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JFK ACT RELEASE

VIII

THE ASSASSINS

EVERYTHING ABOUT assassination seems un-American. The word assassin comes from "hashish." The first assassins, almost a thousand years ago, were the "*hashshāshīn,*" the "hashish-users," a fanatical Moslem sect in Persia who considered murder of their enemies a sacred duty. Violence may be, in the words of the black militant H. Rap Brown, "as American as cherry pie," but for most Americans political assassination was an Old World phenomenon of bomb-throwing Bolsheviks and Balkan fanatics. Even though four Presidents fell to assassins' bullets and others were targets of assassination, the staff of President Johnson's National Commission on Violence concluded in 1969 that the general pattern was not one of conspiracy, but of "freelance assassins in varying states of mental instability." The wave of assassinations that cut down, in less than a decade, President Kennedy, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers and Malcolm X troubled Americans deeply, making them wonder if this alien aberration was becoming a feature of American life.

Now, in the summer of 1975, there was the nagging suspicion that for *some* Americans, in some shadowy recess of government, the idea of assassination had long been a way of life. Because of this, Senator Church's committee, pushing on with the investigation from which President Ford had recoiled, found itself enveloped in tension. The CIA felt threatened by an assault on its deadliest secrets. The White House saw America's reputation in the world endangered. Senators found themselves walking a tightrope across an abyss of dark deeds

plotted under two Democratic and two Republican Presidents. And, if all this were not neuralgic enough, they would end up with the nightmarish question of whether assassination cast upon the Cuban waters might somehow have returned to Dallas.

Under Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon the CIA had been involved, in varying degrees, in plots and coups against eight foreign leaders:

In 1960, against Lumumba. He had threatened to bring Soviet troops into the Congo. Plans had been made, poisons shipped, access to Lumumba sought. But he was killed by others before the CIA plans could be realized.

In 1961, against the Dominican dictator Trujillo. His brutality had inspired fear of another Castro-style revolution. He was killed by Dominican dissidents, who had received American arms, though it was unclear whether these were the guns used.

In 1963, against Ngo Dinh Diem. His repressive actions had led to fear of an uprising in Vietnam. He was killed in a generals' coup, supported by the CIA, but without evidence that the United States wanted him dead.

In 1970, against General René Schneider, the Chilean army chief of staff. He had stood in the way of a CIA-supported military coup against Allende. The CIA backed a plan to kidnap Schneider, but apparently did not foresee that he would be killed when he resisted abduction. By the time of the coup against Allende in 1973, the CIA claimed it had "separated" itself from the military plotters.

Evidence indicated that some thought had been given, at various times, to the assassination of President François Duvalier of Haiti and President Sukarno of Indonesia, both of whom died in the early seventies of apparently natural causes.

The chief target was Fidel Castro of Cuba — the closest to America's shores, and the closest to America's trauma. He became the subject of much of the goings and comings of an unbelievable array of witnesses before Senator Church's committee, which had moved, for the purpose, into the securest hearing room on Capitol Hill — the windowless penthouse of the Joint Committee on Atomic En-

ergy. Some of the activities surrounding the closed hearings are drawn from my journal:

June 13: Helms is back from Iran and before the Senate committee. To avoid reporters, he goes up the side stairs to the closely guarded hearing room. Senator Mansfield suggests on the Senate floor that Helms should stop shuttling back and forth from Teheran and stay here until his problems are settled.

June 18: Former Presidents have become involved in a game of political football. Despite President Ford's admonition against "Monday morning quarterbacking" about presidential responsibility for assassination plots, Rockefeller has said on NBC's "Meet the Press" that there was "White House knowledge and/or approval of all major undertakings." Senator Goldwater has said he wouldn't be surprised if President Kennedy knew all about plots against Castro. Senator Church: "I will have no part in pointing a finger of guilt toward any former President, none of whom are alive today." (He has forgotten, of course, that Nixon lives.)

June 20: Sam Giancana of the Chicago Mafia was killed last night. He was to have been a witness before the Senate committee to be asked about his part in the CIA plots against Castro. His one-time lieutenant, John Rosselli, subpoenaed for next Tuesday, is already in Washington, hiding out. Rosselli's lawyer quotes him as saying he doesn't think Giancana's murder was connected with his prospective Senate testimony. Vice Chairman John Tower, presiding over today's hearing, says, "The committee, of course, notes with interest that Mr. Giancana was done away with." Colby, after testifying, says the CIA certainly had nothing to do with Giancana's murder.

Trying to find John Rosselli, we call all the Washington hotels. There's a John Rosselli registered at the Watergate. The telephone in his room is answered by a man who says, "Mr. Rosselli is out playing golf," assuring me that this Mr. Rosselli is a businessman from Florida who knows nothing about the CIA or crime. Maybe!

June 24: This is the morning Rosselli is supposed to testify. At 7:45 A.M. I try the Watergate again. Same voice, but this time he answers to his name. Says he's waiting to hear from his lawyers about when

he goes before the Senate Committee. I offer to supply the information because it's on the committee calendar. He says, "Let my lawyers do it. I pay them enough." Adamant about no interview, no picture.

The committee cooperates by slipping Rosselli, with Capitol Police escort, up the backstairs, and later out through an unannounced exit. By having several camera crews and with walkie-talkie communications, we manage to catch him getting into his car, so there are pictures for the Evening News. Later, Senator Church indicates that Rosselli has told a vivid, but incomplete story about trying to kill Castro. Missing are the names of gangland associates, which he refuses to give, and the identities of those who set the whole thing in motion, which he does not know.

June 26: In a briefing outside the hearing room, Senator Church says there will be a report, but no open hearings on assassination plots because the committee doesn't want to "hold this sordid story before the world." Vice Chairman Tower adds puckishly, "I might say further that the matter of assassinations might be viewed in a broader context of other options that might have been available within the proscriptions of certain policy guidelines." When I say I'm not sure I understand him, Tower says, "Well, perhaps that's good."

