

In Search of the Third Man

By Tim Brennan

Perhaps the only thing more fantastical and bizarre than the 2016 Republican race itself is how the Kennedy assassination became part of the campaign news cycle in May, albeit fleetingly.

A false allegation, given prominence by the *National Enquirer*, was recycled by Donald Trump, the presumed GOP nominee, during an appearance on “Fox & Friends.” Per the article, Trump accused Rafael Cruz, father of candidate Ted, of consorting with the accused assassin of President Kennedy before November 1963: “You know, [Cruz’s] father was with Lee Harvey Oswald prior to Oswald’s being, you know, shot I mean, what was he doing with Lee Harvey Oswald shortly before the death, before the shooting? It’s horrible.”

Putting aside the incoherence of Trump’s mind, as well as the frightening prospect of a US president who parrots the *National Enquirer* and listens to the likes of Roger Stone, a conspicuous conspiracy theorist, the kerfuffle did focus attention on a long-forgotten minor mystery: who was the “unidentified man” who distributed Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC) handbills with Lee Harvey Oswald on the streets of New Orleans scarcely three months before John F. Kennedy’s assassination on 22 November 1963?

Following Oswald’s arrest, news organizations and government bureaucracies scrambled frantically to scour their records to see what, if any, prior contact they had had with the 24-year-old Oswald, instantly the most notorious man in the world. In New Orleans, news cameraman [Johann W. Rush](#), working with colleagues at WDSU-TV, the local NBC affiliate, recalled Oswald’s string of local radio and TV appearances the previous August, some of them captured on WDSU footage.

[Rush himself had filmed](#) Oswald in front of the International Trade Mart on 16 August 1963. Oswald and a number of helpers were distributing handbills demanding “Hands Off Cuba!” to lunchtime passersby. It was a provocative act just one year after the Cuban missile crisis, yet only one of a string of similar activities undertaken by Oswald in New Orleans that summer.

As part of the burgeoning assassination investigation, stills from the WDSU footage made by Johann Rush were quickly printed up and made available to agents of the Secret Service and the FBI as they opened investigations of Oswald. The Warren Commission later included some of these stills (named the [Pizzo Exhibits](#)) in the voluminous appendices to the Warren Report.



Newsman Mike O'Connor, from rival station WWL-TV, the CBS affiliate, had also filmed the August 16th FPCC demonstration at the Trade Mart. Stills from his footage were likewise quickly supplied to the authorities and one photograph was subsequently published by the Warren Commission. The so-called [Garner Exhibit No. 1](#) is perhaps the most familiar



photograph of Oswald leafleting in front of the International Trade Mart in New Orleans. Insofar as the authorities were concerned however, nothing was more important than identifying two young men who appeared to be assisting Oswald.

Washington Decoded

One of them quickly stepped forward, no doubt at the insistence of his father, who happened to be a deputy sheriff. Charles Hall Steele, Sr. saw the footage of Oswald on TV late on the evening of November 23rd, and instantly recognized his 20-year-old namesake helping the accused assassin distribute handbills. After cross-examining his son that same night, the next morning Steele Sr. accompanied Charles Hall Steele, Jr. to the FBI field office in New Orleans, having made arrangements to do so the previous evening.

Steele's statement to the FBI, and the subsequent testimonies of both the son and father before the Warren Commission, clarified the nature of Steele's involvement with the man who assassinated President Kennedy just about 100 days after Steele met him. "I am positive [my son] didn't know what he was doing at the time," Steele, Sr. testified to Warren Commission staffer Albert E. Jenner in April 1964. Steele had been recruited by Oswald the morning of the leafleting. He had accompanied his girlfriend, Charlene Stouff, to the Louisiana State Employment Service, where she was going to take a typing test for a secretarial job. Oswald came up to Steele, introduced himself, and offered \$2 (\$15 in 2016 dollars) for what was described as 15-20 minutes of work handing out flyers. Steele agreed, and Oswald told him to be at the entrance of the International Trade Mart on the corner of Camp and Common Streets at noon.^[1]

The WWL and WDSU films show Steele, a strapping young man in Bermuda shorts and without a tie, doing Oswald's bidding. Steele wanted to pass the flyers out as quickly as possible so he could collect his money and leave. At some point Steele noticed



the TV cameras and finally glanced at the yellow handbill.



