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JFK ASSASSINATION SYSTEM  
IDENTIFICATION FORM

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[R] - ITEM IS RESTRICTED 104-10335-10011

# 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.

File 4.20.1, 4.20.4 and 4.50  
Combs e:\cia-13wu.wpd



Washington, D.C. 20505

4 February 1998

T. Jeremy Gunn, Esq.  
Executive Director  
Assassination Records Review Board  
600 E Street, N.W. (2nd Floor)  
Washington, D.C. 20530

Dear Mr. Gunn:

Re: ARRB Request CIA 13, for Information  
On "Backchannel" Communications

The following is responsive to referent request.

Within referent request and an addendum thereto accessioned by Mr. Dewey Claridge's book, you asked for information on the forms of so-called "backchannel" communications. Further, the request asks for any backchannel communications between Mexico City Station, CIA Headquarters and JMWAVE for specific time periods.

First, we have previously advised you concerning Roger/Cactus designated communications which you have acknowledged as a partial response. Second, during the DO records briefing follow-on which took place on 1 April 1997, a question-and-answer session, the subject of "backchannel" communications was covered.

During the period 1959-1964, the term "backchannel" applied to non-CIA communications sent through Agency communications facilities. It was a communications channel used by senior government officials, including the President.

There is another term applied to similar communications which is frequently but erroneously labeled "backchannel" communications. It is the "privacy" channel used by CIA managers primarily to discuss personnel matters. Conceivably senior CIA officials could communicate in the "privacy" channel without coordinating the cable with a particular area division, for example Western Hemisphere/Latin American Division. However, the message would still be in cable format, addressed "Eyes Only COS" or something similar, and would be sent and received through regular Office of Communication facilities.

With reference to your question can the Agency retrieve any of these categories of cables, the answer is no. Such cables were not captured by any organized filing process or any generic or specific filing term and were not placed in official files. Therefore, there are no indices or other indicators that can be used to search for them. In addition, because any copies which were retained were considered unofficial files, there were no retention policies governing their retention or destruction.

If you require anything further in this regard, please advise.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Barry Harrelson', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

J. Barry Harrelson

SUBJECT: ARRB Request CIA 13, for Information on  
"Backchannel" Communications

Distribution:

Orig - Adse

1 - C/HRG

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1 - ARRB Request Chrono

~~1~~ - ARRB Request CIA 13

1 - Barry

~~SECRET~~

20 January 1998

CIA SPECIAL COLLECTIONS  
RELEASE IN FULL

MEMORANDUM FOR: (U) Chief, JFK Declassification  
Project/HRP/OIM/DA 2000

FROM: (U) Fredrick C. Wickham, Jr.  
Chief, External Support Group/IMS/DO  
Central Intelligence Agency

SUBJECT: (U) DO Response to Formal Request CIA #13

REFERENCE: (U) ARRB's Memorandum dated 18 December 1997,  
RE: Status of CIA Responses to  
Assassination Records Review Board's  
Requests for Additional Information and  
Records

(U) This memorandum is submitted in response to formal request number 13 (CIA #13) from the Assassination Records Review Board.

\*\*CIA-13 Mexico City Backchannel Communications

a. (C) In the question-and-answer segment of the Directorate of Operations Records briefing follow-on of 1 April 1997, the backchannel/privacy topic was covered. First, a distinction needs to be made between backchannel and privacy channel.

b. (S) In 1959-1964 the term "backchannel" applied to non-Agency communications through Agency communications facilities; that is, as utilized by senior officials, including the President, of other U. S. Government agencies.

c. (S) Senior Agency officials conceivably could communicate -- through "privacy channels" -- without coordinating the cable with Western Hemisphere/Latin America Division, but it would still be in cable format, addressed "Eyes Only COS," and would be sent and received through regular Office of Communications facilities. Agency officers frequently -- but erroneously -- interchanged the terms "back channel" and "privacy channel."