July 18: Senator Church, at one of his regular posthearing briefings, says, "The agency [the CIA] may have been behaving like a rogue elephant on a rampage." Church, now obviously nurturing presidential dreams, would find life more comfortable if he could exonerate the Kennedys and pin all the assassination plots on Helms and his cloak-and-dagger band.

July 20: On CBS's "Face the Nation," Senator Richard Schweiker, a Republican on the Intelligence committee, disputes Church on the "rogue elephant" theory. "I think it's only fair to say there was no direct evidence that exonerates Presidents from assassination attempts . . . It's hard for me to conceive that someone higher up didn't know."

July 22: Lawrence Houston, retired CIA general counsel, while on Capitol Hill for testimony, agrees to be interviewed on film. He says

that in 1962 he briefed Attorney General Robert Kennedy about the CIA-Mafia plots to kill Castro and that Kennedy's only reaction was that "if we were going to get involved with the Mafia again, please come to him first because our involvement with the Mafia might impede his drive against the Mafia in general crime-busting." Houston implies Kennedy didn't object to the assassination plans as such.

July 30: Senator George McGovern, back from Cuba, holds a news conference to release a Castro book recounting twenty-four plots against him, all allegedly CIA-inspired, the last of them in 1971 when Castro visited Chile. Confessions of would-be killers are quoted, mostly Cubans. The weapons pictured range from dynamite to a gun hidden in a television camera. McGovern notes that many of these plots were hatched after President Kennedy's pledge, in return for Bay of Pigs prisoners, to avoid future violence against Cuba. McGovern says that either the CIA acted on its own or President Kennedy broke his promise.

Soon afterward, in another room of the Senate Office Building, Robert Maheu, who has just completed testifying, holds a news conference. The former Howard Hughes lieutenant, one-time FBI agent, has told the Senate committee of his role in the anti-Castro plots. Before the press his elaborate gestures and long-windedness remind me of W. C. Fields playing a con man. Maheu's story boils down to this:

On the CIA payroll since 1954, he was asked, in 1960, as part of the planning for the Bay of Pigs invasion, to contact Rosselli to help remove Castro. He holed up in the Miami Beach Fontainebleau Hotel with Rosselli and Giancana, and there they planned how to poison Castro in Havana. It all sounds so silly that one wonders what kind of nitwits ran the clandestine operations. For his services, Maheu says he got $500 a month, but claims that his real motive was patriotism.

An interesting sidelight: Maheu says that in 1966, when Howard Hughes employed him in Las Vegas, his employer ordered him to set up a big covert operation for the CIA. Hughes "wanted this kind of protection from the government in case he ever became involved in any serious problem with any agency of the government." Maheu

does not explain whether Hughes wanted the government vulnerable to blackmail or just in his debt.

September 22: The investigation of the plots to assassinate Castro has developed strange and tenuous links to the assassination of President Kennedy. The Church committee has evidence that the FBI destroyed a letter from Lee Harvey Oswald threatening to blow up the FBI office in Dallas if the bureau didn't leave his wife alone.

Also, the National Archives has declassified an FBI report on the Soviet defector, Lieutenant Colonel Yuri Nosenko of the KGB. He had handled the Oswald case in Moscow and defected to the United States in Geneva ten weeks after the Kennedy assassination. Nosenko told the FBI that the KGB considered Oswald mentally abnormal, possibly an American agent, and never tried to recruit him. When Oswald turned up in the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City in September 1963, trying to get a visa to return to Russia, the KGB vetoed it. Nosenko also said that after the Kennedy assassination, Khrushchev ordered a crash KGB investigation to learn if Oswald had returned to the United States in 1962 with any Soviet instructions, and was relieved to get a negative answer. John McCone, who testified before the Warren Commission as CIA director in 1964, never mentioned Nosenko. McCone happens to be in Washington today and tells me in an interview that the CIA didn't trust Nosenko at first because his coincidental defection looked so suspicious, but now the agency accepts the story as true. Nosenko was held incommunicado for three years at the CIA's Camp Peary, Virginia. The Rockefeller report, without giving his name, cited his case as a gross example of mistreatment of a defector.

Another document just released by the Archives is the top-secret 1964 memorandum for the Warren Commission reviewing conspiracy theories. In it William T. Coleman, Jr., and W. David Slawson, staff lawyers for the commission, traced Oswald's pro-Castro activities in New Orleans and said, "Simple retaliation is a motive which must be thoroughly considered" in the light of Castro's record. They suggested "additional investigation" along these lines, not even knowing of the plots against Castro. Coleman, now secretary of transportation, tells me on the phone that he was satisfied, in the end,

that Oswald was not part of a conspiracy. Slawson, now at the University of Southern California, says he would have liked to have seen more investigation of possible influences on Oswald.

Senator Church says he is appointing a subcommittee, with Senators Schweiker and Gary Hart, to conduct a special investigation of what the CIA and FBI told the Warren Commission — and what they failed to tell. By an ironic coincidence, Senator Edward Kennedy appears before the Church committee today to testify that he is "morally certain" that neither of his brothers had any role in the plots against Castro.

October 28: Senator Church states that the White House is opposing the release of the completed report on assassination plots — even though President Ford last June asked the committee to conduct the inquiry.

November 2: Colby is fired by President Ford, along with Defense Secretary Schlesinger. Under fire from Rockefeller and Kissinger for candor that contributed to the troubles of Helms, Colby had clearly been on the skids, but his removal had not been expected until the congressional investigations were finished.*

November 3: The Church committee meets to consider a letter from President Ford demanding that its assassination report be held secret on the ground that it would "result in serious harm to the national interest and may endanger individuals." The committee votes unanimously to release the report, but, as a concession to Senators Tower and Goldwater, agrees first to give it to the Senate in secret session. Senator Church, denouncing the administration, says, "Concealment is the order of the day," and he has no doubt that Colby was fired for being too forthcoming.

