

MEMORANDUM

July 6, 1998

To: Jeremy Gunn
Executive Director

cc: Bob Skwirot
CIA Team Leader

From: Michelle Combs
Associate Director for Research and Review

Subject: Backchannel Communications Between Mexico City, JMWAVE, and
Headquarters (ARRB Request for Additional Information and Records No.
CIA-13)

ARRB Request for Additional Information and Records No. CIA-13 asked CIA to determine whether there existed any "backchannel" communications between the Mexico City Station, JMWAVE, or Headquarters during 1963. "Backchannel" was taken to mean, *inter alia*, any administrative, senior staff, or restricted access communications or any written or electronic communications other than cables or dispatches of the types already included in the JFK Collection. Work by the CIA Team has not uncovered any indication of an established or ad hoc informal backchannel *per se* in 1963.

There has been no indication of the existence of any additional recoverable records other than official Agency communications.

Members of the CIA Team received a very detailed comprehensive briefing on the working of the CIA's Cable Secretariat as it handled electronic cable traffic in 1963. Various members of the CIA Team also have examined the Mexico City Station, JMWAVE, and Headquarters communications material available in the JFK Collection and have seen nothing to indicate that communications existed within another channel. In addition, the ARRB has spoken informally with numerous former and current CIA employees who served overseas during the relevant time period. Each of these individuals, without exception, stated that they had no knowledge of the existence of any established or ad hoc electronic backchannel communications. Several mentioned that while such a form of communication might have been possible in 1963, it would have been a very unusual last resort since both the Chief of Station and the communicator could have expected to be immediately relieved if such a communication came to light.

During the relevant time period, CIA electronic cable traffic was handled by CIA communicators through a restricted handling communications channel separate from that used by the Department of

State for its cable traffic. CIA communicators were required to send an information copy of every communication between stations to "Director," that is, to Headquarters. Once a cable arrives at Headquarters, routing indicators at the top of the cable and cryptonyms in the "slug line" in the body of the cable were used to direct a cable to the proper recipients. Cables received widespread distribution or restricted, special, or proscribed and limited handling based on the sensitivity and type of information they contained. Any limited distribution to particular offices was indicated by the routing indicators and any limited distribution within an office was indicated by the cable "slug line."

Traffic received by a station from Headquarters or another station was handled in the same manner and distributed to the appropriate individual or branch within the station.

Formal station traffic to and from CIA Headquarters through the diplomatic pouch was handled by hand in much the same manner as cable traffic. Dispatches were sent to the designated addressee and packages to the office, branch, or individual indicated on the address label. However, in 1963, it would not have been unusual for a Chief of Station or any other member of a station to send an envelope marked "eyes only" to any individual in Headquarters, nor would it have been unusual for someone in Headquarters to send an "eyes only" envelope to an individual in an overseas station. Since these types of messages were not considered official CIA traffic, no records were kept.

The CIA reports, and all of the individuals with whom we spoke agreed, that while it was technically possible for a CIA Chief of Station to send an electronic communication to his or her counterpart in another station in 1963, to do so would have required the acquiescence of the communicator to violate one of the most basic and oldest rules of Agency communications traffic. Yet it was entirely possible to send non-time-sensitive messages to and from individuals through the diplomatic pouch. In addition, given the locations of the Mexico City and JMWAVE (Miami) stations, communications could have been sent via the US Mail system or even by telephone. Communications between an individual at Headquarters and an individual attached to JMWAVE could easily have been sent through the mail. Similarly, a person traveling from Mexico City Station to any location in the United States could be asked to mail a letter or package to an individual at JMWAVE or Headquarters. Most commonly, sensitive messages simply were handed to individuals traveling between Headquarters and a particular station and hand carried to the designated addressee. Hand carried messages and messages sent by US Mail would have not officially existed as CIA communications. No records were kept of any non-official traffic between Headquarters and any station.