CL BY 2103140  
CL REASON: 1.5(c)  
DECL ON: X1  
DRV: MIS 5-82

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SUBJECT: DO Response to Formal Request CIA #13

d. (S) Unfortunately, there is no way of retrieving these cables through a reasonable search using any generic or specific term. Cables were not captured by any organized filing process and were not placed in official files. Therefore, there are no indices or other indicators that could be used to search for them. Because copies that may have been retained were unofficial files, there were no retention policies.

  
Fredrick C. Wickham, Jr.

~~SECRET~~

# FAX TRANSMISSION

ARRB

202-724-0088

Fax: 202-724-0457

**To:** Barry Harrelson **Date:** October 28, 1997  
**Fax #:** 703-613-3063 **Pages:** 3, including this cover sheet.  
**From:** Michelle Combs  
**Subject:** Backchannel Communications

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**COMMENTS:**

Barry,

As we discussed, please note the description of a "privacy" or "back" channel in Dewey Clarridge's A Spy For All Seasons. Admittedly, Clarridge is discussing the mid-1980's but this channel was not mentioned during our agency briefings. Did such a channel exist in 1959-64? How was it used? How did it work? Are any cables sent via this channel recoverable today? As you know, we are particularly interested in any communications to and from Moscow, Mexico City, and JMWAVE.

Information on "back" channels is the subject of our Request for Additional Information and Records No. CIA-13 of November 1, 1996. If you wish, an additional formal request focusing on "back" channels as a broader issue can be sent.

Thanks for your help.

Michelle

# A SPY FOR ALL SEASONS

*My Life in the CIA*

Duane R. Clarridge

*with Digby Diehl*

Michelle —  
Thanks for all the great  
work at CTC.

*Duane*

A LISA DREW BOOK

SCRIBNER

## A SPY FOR ALL SEASONS

North set himself up in my outer office. He needed access to our secure communications with Lisbon to work on the landing rights problem. I sent the cables via my "privacy" or "back" channel to Lisbon. A privacy channel is the way a division chief communicates with his chiefs on matters that are particularly sensitive—usually personnel matters. Cables in this channel are supposed to be destroyed on both ends after ninety days. Knowing this, I asked my secretary to set up a special file for these cables, separate from the regular files, to have a record of events. I did this because I still clearly recalled Ted Shackley's admonition to me. In 1977, Shackley was the associate deputy director for operations (ADDO). He gave me advice, saying, "When you support another agency, keep a detailed record, because when it all goes south, guess who's holding the sack."

This was a Friday morning, and Casey, McMahon, and Clair George were all away from Washington. Ed Juchniewicz, the ADDO, was running the Directorate of Operations. A copy of all incoming and outgoing divisional back-channel cable traffic is sent to the office of the deputy director of operations; thus Juchniewicz and his staff had full access to our communications between Washington and Lisbon. The DDO and ADDO read the divisional back-channel traffic first every day, unless some other crisis took precedence. What was going on was so unusual it must have been brought to Juchniewicz's attention immediately.

At North's behest I contacted our chief in Lisbon, telling him to pull out all the stops to secure landing rights for the El Al aircraft. My efforts were not isolated—the flight was nearing the turnaround point and North was trying anything he thought would work. Bud McFarlane was yanked from a meeting with Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev in Switzerland to place a call to the Portuguese foreign minister to see if he could get the needed clearance.

It was all in vain; the El Al plane had to turn around. Once the aircraft returned to Israel, North had to figure out an alternative means to get his shipment to Iran. Even if landing rights had eventually been secured in Lisbon, the El Al 747 was no longer available to fly the cargo there. The shipment was stuck in Tel Aviv.

The problem rattled on through Friday, the twenty-second. North wanted Lisbon to contact his confederate Richard Secord, who was going by the alias Richard Copp, to see about arranging other transportation. For me this episode was the first time Secord's name had surfaced—I'd never heard of him before. When it became clear to North that Secord could not solve the problem from the Lisbon end, Ollie asked me, "Can you recommend an aircraft charter company that can provide a couple of 707s to get this stuff out of Israel?"