Colby is called before the committee, and instead of walking briskly past our stake-out as he usually does, pauses for a brief on-camera interview. I ask if he thinks he has been too candid about disclosing his agency's past sins. "No," he says, "I don't think so. I think it was best to get rid of the past and start a transition to a

*Colby, Schlesinger's successor as CIA director, visited him that afternoon in his Virginia home, he later told me, and Schlesinger remarked, "Well, Bill, it looks as though Dick Helms outlasted both of us."

future structure of intelligence under the Constitution." Colby has drawn the line more clearly than ever before between his reformist philosophy and Kissinger-Helms secretiveness. Later, Senator Church calls Kissinger the moving force in the shake-up, adding, "He is the prime minister, the President taking care of the ceremonial functions."

November 4: As Colby is clearing off his desk, he gets a call from the White House. The President wants to see him tomorrow and will ask him to stay on for a couple of months. It seems that Ford acted too hastily in firing Colby, not thinking that the new nominee, George Bush, ambassador in Peking, cannot come back in the midst of arranging a presidential visit to China. Colby says okay — if it's understood that he remains in full charge.

November 19: In the spherical-roofed auditorium at CIA headquarters in Langley, Colby calls one of his rare news conferences. The assassination report is due to go to the Senate tomorrow morning and then be publicly released. Colby demands the deletion of the names of those who worked for the CIA, saying, "Exposure of our people to hostile and irrational retaliation is not within the tradition of our country." This must be to set the stage for some kind of last-minute maneuver in the Senate to block the report.

November 20: The names — which strangely include Giancana, Rosselli and Maheu — are indeed the springboard for a three-hour procedural debate in secret session of the Senate. The underlying issue is: Who decides what is secret? Robert Griffin, the minority whip, argues that confidential material received from the President cannot be released without presidential permission. The Senate overrides him.

In the Senate Caucus Room — Ervin "Watergate country" — the Intelligence committee assembles for a news conference, without the dissenting Tower, Goldwater and Baker, to display its first fruit — the first official report on America's cloaked daggers. There is some speechmaking. "We regard assassination plots as aberrations," says Senator Church. "The United States must not adopt the tactics of the enemy." Senator Mondale says, "We're not good at assassinations, and thank God!" As the news conference ends, I stand up

before my camera in the back of the room to ad lib what will be the close of my report for the Cronkite show. I think back to my confrontation with Helms.

"It turned out as Helms said," I conclude, "that no foreign leader was directly killed by the CIA. But it wasn't for want of trying."

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Nothing says more about what was wrong with the CIA — the James Bond role-playing, the loss of touch with reality, the intellectual incestuousness of professionals shielded by their secrecy from any accountability — than the grand obsession with Fidel Castro. "We were hysterical about Castro at the time of the Bay of Pigs and thereafter," testified former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. Between 1960 and 1965 the clandestine services nurtured eight separate plots to kill him, with various mixtures of absurdity and ingenuity.*

They started, in March 1960, wanting not to kill Castro, but just his public image. In the next six months, as planning for the Bay or Pigs invasion proceeded, they discussed spraying Castro's broadcasting studio in Havana with a mood-altering chemical; arranging to get him to smoke a cigar soaked with a disorienting drug before delivering a speech; dusting his shoes with thallium salts, which was supposed to make his beard fall out and thus cause him to lose face, so to speak, with his worshiping citizens. Speaking of worshiping, my favorite plot — nonlethal — was what someone in the CIA called "elimination by illumination." It was dreamed up by General Edward Lansdale, Robert Kennedy's coordinator for the hidden war against Castro. Never put into execution, the plan was to spread the word in Cuba of the imminent Second Coming of Christ, with the corollary message that Castro, the anti-Christ, would have to go. At the appointed time, American submarines would surface off the coast, sending up star shells, which would presumably inspire the Cubans to rise up against Castro.

*The CIA disclaimed credit for the twenty-four plots that Castro had told Senator McGovern about. In nine of those cases, the agency admitted "operational relationships" with some of the individuals, "but not for the purpose of assassination."

More serious — though hardly less absurd — were the various plots on the life of Castro unearthed by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

The Accident Plot. In July 1960, the Havana station chief of the CIA was startled to receive a message saying, "Possible removal top three leaders is receiving serious consideration at HQs," starting with Fidel Castro's brother, Raul. A Cuban agent was to be offered $10,000 for "arranging an accident." The agent, also promised a college education for his children in case of his own death, agreed to take a "calculated risk," limited to possibilities that might pass as accidental. The agent returned from meeting Raul Castro, reporting he had not been able to arrange the accident.

Poison Cigars. In October 1960, experts in CIA's Technical Services Division completed work on treating a box of Castro's favorite cigars with a toxin so potent that "a person would die after putting one in his mouth." In February 1961, the cigars were delivered to a contact in Havana. The files do not make clear whether any attempt was made to pass the cigars to Castro.

Mafia, Phase One. In September 1960, Robert Maheu, whose private detective agency was on CIA retainer, was asked to contact John Rosselli, involved with the gambling syndicate, and enlist his aid in an assassination plot. Rosselli agreed to go to Florida and recruit Cubans for the enterprise. To assist him, Rosselli brought in Momo Salvatore "Sam" Giancana, the Chicago-based gangster, and Santos Trafficante, the Cosa Nostra chief in Cuba, who made frequent trips between Miami and Havana. (A comedy of errors sidelight was the CIA wiretap put on the telephone of Giancana's girlfriend, Phyllis McGuire, in Las Vegas, because of his concern about her fidelity — a wiretap discovered by the FBI, which then had to be dissuaded from prosecuting.) A scheme evolved to have one of Trafficante's agents put a poison pill in Castro's drink. One batch of pills was rejected because they would not dissolve in water. A second batch was tested on monkeys and found effective. In March 1961, Rosselli reported that the pills had been delivered to an official close to Castro, his cooperation purchased by kickbacks from the gambling interests. The Cuban official reported, however, that he had lost

his position before he could poison Castro's drink, and he turned back the pills with regrets. Another effort was made to administer the lethal pill through a contact in a restaurant frequented by Castro, but Castro stopped frequenting the restaurant.

