

## A Conspiracy of Dunces

*Rendezvous with Death:*

*Why John F. Kennedy Had to Die*

Directed by Wilfried Huismann

Written by Wilfried Huismann & Gus Russo

Produced by WDR/NHK/SWR/Radio Bremen

Documentary. 90 Minutes. 2006

*By Ron Radosh*

Everyone loves conspiracy theories, and Europe is no different. First they had the best-selling French book whose author claimed the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were covert actions of American intelligence; next there was the Arab world's claim that it was an operation by Israeli intelligence. Now we have a new one--in the form of a much-hyped German television documentary, *Rendezvous with Death*, directed by Wilfried Huismann with the help of an American JFK assassination buff named [Gus Russo](#). The film first aired in Germany in January and is now being readied for American distribution.

Ulrich Deppendorf, the director of German television's public broadcasting network, ARD--the equivalent of PBS here--claims the documentary proves that "Lee Harvey Oswald was the final pawn in a murderous feud between Fidel Castro and the Kennedy brothers." This writer would love nothing more than to reveal that the detestable Fidel Castro, one of the hemisphere's few remaining communist dictators and tyrants, had a hand in President Kennedy's murder, using Oswald as a secret top agent of Cuba's G-2, its intelligence arm. Unfortunately, this tendentious and conspiratorial film--blending favored conspiracy theories of both the far left and far right--falls far short of the task.

The 90-minute film offers the following line of argument. Oswald, then a 24-year-old Castro supporter, got his orders in the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City, where G-2 gave him the job of assassinating the American president. The job was Mr. Castro's retaliation for the CIA's comic and failed attempts to have Mr. Castro killed--from exploding cigars to poison in his food. Those who have not studied the hundreds of assassination books, or had a chance to read Gerald Posner's definitive conspiracy-debunking *Case Closed*, might find the film compelling on first viewing.

Over dramatic music, Mr. Huismann presents - for the "first time" of course - tapped phone calls from the Cuban Embassy in Mexico; references to secret KGB documents about Oswald; and alleged former agents from G-2, now in exile in Spain and Mexico. Each says he always knew Oswald was their former agency's pawn. Mr. Huismann also interviews Larry Keenan, a former FBI agent who was sent to investigate in Mexico after

Kennedy's death - and quickly called back - as well as a former CIA officer named Sam Halpern, who was involved in the plots to eliminate Mr. Castro in the 1960s. But Mr. Halpern offers nothing to substantiate the film's thesis, merely reiterating familiar stories about the attempts to assassinate Mr. Castro.

Compelling? Hardly. First, the witnesses are all speaking second-hand; not one of them is said to have been involved in running Oswald. Take one charge made by Mr. Huisman. An unidentified but alleged FSB officer, presented in silhouette, reads from what he says is a secret telegram dated July 18, 1962, sent by the KGB (the FSB's predecessor agency) to the Cubans. The gist of the message allegedly supports former G-2 agent Antulio Ramirez's claim that the KGB contacted him to let him know that Oswald had gone back to the United States, and was therefore ready for some unspecified mission. We are offered no proof that such a telegram exists save for Mr. Huisman's source's claim. Likewise, we are told that Oswald's attempt to kill right-wing Major General Edwin Walker in April 1963--which he fumbled--was a test run by G-2 to see whether he was capable of assassination. Again, not one iota of hard evidence is offered; it's just asserted that the Cubans were involved.

The main evidence offered by Mr. Huisman and writer Gus Russo--their would-be smoking gun--is a document written on White House stationery. It says on the morning of November 22, the day JFK was killed, Fabian Escalante, the head of Cuba's counterintelligence service and a top adviser to Mr. Castro, took off in a small passenger plane to Dallas from Mexico to personally supervise the impending assassination. After Kennedy was dead, Escalante purportedly flew back to Mexico and switched to another plane for his return to Cuba.

Viewers are shown dramatic footage of a small plane, which we are told is "Escalante's plane" and proves nothing. (The claim is the equivalent of someone who says he has proof that then-CIA chief of counter-intelligence James Angleton had flown into Havana in a small plane to supervise the various attempts to assassinate Mr. Castro.) We are never told how Escalante brazenly managed to fly into Dallas the day of the president's appearance undetected by radar, immigration, or customs, and then direct a covert operation. Mr. Huisman says he got the handwritten memo, which is shown on screen, from a former JFK and LBJ aide, Martin Underwood, who asked that it not be made public until his own death.