"I knew we were on bad terms with Cuba," Steele said he realized then, so he told Oswald he didn't want to have anything more to do with the handbills and left—but not before collecting his \$2 from a non-argumentative Oswald. That night, Steele's girlfriend Charlene called to say that she had seen him on television and he was in "trouble" for promoting communism. "I had taken a course in high school on that," Steele testified. He called the TV stations to protest being on the air and even told his

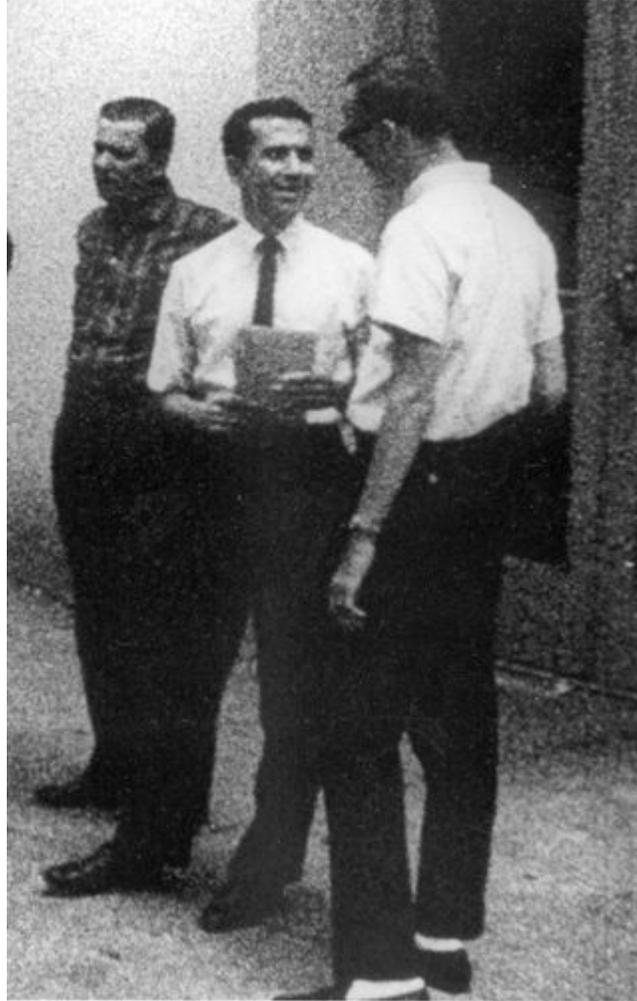
boss at work about what he had inadvertently done. Otherwise Steele all but forgot about the episode until November.[\[2\]](#)

When Steele met up with Oswald at the Trade Mart entrance, they were soon joined by a third man. Steele gained the impression this “sort of Cuban-looking” fellow was another one of Oswald’s recruits from the unemployment line. They were introduced but Steele promptly forgot his name. WDSU cameraman Johann Rush, who was never deposed by the Warren Commission, later recalled that this third man was accompanied by a taller friend. The friend seemed to be there for moral support, yet was intent on keeping his back toward the cameras. Rush also recalled that Oswald appeared to be a nodding acquaintance of the man who looked Cuban, confirming Steele’s impression that the third man had also been recruited at the unemployment office. Oswald appeared not to know the taller friend.[\[3\]](#)

The Lingering Mystery

Once Steele voluntarily came forward, attention naturally shifted to the other figures in the photos and films—in particular, the third, “Cuban-looking” young man with a fistful of flyers in his hands.

Without too much trouble the FBI was able to identify several of the bystanders in the Pizzo Exhibits. [Pizzo Exhibit No. 453-A](#) (shown above) captured [Jay Junichi Ehara](#) and [John Alice](#) as the men in the dark shirts standing behind Oswald, to his left and right, respectively. An unlikely role was played by New Orleans lawyer Dean Andrews; unlikely because Andrews was a dispenser of tall tales, who underscored his unreliability during the 1967-69 [persecution of Clay Shaw](#) by District Attorney Jim Garrison.



Andrews identified the three women grouped to the right in [Pizzo Exhibit 453-B](#) (also above) as Clemencia Almeida and sisters [Victoria and Marguerite Realpey-Plaza](#), although the FBI certainly didn't take his mere word for it. Still, the single-most important identification—that of the third man, dressed like Oswald in a white, short-sleeved shirt and dark tie—eluded the Bureau, despite exhaustive efforts, which included broadcasting appeals for help over local television stations in New Orleans. The FBI was forced to [admit defeat to the Warren Commission in 1964, and then again to itself in 1967](#), when the Bureau revisited the issue after rumors about Jim Garrison's re-investigation became rampant.