Mafia, Phase Two. In the shake-up after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, a veteran clandestine operator, Bill Harvey, was assigned to develop an "executive action capability" — the disabling of foreign leaders, with assassination as a "last resort." In April 1962, Harvey reactivated the Rosselli operation, trying to get the same Cuban who had failed so ignobly before to try again with four new poison pills for Castro, pills that "would work anywhere and at any time with anything." The pills got to Cuba — along with guns and radios that the Cuban had asked for. A three-man team was slipped into Cuba to help "penetrate" Castro's bodyguard. The CIA had put a price of $150,000 on Castro's head. When nothing had happened by February 1963, Harvey called the whole thing off — forgetting to withdraw the reward offer. The reward for Rosselli, who boasted of never having taken a nickel for his patriotic contribution, was that he was able to call on the CIA for help whenever he was in trouble with the law — which was often, since he was a convicted extortionist being pursued by the Immigration and Naturalization Service as an illegal alien. He had still not been deported when, like Giancana, he was murdered. In August 1976, his body was found in an oil drum floating in the bay near Miami.*

Seashell and Diving Suit. By early 1963, the CIA's assassination planners were called "Task Force W," led now by a legendary secret agent, Desmond Fitzgerald. They worked on the idea of creating an exotic seashell, rigged to explode, which would be deposited in an area where Castro usually went skin diving. When that proved impractical, the Technical Services people came up with a diving suit, dusted inside with a fungus that would produce a chronic skin dis-

*In the *New York Times* of February 25, 1977, Nicholas Gage reported that Rosselli had been killed by members of the underworld as a direct result of his testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee, "his murder approved by the commission of bosses that sets policy for the twenty-six Mafia families in this country." According to Gage's sources, Giancana, on the other hand, was not killed because of his planned testimony, but "because he tried to reassert his authority in Chicago after a ten-year absence."

ease, its breathing tube contaminated with tuberculosis germs. The idea was that an unwitting James Donovan, who was going to Cuba for President Kennedy to negotiate the release of Bay of Pigs prisoners, would present the diving suit to Castro as a gift. Donovan was so unwitting that, on his own initiative, he presented Castro with a different diving suit.

The Inside Man. Starting in 1961, the CIA had been developing its most prized "asset" — a disgruntled official still close to Castro. By the end of the summer of 1963, having given up on the American underworld, the agency turned to him for an "inside job" of assassination.

His code name was AM/LASH. (His closest associate was, of course, AM/WHIP.) The real name of AM/LASH is Rolando Cubela Secades, a physician and army major (Cuba's highest rank), who had led the Castro guerrillas in the Escambray Mountains. After the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship, Cubela served briefly as deputy minister of interior, then left the government to head the Federation of University Students. As soon as he got his medical degree in 1962, he was named director of a large hospital. Castro apparently regarded him as too unstable, extremist and violence-prone to remain a member of the ruling revolutionary directorate. Major Cubela was also sent on frequent missions abroad — such as an international conference of students in Paris. This made it easy for the disaffected revolutionary to establish contact with the CIA.

In periodic discussions with his CIA "case officer," a plan began to evolve for the assassination of Castro. Dr. Cubela wanted American support in the form of weapons and an invasion. The clandestine negotiations, in obscure places in Paris, Madrid and elsewhere, went on until the summer of 1962, then lapsed for a year.

On Saturday, September 7, 1963, AM/LASH met again with his CIA contact. Afterward, the "case officer" reported to headquarters that, with U.S. support, AM/LASH was ready to organize Castro's overthrow.

That night a strange thing happened. Fidel Castro, who rarely went to foreign embassies, showed up unexpectedly at the Brazilian National Day reception at the Brazilian Embassy and made an off-

the-cuff speech accusing the CIA and President Kennedy of plotting against him. Castro was quoted as saying, "Let Kennedy and his brother Robert take care of themselves since they, too, can be the victims of an attempt which will cause their death."

During the reception, Castro gave an interview to Daniel Harker, correspondent for the Associated Press, accusing the United States of "aiding terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders" and threatening to retaliate. The interview was published in American papers on Monday, September 9, striking most readers as typical Latin Communist rhetoric about imaginary plots. In Washington, a medium-level interagency "Cuban Coordinating Committee" met to analyze the implications of Castro's threat. None of those present knew of the real basis for Castro's charge about American plans to "eliminate Cuban leaders," with the possible exception of the delegate from the CIA. The committee compiled a memorandum concluding that a "likely" possibility was an attempt to kidnap or assassinate an American official somewhere in Latin America. It considered "attacks against U.S. officials" within the United States "unlikely."

The CIA planning with AM/LASH went on undeterred by Castro's warning. His CIA contact told him that his proposal for a coup, starting with Castro's assassination, was under consideration at the "highest levels." Major Cubela asked for a meeting with Robert Kennedy to get personal assurance of American support. Instead, Desmond Fitzgerald, the head of the Cuban operation, arranged to meet with him in Paris on October 29 as Attorney General Kennedy's "personal representative." Fitzgerald recklessly ignored warnings from CIA security experts that this direct contact by a ranking American intelligence official was risky. A counterintelligence officer thought the whole operation was "nonsense" and "counter-productive" and that AM/LASH's "bona fides were subject to question."

Accompanied by the Spanish-speaking CIA "case officer," Fitzgerald, introduced under an alias, told Major Cubela that the U.S. would provide support only after a successful coup. The major asked for an assassination weapon — preferably a high-powered rifle with telescopic sight. He also wanted a more sophisticated weapon that

might give him a chance to kill Castro at close range without getting caught. CIA technicians went to work fashioning a ballpoint pen concealing a hypodermic needle "so fine that the victim would not notice its insertion." It took a little longer than expected to make that exotic weapon and Major Cubela, planning to leave Paris for Havana on November 20, was asked to wait for a meeting on November 22.

