

Garry Wills

A glimpse of FBI reality

The revelation that the FBI destroyed a letter from Lee Harvey Oswald does not tell us anything new about the FBI — its highest imperative has always been, "Don't embarrass the bureau."

What is more important, the letter tells us nothing new about Oswald's assassination of President Kennedy. We are often told that new revelations make it desirable to reopen the Kennedy investigation. Most of these new revelations are repetitions of old stuff, like the fact that Jack Ruby was a mob groupie.

But the letter of Oswald was a new bit of information, and it just tends to confirm the Warren Report. Oswald wrote the letter because he was mad at an FBI agent for checking up on Marina Oswald, a routine the FBI follows with immigrants from Russia. If Oswald had been working for the FBI, as many conspiratorialists have argued, he would not write the agent a letter telling him to stay away — he would have talked to his "contact." In fact, he would probably have expected, and not resented, the agent's call on Marina.

Then why did the FBI destroy the letter? Because it regularly tells lies to make itself look like its TV image. Even without knowledge of the letter, some people find that the FBI had been remiss in not

watching Oswald more closely. With the letter, things might have looked worse. So the FBI denied such prior knowledge of Oswald in his threatening mood.

The letter gives us a glimpse of the reality that exists behind conspiratorial theorizing. The theorists believe that all people in power make up a clique of bad bad guys, whose interests are similar when not the same. They do not recognize that the bad guys spend a lot of their time fighting each other.

The FBI swept much of the evidence in the Kennedy and Oswald killings off to its vaunted laboratories in Washington. When the state prosecutors needed some of that evidence for the trial of Jack Ruby, they almost had to blackmail the FBI to get it. The conspiratorial scenarios depend very largely on meet-meshings between local police, the FBI, the CIA, and the Justice Department. But local police often resent the FBI — especially Texas police, who still think of themselves as Rangers. The CIA and FBI have a long history of mutual distrust and bureaucratic non-cooperation. That is one reason J. Edgar Hoover shot down the Huston plan — he did not like to work with others, and especially with the CIA.

In World War II, Hoover quickly expanded his anti-crime work to the hunt for

domestic spies and saboteurs, and then expanded that hunt to foreign cities where he had FBI offices. So thoroughly did he take over the busy anti-espionage activities throughout South America that William Donovan, when he founded the OSS, could not move in on Hoover's territory. General MacArthur kept Donovan's boys out of the South Pacific, too; so the OSS had to settle for Europe and Africa.

After the war, Hoover tried to supplant the OSS in Europe while retaining his sovereignty over South America. But with the founding of the CIA, he had to relinquish even South America to the President's new army of spies. He did this with a notable lack of grace, and the bitterness engendered then was kept alive, like most of Hoover's resentments, through the rest of his career. As recently as 1971 he was again expanding overseas FBI offices, against the active resistance of the CIA.

So those people who imagined Hoover's one-man band cooperating in a conspiracy to kill the President are misjudging the actors in the plot. The FBI has always tended to be timorous with any people but the very helpless — frightened of embarrassing the bureau, and better at destroying letters than at pulling off cooperative ventures of high risk.