the number of Czech addicts — mostly teen-agers — at some ten of thousands in a population of about 15 million.

Heroin and cocaine are hard to get, so the junkies get their kicks by mixing various over-the-counter painkillers and sedatives.

• Sudanese President Gaafar Nimeiri's stubborn insistence on imposing strict Islamic law on the largely Christian southern part of his country may have cost him more than he realizes. My intelligence sources say that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has secretly decided that he will no longer protect Nimeiri from an internal coup, only from external threats by Libya or others. Nimeiri, incidentally, may be suffering from Bright's disease, or nephritis, an ailment of the kidneys.

• Tired of buses passing by without stopping for you? Here's a suggestion that might work — if you happen to live near a zoo. The villagers of Shimoga, India, got fed up with bus drivers who refused to stop and, so help me Hannibal, they parked an elephant in the middle of the road. This created such a traffic jam of buses that the drivers promised they'd stop at Shimoga in the future.

• A British researcher has figured out how to swat a fly with deadly accuracy. To overcome the pesky critter's all-around vision and super-fast reaction, simply take a rolled-up newspaper in each hand and swat fore and aft. Bingo!