At the November 22 meeting Fitzgerald called attention to a speech President Kennedy had made four days earlier, which the CIA official said he had helped to draft. He said the President had called the Castro government "a small band of conspirators," which, once removed, would assure American support for progressive goals. That, he told Cubela, was the signal of the President's support for a coup. It was a gross distortion of a speech in which Kennedy had actually extended a hand of friendship to Castro on condition the Cuban regime cease subversive efforts in other West Hemisphere countries.

Cubela was given the poison pen and told that he could fill it with a commercial poison, "Black Leaf 40." An air drop of high-powered rifles with telescopic sights at a prearranged place in Cuba was promised.

A chillingly laconic CIA memorandum records, "Fitzgerald left the meeting to discover that President Kennedy had been assassinated. Because of this fact, plans with AM/LASH changed . . ."

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In Dallas, President Kennedy lay dead from an assassin's bullet. In Paris, a high CIA operative purporting to represent the President's brother (there is no evidence that Robert Kennedy knew) was meeting with a prospective assassin of Fidel Castro. In Havana, at the same moment, Castro was meeting with a French journalist, Jean Daniel, bearing a message from President Kennedy of his wish to explore ways of improving relations. No Hollywood scenario could match the irony — and the madness — of this triangle.

How could such things be? Had President Kennedy been pursuing a "two-track" policy of offering Castro friendship while plotting his murder? Or were the cloak and dagger people, in Senator Church's

to thirty years' imprisonment after Castro had opposed execution.*

Had the CIA been acting on its own volition, and then deliberately deceiving one President after another about its murderous activities? In extensive interrogation before the Senate Intelligence Committee behind closed doors, Richard Helms sought to explain and justify.

There was, he said, "intense" pressure by the Kennedy administration to overthrow Castro. "I believe it was the policy at the time to try to get rid of Castro and if killing him was one of the things to be done in this connection, that was within what was expected . . . Any of us would have found it very difficult to discuss assassinations with the President of the U.S. I believe we all had the feeling that we're hired to keep these things out of the Oval Office . . . No member of the Kennedy administration . . . ever told me that assassination was proscribed or ever referred to [it] in that fashion . . . Nobody ever said that [assassination] was ruled out . . . Nobody wants to embarrass the President of the United States by discussing assassination of foreign leaders in his presence."

Every surviving intimate has testified that President Kennedy wanted no assassination, but somewhere amid all the winks and nods and euphemisms about "getting rid of" and "eliminating," something had gone off the rails. McNamara acknowledged a dilemma when he testified before the Senate committee. On the one hand, he said, "I know of no major action taken by the CIA during the time that I was in government that was not properly authorized by senior officials." On the other hand, every senior official he knew was opposed to assassination. So, he concluded, "I find it almost inconceivable that the assassination attempts were carried on during the Kennedy administration without the senior members knowing it, and I understand the contradiction that this carries with respect to the facts."

All the talk did not change the fact that President Kennedy, in whose name the CIA had tried to kill Premier Castro, was dead —

*In fairness it must be said that Communist "show trials" were not taken seriously in those days. A *New York Times* editorial on March 7, 1966, said, "Premier Castro blames the United States Central Intelligence Agency, but that is a stock charge."

at the hands of an avowed admirer of Castro named Lee Harvey Oswald.

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One investigation breeds another. The exposure of the plots to assassinate Castro raised new questions about the assassination of President Kennedy. Was there a connection? Why had the Warren Commission not been told about the anti-Castro plots? That became the subject of the final report of the Senate Intelligence Committee — actually filed by Senators Richard Schweiker and Gary Hart in June 1976, after the committee had disbanded. It unveiled a strange and sinister cover-up.

CIA Director John McCone, appearing before the Warren Commission in June 1964, accompanied by his deputy, Helms, was asked by Congressman Gerald Ford, a member of the commission, if he had "full authority" to disclose any information in the CIA files. "That is right," said McCone, including "all information of every nature in our files or in the minds of employees."

Questioned about any possible conspiracy, foreign or domestic, Russian or Cuban, McCone's answer was that an investigation had turned up "no evidence to support such an assumption." Helms went so far as to assure Ford that "we haven't stopped our inquiries" and that anything subsequently learned would be forwarded to the commission.

REP. FORD: In other words, the case isn't closed.
HELMS: It is not closed as far as we are concerned . . . I would assume the case will never be closed.

That turned out to be true in ways that Helms may not have anticipated. In July 1975, he was before the Senate Intelligence Committee behind closed doors, being questioned by Senator Robert Morgan of North Carolina.

MORGAN: You had been part of an assassination plot against Castro?
HELMS: I was aware that there had been efforts made to get rid of him by these means.

MORGAN: . . . You were charged with furnishing the Warren Commission information from the CIA, information that you thought relevant?

HELMS: No, sir. I was instructed to reply to inquiries from the Warren Commission for information from the Agency. I was not asked to initiate any particular thing.

MORGAN: In other words, if you weren't asked for it, you didn't give it.

HELMS: That's right, sir.

It was worse than that. The CIA *had* been asked and had evaded giving the information. Still worse, there was evidence that it actively planned to prevent its "Cuban connection" from coming out.

A possible "Cuban connection" should have been a natural line of inquiry for the Warren Commission. After all, Oswald had been arrested in New Orleans in August 1963 for making a scene while distributing leaflets for the pro-Castro Fair Play for Cuba Committee. On a New Orleans radio program, he had extolled Cuba and defended Castro. He had used the alias of "A. J. Hidell" because it rhymed with Fidel, his wife, Marina, testified. Less than two months before the assassination, in late September, Oswald had visited the Cuban consulate in Mexico City and tried to get a visa. Staff lawyers Coleman and Slawson had emphasized in their report that "the Cuban government might have been involved" in the Kennedy assassination because it "had ample reason to dislike and distrust the government of the United States and the late President in particular." There were, however, powerful forces in government with disparate motives for playing down the Cuban connection.

