

The Secret Assassination Records and the Story They Tell

By Max Holland

In 1994, five presidential appointees embarked on an unprecedented exercise in the history of federal record-keeping: the declassification of the paper explosion that occurred inside the federal government after the gunfire subsided in Dealey Plaza. The Assassination Records Review Board – a Minnesota federal judge, two historians, a college dean, and a university librarian – had the daunting task of collecting documents from more than 30 federal entities, from the obvious (FBI) to the seemingly tangential (National Labor Relations Board). By September 30, when the Board closed its doors for the last time, the panel’s legacy was a collection of more than 4 million pages in the National Archives in Washington.

The Review Board did not discover a single fact that in and of itself altered the conclusion reached in the first instance by Captain Will Fritz of the Dallas Police Department. As board member Dr. William Joyce, a librarian at Princeton University, put it, “I haven’t seen any document that lends credibility to any kind of conspiracy. Not one.”

Although the paper mountain erected by the Review Board mostly serves to buttress the official verdict, there are some documents that deepen our understanding of the crimes and provide an unfettered look at our government three decades ago.

One of the most heart-rending documents unearthed by the ARRB was the diary kept by Clay Shaw, the urbane businessman whose good life was destroyed by Oliver Stone’s white knight, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison. To read the diary is to vicariously suffer along with Shaw as he lives a nightmare.

“. . . I am still dismayed to find myself charged with the most heinous crime of the century,” Shaw wrote in March 1967, after his arrest. “But I am completely innocent, and the feeling of being a stunned animal, which marked the first part of the month, seems to have gone now. It would appear that one can get used to living with anything, even the bizarre situation in which I find myself.”

Clay Shaw’s only “contact” with Lee Harvey Oswald was that Oswald was once arrested in front of the building where Shaw worked. Garrison’s “witnesses” included a heroin addict who was about to give himself an injection when he allegedly saw Clay Shaw – more than 100 yards away – give Oswald a wad of bills. Yet an out-of-control DA forced Shaw to stand trial for masterminding the American crime of the century.

In a legal battle that reached all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, the review board also obtained Garrison's original prosecution files and sealed court records, including previously secret transcripts of the more than 40 grand jury witnesses. The current DA, Harry Connick, sought to conceal, if not destroy, many of the records. But the Review Board prevailed, and the result is that Garrison is utterly damned by his own paper trail.

Apart from the exposure of Garrison's folly, there are many documents that reveal how tantalizingly close history came to being dramatically different – like the handwritten notes of Captain Fritz, head of the DPD's Homicide Department during that never-to-be-forgotten weekend.

After Oswald's apprehension, Dallas police learned that he was well-known to the FBI, particularly to agent James Hosty, who told them he had no reason to believe Oswald was a threat to JFK. (Hosty and the authorities were not then aware of Oswald's attempt to kill retired Major General Edwin Walker seven months before.) In fairness, everyone's attention that November was riveted on Dallas's increasingly vocal far right extremists, not one of the city's handful of Marxists.

Nevertheless, Oswald was so agitated at Hosty's two visits to the Irving residence where his wife, Marina, was living that he hand-carried a threatening note to the Dallas FBI offices 10 days before the assassination. The note threatened unspecified actions to counter the FBI "harassment." Hosty interpreted it to mean that Oswald would take his protest to the ACLU.

Oswald's note was quickly flushed down a toilet after the assassin's murder. The note's existence, and explosive history, remained a deep secret until 1975, when *The Dallas Times Herald* made the disclosure.

Captain Fritz's notes clearly indicate, however, that during his interrogation on Friday, Oswald "admit[ted to] writing Russian Embassy & to Hosty." If Fritz had only pursued this thread, it is possible that the Bureau's cover-up would have unraveled in 1963 with far-reaching consequences. J. Edgar Hoover himself might have been forced to resign, as the note's destruction on November 24 was an obvious expression of the impunity with which the Bureau sometimes operated.

Another important document excavated by the board has to do with the President Kennedy's brother Robert. RFK's behavior after the assassination has always been one of the case's great puzzles. Bobby was devastated by the event, of course, but seemingly never responded in character, even after the initial shock wore off. The attorney general was famous for his ferocious pursuit of criminals via every means at his disposal. Yet toward the killer or killers of his brother he displayed marked indifference. At the time this posture was explained as the reaction of a brother who simply found the subject too painful.

The document that challenges this interpretation is a mere three pages, dated November 27, 1963. It lists innocuous information about Jack Ruby, developed by

informants in Chicago, and confirms in writing what former Justice Department aides to Bobby now concede. Their boss was never willing to leave certain angles of investigation in the hands of anyone else, not even the Warren Commission.

Within hours of the assassination, the attorney general asked his trusted network of organized crime/Teamster investigators, led by Walter Sheridan, to conduct a secret investigation of the assassination. This occurred two days before Ruby's vigilante killing, and that act only underscored the urgency of investigating possible mafia and/or Hoffa links to the assassination.

Yet by Christmas 1963, the hand-picked team of investigators in Robert Kennedy's employ reported that they were drawing blanks. They had been unable to tie either Oswald or Ruby to Teamster president Jimmy Hoffa or mobsters like Chicago's Sam Giancana. Moreover, Sheridan was confident there *was* no linkage. Robert Kennedy's passivity stemmed not from a lack of interest but from a fundamental truth: He and men he trusted were satisfied.

There is nothing more Washington can do. The release of documents is the last chapter in the Kennedy tragedy. If Americans who lived through that weekend cannot find closure, then at least the raw history will have been preserved intact, so future generations can appreciate the somber portrait the documents paint of our government and ourselves.