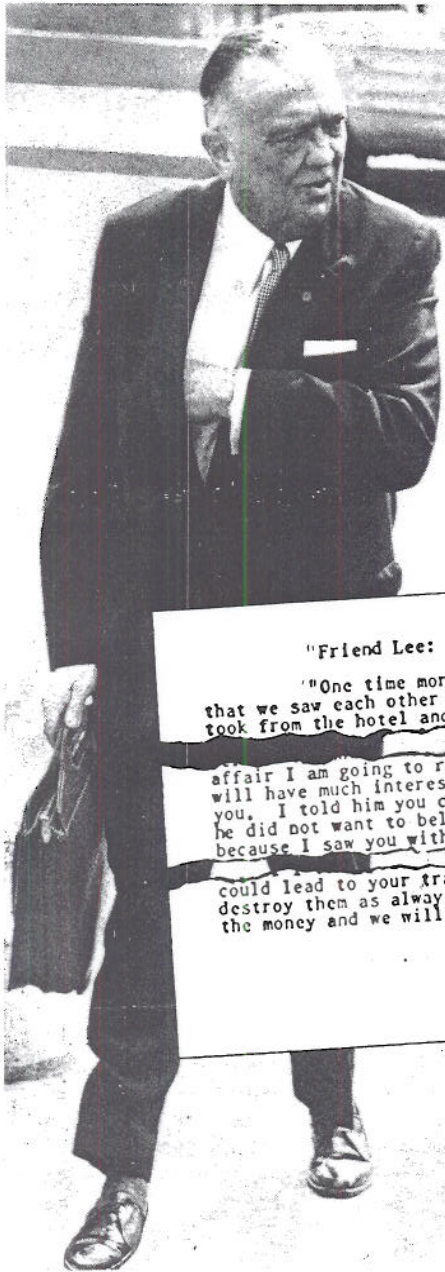


JFK: What the FBI Found

All doubts will probably never be resolved, and every last detail, certainly, will never be known. But the frantic conviction on the part of so many Americans that President John F. Kennedy was not, could not have been, killed by a lone assassin named Lee Harvey Oswald was buried a little deeper last



"Friend Lee:

"One time more I write you since the last time that we saw each other in Miami. The Spanish books that you took from the hotel and I have hardly anything. I told you

affair I am going to recommend to the Chief that he certainly will have much interest in knowing you as they need men like you. I told him you could put out a candle at 50 meters and he did not want to believe me, but I made him believe it because I saw you with my own eyes and the Chief was

could lead to your trail and when you receive my letters destroy them as always. After the affair, I will send you the money and we will see each other in Miami where always.

"Sincerely, always

signed Pedro Charles
Peter

Hoover, fake Cuban letter: After half a ton of paper, a cold trail

week by half a ton of paper. Fourteen years after the event, the FBI finally released the first half of its colossal file on the assassination—40,001 pages of letters, memos, inquiries, interviews, judgments and summaries. The bureau's investigation was exhaustive, tedious and far-flung, and in every important particular, it bore out the Warren Commission's judgment that Oswald was the killer and that he acted alone.

The ponderous FBI files put forth

their conclusion indirectly, not so much by what they turn up as by what they don't. They suggest no collusive pattern, reveal no curious repetition of names, uncover no trails that lead to other trails. The compass needle swings this way and that—to the mysterious graffiti on the inside of a boxcar in Michigan, to a "suspicious"-looking black waiter at a party in an Arlington motel—but always ends up pointing to nonconspiracy, to Oswald.

Tenacity: The papers also suggest that the nation was better served than it realized by the FBI and its crusty, old chief. J. Edgar Hoover opposed the formation of the Warren Commission in the first place and groaned aloud at the investigative load the commission dumped on his bureau; he fought angry, behind-the-scenes battles with the Secret Service, the CIA and Dallas city and county police, and he defended his agents against all outside criticism, valid or not. But Hoover appears to have run the investigation with tenacity, open-mindedness and professional skill, holding open the possibility of conspiracy until the evidence persuaded him otherwise, and even thereafter pursuing every last lead to its invariable dead end.

Still, the files reveal that the FBI performed with something less than Hollywood-style perfection before and after the assassination. Its most grievous error came in its "official" report of the exact path followed by the first bullet—a matter that originally baffled even the pathologists. In the tension and confusion of the day, two FBI agents and three Secret Service men, none of them medically qualified, witnessed the autopsy and filed an inaccurate report stating that there was "no point of exit" for that bullet, which had apparently struck Kennedy in the back. This unlikely account became part of official FBI correspondence, and later of the Warren Commission evidence—giving a field day to critics and

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undermining the far different, enormously more plausible report issued later by the pathologists themselves who identified the wound in Kennedy's throat as the bullet's point of exit.

Hoover's bureaucratic instincts also added to the general confusion by obscuring the vital question of how much the FBI knew about Oswald ahead of time—and why he was running free on the day of the assassination. When Dallas police chief Jesse Curry intimated that the FBI had been dogging Oswald but had failed to notify Dallas police, the FBI demanded and got a public apology from Curry. But Hoover knew that Curry had been essentially correct. The late columnist Drew Pearson picked up the story, and Hoover aide Cartha (Deke) DeLoach suggested in a memo that "our news media friends" want "to take Pearson apart." Hoover discouraged this, noting at the bottom of DeLoach's memo: "Unfortunately, we are not in a position to completely contradict Pearson . . ."