The Johnson administration had an immediate concern about allaying American panic over a possible conspiracy. Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach wrote Presidential Assistant Bill Moyers on November 25, three days after the assassination, "Speculation about Oswald's motivation should be cut off, and we should have some basis for rebutting the thought that this was a Communist conspiracy . . ."

The CIA — up to its neck in anti-Castro plotting — had a special interest in steering the investigation away from the Cuban angle.

The morning after the Dallas assassination a cable went to the AM/LASH case officer with orders to "break contact." The same day, Deputy Director Helms, while telling his subordinates that there would be full cooperation with the investigation of the Kennedy assassination, put the coordination of information from the CIA into the hands of a desk officer from Counterintelligence who knew nothing of the anti-Castro plots. This officer told the Senate Intelligence committee, thirteen years later, that had he known about the poison pen being slipped to AM/LASH "that would have become an absolutely vital factor in analyzing the events surrounding the Kennedy assassination." The AM/LASH case officer filed his report on the Paris meeting on November 24 and was ordered by Fitzgerald, he later testified, to delete reference to the delivery of the poison pen. The case officer was then quickly reassigned to a faraway post.

On November 26, Helms cabled the CIA stations in Europe asking for "any scrap" of information that might bear on the Kennedy assassination. Promptly, one European station cabled back that it had information from "a specified sensitive and reliable source" (electronic eavesdropping) indicating, as the sanitized Senate report put it, tht "AM/LASH was indiscreet in his conversations." Translated, Major Cubela had talked so freely about the plan to kill Castro that word had been picked up in overheard conversations. The cable was quickly filed away; no mention of it was made to the CIA officer coordinating information on the Kennedy assassination. The CIA "coordinator," cut off from any significant information touching on Cuba, was also not permitted to know what the FBI had found out. He completed a short report late in December for President Johnson, barren of any word of relevant CIA activities.

After the creation of the Warren Commission, Counterintelligence Chief James Angleton took over the CIA's part of the investigation in January 1964. To make the cover-up accident-proof, he sought to insure that the FBI did not tell the commission anything the CIA was trying to hide. FBI documents reveal that Angleton contacted William Sullivan of the FBI, saying that "it would be well for both McCone and Hoover to be aware that the commission might ask the

same questions wondering whether they would get different replies from the heads of the two agencies." Angleton gave examples of what questions might be asked and how they should be answered:

(1) Q. Was Oswald ever an agent of the CIA?
A. No.
(2) Q. Does the CIA have any evidence showing that a conspiracy existed to assassinate President Kennedy?
A. No.

Angleton chose his team from his own counterintelligence staff, which was preoccupied with the Soviet Union and the KGB. There was no one from Fitzgerald's task force on Cuba. Exhaustively, the Angleton group analyzed Oswald's activities in the Soviet Union, and assiduously it stayed away from every Oswald link with Cuba. Indeed, as the Senate report noted with astonishment, AM/LASH, who still had access to high officials in Havana, "was never asked about the assassination of President Kennedy in meetings with the CIA in 1964 and 1965." It could only be assumed the CIA was afraid of what Cubela's answer might be. Angleton, who believed that all Communist activities basically started with the KGB, would have loved to find a Russian conspiracy. Unfortunately for that search, Lieutenant Colonel Yuri Nosenko of the KGB, who had defected early in 1964, only offered information to counter such a theory. The report of his interrogation was filed with a mass of material at the end of the Warren investigation, but never mentioned in the hearings. Angleton, to this day, believes Nosenko was a plant, although the CIA — after three years of dealings with Nosenko as their prisoner — had long ago concluded that Nosenko told the truth.

The Warren Commission did not push the CIA for information about Oswald's Cuban associations, this despite the fact — or perhaps because of the fact — that one of its members was former CIA Director Allen Dulles, who knew about the early plots against Castro. Of thirty-four requests for information from the Warren Commission to the CIA, fifteen dealt with the Soviet Union, one with Cuba. That one asked about Jack Ruby's alleged visit to Cuba in 1959. In the Warren Commission, former Senator John Sherman

Cooper told the Senate committee, no word was ever said about CIA anti-Castro plots. "The subject never came up . . ."

CIA officials, such as Helms, who knew about AM/LASH, insisted in 1975 that there had been no reason to see any connection with the Kennedy assassination. But in 1965, when the CIA finally gave up on AM/LASH, fearing that the operation had become too widely known and might blow up in its face, the counterintelligence officer of the task force on Cuba wrote this assessment for the CIA:

> The AM/LASH circle is wide and each new friend of whom we learn seems to have knowledge of plan. I believe the problem is a more serious and more basic one. Fidel reportedly knew that this group was plotting against him and once enlisted its support. Hence, we cannot rule out the possibility of provocation.

By then the Warren Commission — to whom Helms had indicated that the case would remain open — had gone out of business.

"All the Government agencies have fully discharged their responsibility to cooperate," said this high board of inquiry, as it concluded:

> . . . no evidence that Oswald was involved with any person or group in a conspiracy to assassinate the President . . .
>
> . . . no evidence to show that Oswald was employed, persuaded, or encouraged by any foreign government to assassinate President Kennedy . . .

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The Warren Commission's confidence in 1964 that government agencies "fully discharged their responsibility to cooperate" sounded in 1976 like a melancholy travesty as the final report of the Senate Intelligence Committee concluded that "for different reasons, both the CIA and the FBI failed in, or avoided carrying out, certain of their responsibilities in this matter." The FBI mainly covered up the extent of its contacts with Oswald; the CIA worked assiduously to steer the Warren Commission away from any knowledge of its own activities in Cuba.

Would anything be different if the Warren Commission had not been so manipulated?

The commission might have probed the "Castro retaliation" theory and run up against lack of evidence of Cuban involvement. It might have investigated the alternate theory of the commission staff — that Oswald could have been programmed by anti-Castro exiles to simulate a pro-Castro assassination — and also run up against a blank wall. What the commission might have discovered was not evidence of a conspiracy, but a clear indication of what set Oswald off. It could probably have wound up its historic mission less baffled about his possible motive, less mystified about when the assassination idea formed in his disordered mind.