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Mr. J. Barry Harrelson  
April 16, 1997  
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DRAFT

that all of the records provided were located in the Sequestered Collection.

As stated in the second paragraph at the beginning of this letter, we seek to review the original files that we have requested. The DO provided no response and no time frame for a response.

#### CIA-13 Mexico City Backchannel Communications.

This request, dated November 1, 1996, was raised at the DO follow-up briefing on April 1, 1997. The DO provided no response and no time frame for a response.

#### CIA-14 Mexico City Station Annual Reports.

This request, dated December 23, 1996, was raised at the DO follow-up briefing on April 1, 1997. The DO provided no response and no time frame for a response.

#### CIA-15 Win Scott files identified in Russ Holmes Files.

CIA has completed its response and no further action is needed.

#### \*\*CIA-16 Oswald Pre-Assassination Files.

The HRG reportedly received a lengthy answer from the Office of Security on the LHO files and a formal response to the Review Board's request is in process. Oswald's Office of Security file has been located and will be delivered to HRG for review in April. Access to other files will require a special request from HRG to the Office of Security and should be requested by HRG for ARRB staff review.

## II. Informal Requests.

All of the following informal requests have previously been made to CIA. For future reference, they will be referred to by the "Informal Request" (IR) number provided below.

~~FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY~~

CSI-0359/96  
8 November 1996

CIA SPECIAL COLLECTIONS  
RELEASE IN FULL  
2000

MEMORANDUM FOR: Fred Wickham (FOUO)  
DO Focal Point for  
JFK Board

FROM: John F. Pereira  
Chief, Historical Review Group

SUBJECT: Request No, CIA-13  
from JFK Board

(U) 1. Attached is "Request for Additional Information and Records No. CIA-13 (Backchannel Communications)", which was received from the Assassination Records Review Board on 7 November 1996. The request is for access to material about back channel communications related to Mexico City, JMWAVE, or Headquarters during certain periods in 1963.

(U) 2. Please advise how you would like us to respond to this request. We are asked to make the information available by 1 December.



John F. Pereira

Attachment

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**Assassination Records Review Board**

600 E Street NW • 2nd Floor • Washington, DC 20530

(202) 724-0088 • Fax: (202) 724-0457

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IN THIS DOCUMENT

November 1, 1996

Mr. John Pereira  
Director  
Historical Review Group  
Center for the Study of Intelligence  
Central Intelligence Agency  
Washington, DC 20505

Re: Request for Additional Information and Records No. CIA-13  
(Backchannel Communications)

Dear John:

We request your assistance in obtaining access to information and records of possible pertinence to the John F. Kennedy assassination. We request that you provide information to answer the following queries:

1. What forms of backchannel communications were there between the Mexico City Station (including the COS), JMWAVE, or Headquarters during 1963? By "backchannel" we mean, *inter alia*, any administrative, senior staff, or restricted access communications, or any written or electronic communications other than regular cables or dispatches (of the type included in the JFK Collection).
2. Were there, in fact, any backchannel communications between the Mexico City Station (including the COS), JMWAVE, or Headquarters during the time periods 27 Sept - 16 Oct 1963 and 22 Nov - 30 Nov 1963?
3. To the extent that there were any backchannel communications for the time periods 27 Sept - 16 Oct 1963 and 22 Nov - 30 Nov 1963 (other than those currently contained in the JFK Collection), please make such records available for review.

These requests should be interpreted in their broadest reasonable sense. To the extent that you question whether a particular record is encompassed by our request, please let us know and we can advise you whether we seek to include it.

Mr. John Pereira  
November 1, 1996  
Page 2

We request that you make this information available to us by December 1, 1996. If this does not provide you with sufficient time, please let us know, in writing, by what date you believe you will be able to answer the questions fully.

In requesting access to these materials, we are not designating them "assassination records" and we are not, at this time, requesting that copies be given to the Review Board.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely Yours,

  
David G. Marwell  
Executive Director