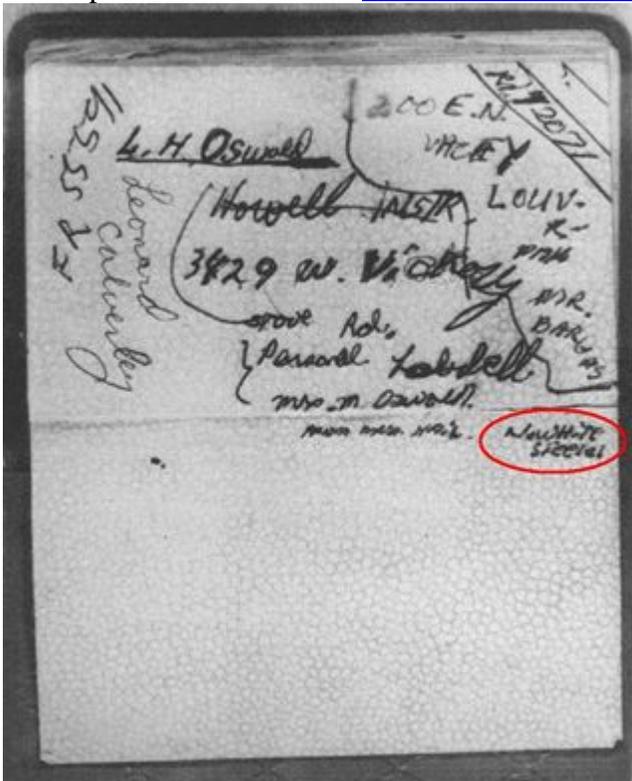
It was not a surprise that the third man never came forward. Assuming that he was recruited at the unemployment office, he surely was mortified, if not terrified, by his fleeting association with a man who turned out to be a presidential assassin. Unlike Charles H. Steele, Jr., the third man did not likely have a close relative who was in law enforcement, pressing him to do the right thing.

But the FBI might have cracked the mystery had it paid more attention to Oswald's address book.

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Johann Rush, who died in December 2015, maintained a lifelong interest in the Kennedy assassination, later becoming instrumental in rectifying the Warren Commission's (and subsequent investigations') erroneous theories about the timing of the [first](#) and [second](#) shots fired by Oswald. Rush, naturally, was also a keen student of Oswald's New Orleans activities, some of which he had personally witnessed. In addition to filming the leafleting in front of the International Trade Mart, Rush was the first newsman to capture Oswald on film. Rush documented Oswald leaving a New Orleans courtroom on August 12th, right after he had plead guilty to disturbing the peace during an earlier pro-Cuba demonstration that he mounted all by himself, also in downtown New Orleans.[\[4\]](#)

Rush found a clue written on the inside back of Oswald's address book, which was published as a [Warren Commission Exhibit 18](#) months after the



panel went out of business. As Norman Mailer reminded us to great effect in his 1995 book *Oswald's Tale*, Oswald suffered from dyslexia, and that, together with his poor education, led to constant spelling mistakes. In his address book Oswald apparently misrecorded the name of Steele, Jr. as "Steelel." Just above that notation is another name, however, which appears to be "N. White."[\[5\]](#)

Rush theorized that this notation referred to either the third man or his taller friend, who was also wearing a white, short-sleeved shirt. The third man and his friend left the premises together. Oswald's notation would seem a reasonable if cryptic lead, one that the Bureau might have followed up but apparently never did during its search for the third man.

Someone once knew who the third man was or is. Perhaps there is even someone out there today who knows what the reference to “N. White” meant, which just might help solve the puzzle that has been waiting more than 50 years for completion.

The third man need not fear being found guilty by temporary association. His son is not a presidential candidate.

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[1] President’s Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy, *Hearings*, Volume X (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1964), [73](#).

[2] *Ibid.*, [64-71](#).

[3] Vincent Bugliosi, *Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 727.

[4] Gerald Posner, *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of President Kennedy* (New York: Random House, 1993), 158, photo insert “New Orleans,” 317; Bugliosi, *Reclaiming History*, 323n-324n.

[5] Norman Mailer, *Oswald’s Tale: An American Mystery* (New York: Random House, 1995), Appendix, i-xiv.