Had the commission not been so completely sidetracked from every Cuban lead, it might have found what this reporter was able to find — buried in the commission's own files or later dug up in congressional investigations and from other sources.

Where the "Castro revenge" theory had run aground was on the lack of evidence that Oswald had any contact with anyone who knew about the CIA's secret plotting against the Cuban leader. But Oswald did not need to have such contact to reach the conclusion that Castro, his hero, was being threatened and that he, in turn, could become a hero in Cuba by responding to the threat.

Oswald, his wife, Marina, testified, was an avid newspaper reader. On September 9, 1963, Castro's Associated Press interview was printed on the top of page 7 of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. It started this way:

> HAVANA (AP) — Prime Minister Fidel Castro said Saturday night "United States leaders" would be in danger if they helped in any attempt to do away with leaders of Cuba.
>
> Bitterly denouncing what he called recent U.S.-prompted raids on Cuban territory, Castro said, "We are prepared to fight them and answer in kind. United States leaders should think that if they are aiding terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders, they themselves will not be safe."

The interview was not mentioned in the Warren Commission's report. It was not simply an oversight. A staff member, Wesley J. Liebeler, had written a memorandum urging that attention be paid to it, but General Counsel J. Lee Rankin ruled against its inclusion

on the ground that there was no evidence that Oswald had seen it. Liebeler shot off another memo saying that Rankin seemed to be applying a different standard with regard to some Dallas leaflets that Oswald had almost certainly never seen, and he charged that the exclusion of the Castro interview had "obvious political overtones."

The CIA's liaison officer with the Warren Commission, Raymond Rocca, said — eleven years later — that he thought the Castro interview was pretty important. In May 1975 Rocca wrote a memorandum to the Rockefeller Commission expressing the personal view that the Castro threat "represented a more-than-ordinary attempt to get a message on the record in the United States"* and that it "must be considered of great significance in the light of the pathological evolution of Oswald's passive-aggressive make-up." When Rocca wrote this, he still did not know about his agency's anti-Castro plotting, which would be revealed only a few months later.

The Castro accusation of "plans to eliminate Cuban leaders" and his warning to "United States leaders" came at a time when Oswald was in New Orleans in a state of agitation and frustration. In July, he had lost his job in a coffee machinery plant. In August, he had been arrested in a scuffle while distributing pro-Castro leaflets, and had engaged in angry debate on the radio, asserting that "Cuba is the only real revolutionary country in the world today."

After the publication of the Castro interview, events in Oswald's life began to move decisively. On September 17, he cashed his unemployment check at a Winn Dixie store. On September 23, he sent his wife and child to Irving, Texas, to live with their friend Ruth Paine. Oswald stayed behind in New Orleans, ostensibly to look for work.

Instead, in great secrecy, he left by bus for Mexico City, arriving on September 27 and going almost directly to the Cuban consulate to ask for an immediate visa, announcing himself as a "friend of Cuba." He signed an application for a transit visa, saying he was on

*In a June 1977 interview with Barbara Walters on ABC, Castro said he was reluctant to make charges against the late John and Robert Kennedy, but did say, "I think it is absolutely impossible that the CIA adopts decisions of such importance and such intransigence on its own. It seems to me absolutely impossible that they could have carried out...these kinds of plans...for almost ten years without the express or explicit authorization of the top authorities of the country."

his way to the Soviet Union, but Marina Oswald later testified that Cuba had been his real destination.

Silvia Duran, a Mexican clerk in the Cuban consulate, arrested on the day after the Kennedy assassination, told the Mexican police that Oswald, upon being refused permission to enter Cuba until he could obtain a Soviet visa, got into an argument with Consul Eusebio Azque. The consul finally ordered Oswald to leave the office, telling him that he would never give him a visa because "a person like him, instead of aiding the Cuban Revolution, was really doing it harm."

The CIA had attempted to prevent the arrest of Señora Duran, but by the time its station in Mexico City got the message from Washington, it was too late. Asked why the CIA tried to interfere, Thomas Karamessines, who had been Helms' deputy in covert operations, was quoted, in April 1976 testimony before the Senate committee, as having "speculated that the CIA feared the Cubans were responsible [for the Kennedy assassination] and that Duran might reveal this during an interrogation." In other words, if the Cubans had, in fact, been involved in the Kennedy assassination, the CIA would have preferred to see that information suppressed rather than risk disclosure of the agency's plotting against Castro.

Señora Duran's statement — which the Warren Commission had to get directly from the Mexican police — did not implicate the Cubans in any way. The consular clerk, who later complained of having been mishandled by the police, did not say in her statement what had made her boss so angry with Oswald as to throw him out of the consulate and accuse him of wanting to harm Cuba. There was clearly something missing in her account. Coleman and Slawson, the commission staff lawyers in charge of investigating conspiracy theories, wanted to go to Mexico City and interview her, but Chief Justice Earl Warren vetoed the idea — as everything connected with Cuba seemed to be mysteriously vetoed.

Nonetheless, unsolicited, the commission got further word on what had happened at the Cuban consulate. On June 17, 1964, J. Edgar Hoover sent, by special courier, a top-secret letter to Counsel Rankin. It said that "through a confidential source which has furnished reliable information in the past, we have been advised of some

statements made by Fidel Castro, Cuban Prime Minister, concerning the assassination of President Kennedy."

The paragraph containing what Castro said was deleted from the letter as released in 1976. It stated, I have since learned, that Oswald, on his visit to the consulate, had talked of assassinating President Kennedy. The consul had taken this as a deliberate provocation. The Cuban ambassador in Mexico City had reported the incident to Havana. It had not been taken seriously at the time, but after the Kennedy assassination, Castro had come to suspect that the effort to get Oswald into Cuba was part of a right-wing conspiracy. Oswald would return from Cuba, then assassinate the President, and it would look as though Castro had been responsible.

Like so many Cuban clues, the Hoover memo was not acted upon. Slawson does not recall even having seen it.