Guardian: Hoover's overriding concern, the files make clear, was to disassociate the bureau in the public mind from the primary job of protecting the President, and hence from responsibility for his death. Several memos, by the chief and his aides, repeat the theme that "Presidential protection measures were the basic responsibility of the Secret Service . . ." Still, Hoover was privately furious at the sloppiness of many of his Dallas operatives and issued a flood of rebukes and transfers after the investigation was concluded. And he went up the wall after Dallas agent James P. Hosty Jr., who had been assigned to track Oswald, was quoted as saying, "We knew he was capable of assassinating the President, but we didn't dream he'd do it." Another Dallas agent tried to cry misquote, but Hoover wasn't mollified. Scrawled across a photocopy of the interview was the message, in Hoover's hand: "Tell Dallas to tell Hosty to keep his big mouth shut."

On the main thrust of the investigation, however, Hoover and his agents seem to have proceeded sensibly and with antlike thoroughness. On the question whether Oswald acted alone, Hoover's initial reaction was to believe that he had, and he advised Lyndon Johnson that Oswald was "in the category of a nut and the extremist pro-Castro crowd." But when two letters surfaced from Castro's Cuba implying that Oswald had been paid to murder JFK, the FBI chief was prepared to change his mind. "I personally believe Oswald was the assassin," Hoover noted in his memo of a conversation with Warren Commission counsel J. Lee Rankin on Dec. 12, 1963. "The sec-

ond aspect as to whether he was the only man gives me great concern."

The first of the Cuban letters, signed "Pedro Charles Peter" and addressed to "Friend Lee," bragged that Pedro had told the chief (Castro) that "you could put out a candle at 50 meters" and warned him not to "be foolish with the money I sent you." The second, sent to Attorney General Robert Kennedy and signed by one Mario del Rosario Molina, described Pedro Charles Peter as "an agent of the state security department of Cuba" and said that he had hired Oswald to kill Kennedy. The letters were judged to be hoaxes, typed on the same Remington typewriter and signed with the same ink. Hoover played it safe, however, sending covering memos to both the CIA and the State Department's intelligence agency.



From 'Marina and Lee,' courtesy of Harper and Row

Oswalds in Moscow: 'In the category of a nut'

The bureau also spent months digging into the background, character and motivation of Jack Ruby, the Dallas nightclub owner who gunned down Oswald at Dallas police headquarters. In the bureau's eyes, no less than the nation's, the shooting was so bizarre that it cried out for some sinister explanation, some link between Ruby and Oswald. But the FBI never found any—not even after chasing down the hundreds of fan letters that poured into Ruby's jail cell.

An embarrassingly large number of citizens sent their own zany theories to the FBI. The Rev. John Holman of Port Clyde, Maine, informed the bureau that "God punished" Kennedy because the Internal Revenue Service had disallowed the reverend's tax claim for \$611.28. One would-be witness said that entertainer Johnny Carson was a Communist who possessed advance information on the murder. Hundreds of Americans sought to turn in their neigh-

bors, spouses, nephews, brothers, sisters and best friends. The FBI interviewed them all.

Amid all this grisly nonsense appeared certain leads that might have been connected to something real, often sending agents on enormously time-consuming wild-goose chases. Among them:

- Two workmen opened an empty boxcar in Newport, Mich., ten days after the assassination and found in yellow chalk the message: "Lee Oswald, Dallas, Texas. Future man of destiny, Apr. 4, 1963"—a date eight months before the assassination. Once notified, the FBI traced the boxcar's movement through 49 railroad lines and cities from Seattle to Weehawken, N.J. After four agents spent three days in the hunt, they finally ran down a receiving clerk in Vassar, Mich., who had been "just doodling" when he scrawled Oswald's name in the boxcar—four days after the assassination.

- Lyndon Johnson recalled that Oswald had written from the Soviet Union where he lived with his wife, Marina, to Texas Republican Sen. John Tower, asking for help in getting out. Leaving no possible partisan advantage unturned, Johnson had aide Marvin Watson ask for a copy of all such correspondence.

- A member of the Teamsters union in Birmingham, Ala., said that he, Teamster boss Jimmy Hoffa and Oswald had met in Washington in September 1963, at which time Hoffa gave Oswald hit contracts on JFK and his brother Robert. The FBI also checked out another theory that the mob subsequently hired Ruby to rub out Oswald—a hypothesis eloquently refuted by Frank

(Butch) LaVerde of Chicago. "It's not logical to send a guy in to hit a guy [Oswald] who's stood up for 25 hours," LaVerde told the agents. "You know you can trust a guy who can stand up for 25 hours, but how do you know you can trust the guy you send in to hit him?"

In the end, the trails all led nowhere. It may be, as author-attorney Mark Lane ("Rush to Judgment") professed last week, that the telltale conspiratorial link might emerge from the next 40,000 pages due in January. And the fact that certain portions of the files have been censored or withheld for "security" reasons does leave the door slightly ajar. But for most of the nation, unsettled for fourteen years by fierce accusations and sinister theories of government implication in the murder of a President, the FBI's exhaustive mountain of evidence could only seem a monument to emerging sanity.

—RICHARD BOETH with EVERT CLARK and JOHN J. LINDSAY in Washington