Why would Underwood have waited decades to release this document, when for years he was a key proponent of JFK conspiracy theories? The filmmakers do not disclose that [Underwood](#) was thoroughly discredited as a fabricator years ago. Max Holland, the author of *The Kennedy Assassination Tapes* (and with whom I watched the new film), blew apart one falsehood this same Underwood had peddled to Seymour Hersh: that in 1960 he was ordered by a JFK aide to follow JFK's one-time mistress, Judith Exner, on a train from Washington, D.C., to Chicago. Moreover, in the late 1990s, when Underwood was asked by U.S. government lawyers from the Assassination Records Review Board (ARRB) to repeat and document the Exner story and others he had told to the press, Underwood eventually recanted every one of his tall tales.

The final report of the ARRB discussed the very same document that is the centerpiece of the film - i.e., the report of the secret plane trip by Escalante to Dallas to run Oswald. Underwood acknowledged to the board that he had a “lot of extra White House stationery left over from his work with President Johnson,” and wrote this particular note in 1992 or 1993 for Hersh’s benefit. Yet Mr. Huismann would have us believe it is one of his own exclusive discoveries. It was with good reason the ARRB discarded this uncorroborated, if not absurd, charge, now disingenuously resurrected by Messrs. Huismann and Russo.

Aside from hearsay, careful viewers will note that the dramatic allegations are all unproved. We do not learn that both the CIA and FBI evaluated and found Ramirez’s claims to be worthless. A former Cuban archivist says he saw an Oswald-Kennedy dossier, but does not know what was in it. A retired FBI agent, Larry Keenan, claims to have read Mexican secret service documents proving that a Cuban agent--a black man with red hair--gave Oswald money and helped prepare him for the assassination. On camera, Mr. Keenan claims he was sent to Mexico to investigate but was quickly called back because LBJ wanted Oswald identified as a lone assassin. Why did Johnson call for a cover-up? According to Mr. Keenan, the new president was afraid that telling the truth about Oswald would lead to a third world war. (While Johnson was indeed worried, when he formed the Warren Commission, he told Senator Richard B. Russell to get the facts, wherever they might lead.)

Mr. Huismann next turns to a former secretary of state, Alexander Haig, who as a young lieutenant colonel worked with the government when the attorney general was hatching plots against Mr. Castro. Mr. Haig notes that Cuba sent the U.S. government warnings that it should stop, or Cuba would act on its own in a similar fashion. According to Mr. Haig, Johnson’s cover-up was simply political: No Democrat could ever be elected if the Democratic president was shown to have let Mr. Castro get away with JFK’s murder. But Mr. Haig, like LBJ, a longtime believer in a Castro conspiracy, has only his opinion to offer - and no evidence of any kind to prove a conspiracy existed.

Mr. Russo, the film’s researcher and writer, is a man who has written previously about these events. He has been shown to misconstrue evidence or, as Mr. Holland once wrote, leave out “anything and everything that contradicts his preferred thesis.” In that vein, the filmmakers evoke Mr. Keenan’s belief that he and the United States “blew it” and failed to follow leads. The implication is that Mr. Keenan, too, thinks G-2 was behind the assassination. The filmmakers do not mention that Mr. Keenan is reported to believe JFK was killed by rogue CIA agents--not by Mr. Castro.

Mr. Huismann’s claim that he and Mr. Russo, in their three years of work on the documentary, have “settled the question” and proved that Mr. Castro or G-2 in Havana ordered the assassination is quite simply balderdash. As a recent article in the Mexican weekly *eme-equis* shows, nothing the filmmakers turned up in Mexico cements their case for a Cuban-directed conspiracy, and Mexico City is where the alleged conspiracy was hatched. If they don’t have the goods there, they don’t have the goods at all.

Editor's Postscript: More than a year later, the Huismann/Russo documentary has yet to be broadcast in the United States, although it was picked up by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in March 2006. Not surprisingly, the Cuban response, official and through solidarity groups, has been to attack the documentary vehemently. Huismann et al have even been accused of acting at the behest of the CIA to defame Castro. For what *Der Spiegel* had to say about the film in January 2006, click [here](#).

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