What the FBI learned through secret means in 1964 was told by Castro publicly in more detail three years later. In an interview in July 1967 with a British journalist, Comer Clark, Castro said that Oswald had come to the Cuban consulate twice, each time for about fifteen minutes. "The first time — I was told — he wanted to work for us. He was asked to explain, but he wouldn't. He wouldn't go into details. The second time he said he wanted to 'free Cuba from American imperialism.' Then he said something like, 'Someone ought to shoot that President Kennedy.' Then Oswald said — and this was exactly how it was reported to me — 'Maybe I'll try to do it.' "

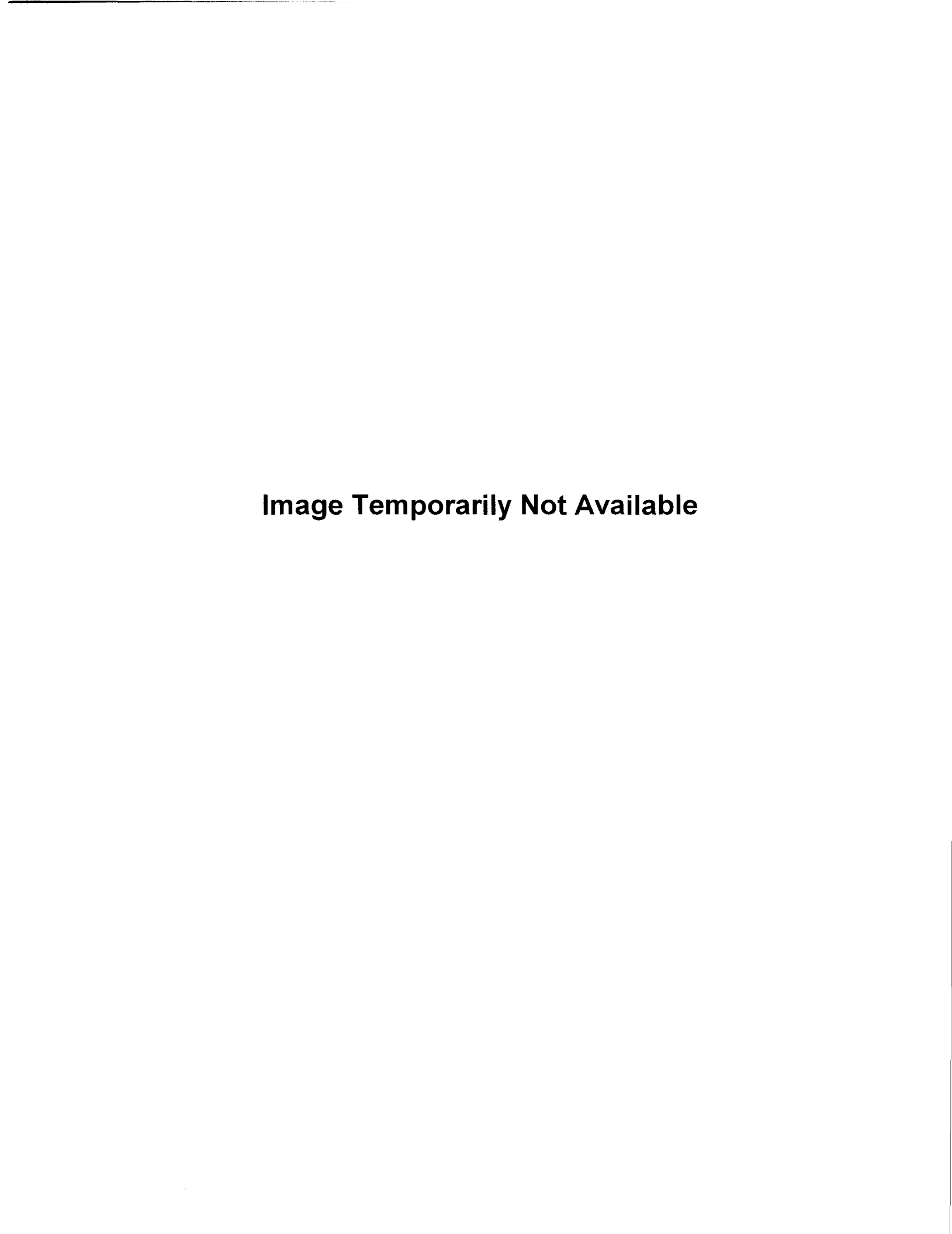
Castro said that he had not thought of warning the United States government because Oswald had been considered a "wild man" and not taken seriously. "We didn't have any relations with the American government anyway," his interview continued. "If I'd taken it seriously I might have informed the United Nations or some other official agency like that. But who would have believed me? People would have said that Oswald was just mad, or that I'd gone mad . . . Then, too, after such a plot had been found out, we would be blamed — for something we had nothing to do with. It could have been used as an excuse for another invasion try."

When Castro said the assassination was "something we had nothing to do with," he may not have been quite accurate. It was likely

that Castro had had an effect on Oswald that he did not realize or preferred not to speculate about. Former President Johnson, a year before his death, told columnist Marianne Means of his conviction that Oswald acted "either under the influence or the orders of Castro." The "influence" may have been as simple as reading Castro's public denunciation of attempts on him and the warning of possible retaliation.

The possibility that Oswald acted on his own, inspired by Castro's statement, cannot today be proved, but it has the elements of the fortuitous and the lunatic that sometimes govern history. The "conspiracy," then, would have been a conspiracy of interlocking events — the incessant CIA plots to kill Castro, touching off a Castro warning, touching off something in the fevered mind of Lee Harvey Oswald.

It would be comforting to know that Oswald acted on his own — not as part of some dark left-wing or right-wing plot to strike down a President. It is less comforting to realize that the chain of events may have started with the reckless plotting of the CIA against Castro, perhaps in pursuit of what it thought to be Kennedy's aim. An arrow launched into the air to kill a foreign leader may well have fallen back to kill our own.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