

“CIA Lying Performance” Then and Now: The JFK Assassination Versus The CIA’s Obstruction of Justice in 2015

Why CIA’s Richard Helms Lied about Oswald, Part III

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This is a rumination on lies — layer upon layer of lies — told by US intelligence agencies and other officials about what Lee Harvey Oswald, or someone pretending to be him, was allegedly doing in Mexico City just weeks before the Kennedy assassination. The original goal, it seems, was to associate Oswald, in advance of the events of Dealey Plaza, with the USSR and Cuba.

The essay focuses on tales told by Richard Helms, a top official of the CIA in 1963 who later became its director — and is based on a talk given by Prof. Peter Dale Scott.

Scott is the popularizer of the expression, “Deep Politics,” and a virtuoso when it comes to what sometimes seems like grabbing smoke — capturing proof, however elusive, of motives and objectives that could explain the machinations of US intelligence agencies — and then analyzing the residue.

Not all of the chicanery Scott describes is subtle. For example, in an apparent attempt to bring the Russians into the picture, someone delivered to the FBI’s Dallas office a purported audiotape of Oswald calling the Soviet embassy in Mexico City. That failed, though, when FBI agents decided that the voice did not seem to be Oswald’s.

Then, two days later, the FBI joined the subterfuge by falsely reporting that “no tapes were taken to Dallas.” Because of this lie, an investigation more than a decade later by the House Select Committee on Assassinations would erroneously declare that there was no “basis for concluding that there had been an Oswald imposter.” (The existence of an Oswald impersonator in the months before the president’s murder would in and of itself have been prima facie evidence of a conspiracy in Kennedy’s death.)

And then there was the attempt to set up a Soviet agent...

You will probably not be able to keep up with each tall tale, nor does it matter. They have a cumulative effect, one that explains why it is impossible to study these documents without coming away believing in conspiracy.

There is dark humor here — reminiscent of the television sit-com of the 1960's, "Get Smart" — about a secret agent who was always telling one lie after another, blissfully unaware that each new lie not only undermined the last one, but any new one that came after:

Smart: I happen to know that at this very minute seven Coast Guard cutters are converging on this boat. Would you believe it? Seven.

Mr.Big: I find that pretty hard to believe.

Smart: Would you believe six?

Mr.Big: I don't think so.

Smart: Would you believe two cops in a rowboat?

Would you believe that the US intelligence community has been telling us the truth all of these years?

Essay based on talk given by Peter Dale Scott at Third Annual JFK Assassination Conference in Dallas, 2015. (Produced by TrineDay Books, Conscious Community Events, and the JFK Historical Group.)

—WhoWhatWhy Introduction by Milicent Cranor

(This is Part 3 of a three-part series. For Part 1, please go [here](#), and for Part 2, go [here](#).)

The CIA's Obstruction of Justice in 2015

Now let us compare the CIA's lying performance in 1964 with its lying performance in 2015. In the wake of the Kennedy assassination, members of many U.S. agencies, including also the FBI, the Office of Naval Intelligence, the U.S. Air Force, and the Secret Service, withheld relevant information from those investigating the murder.[1] But to my knowledge there is in 2015 only one U.S. agency that is still actively maintaining the cover-up – and that is the CIA.

I am referring to the CIA's declassification and release of a previously classified CIA study by CIA historian David Robarge, "DCI John McCone and the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy." [2] The essay is worth reading, and it contains interesting information on such matters as McCone's relationship with Robert Kennedy. It is also significantly selective: it does not mention for example that McCone only learned late on the night of November 22 that "the CIA had known beforehand of [the alleged] Oswald's trip to the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City," nor that as a result McCone "was enraged, ripping into his aides, furious at the way the agency was run." [3]

Buried within Robarge's discussion of John McCone and the Commission – a pertinent but hardly central topic – are a more important thesis statement and conclusion about the CIA itself. In the light of what I have just said about Helms, I would charge that both of these statements are false – so false indeed as arguably to constitute, once again, obstruction of justice.

The thesis statement on page 8 is that "Under McCone's and Helms's direction, CIA supported the Warren Commission in a way that may best be described as passive, reactive,

and selective.” This claims that the CIA’s deception of the Warren Commission was a sin of omission. But no, the CIA was not just passive. Helms perjured himself, just as he lied again in the 1970s.

Worse, the article focuses on the failure of the CIA to tell the Warren Commission about its plots to assassinate Castro, which may very well have been relevant; but in so doing it deflects attention away from the CIA’s suppression of its own LCIMPROVE operation in October involving “Lee Oswald” (or “Lee Henry Oswald”), which unquestionably was of very great relevance.

Worst of all is the article’s conclusion:

Max Holland, one of the most fair-minded scholars of these events, has concluded that “if the word ‘conspiracy’ must be uttered in the same breath as ‘Kennedy assassination,’ the only one that existed was the conspiracy to kill Castro and then keep that effort secret after November 22nd.”



Fidel Castro Photo credit: Library of Congress / Wikimedia

Of the many things wrong with this sentence, the worst service to truth in my mind is the skillful effort to divert attention away from the Angleton operation involving Oswald, and to focus instead on plots to kill Castro. This is an old ploy dating back to 1965, following in the footsteps of old CIA veterans and friends like Brian Latell and Gus Russo. It allows a writer like Philip Shenon to quote from the Robarge study the old red herring question “Did Castro kill the president because the president had tried to kill Castro?”[4]

Public Attacks in 1963-64 on the CIA’s Operational Capacity

Some people have deduced, from the fact that CIA officials lied, that the CIA killed Kennedy. I myself believe only that some CIA individuals were involved, along with others in other agencies. As I indicated earlier, my working hypothesis is not that the killing was a CIA operation, but that the plot was piggy-backed on an authorized CIA covert operation that was not under secure control and may in part have been outsourced.[5] Some CIA actions before the assassination, notably the protection of Oswald by suppressing the reported

allegation that he had been in contact with Kostikov, suggest to me that some members of the CIA CI staff, and in particular CI Chief James Angleton, may have participated to some degree in the piggy-backed plot.

At a minimum, we can say that the CIA, through its Oswald operation, was sufficiently involved in the facts of the assassination to have been embarrassed into a cover-up. We have to recall that in late 1963 the CIA's covert operations were coming under increasing criticism and attack, initially because of the 1961 Bay of Pigs Operation against Cuba, a total fiasco, but now also because of the developing chaos in Vietnam, particularly after the assassination on November 1, 1963, of Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother.

We do not know just how aware the CIA was of Kennedy's expressed vow to friends, first revealed a decade later, "to splinter the C.I.A. in a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds." [6] But objections to the CIA's covert operations were beginning, to an unprecedented degree, to be voiced in the U.S. media.

On November 20, 1963, the *New York Times* published a letter, dated November 7, that argued, as did some Congressmen of the period, that

"One of the very first steps ... should be to strip the CIA immediately of all operational and policy-making powers and confine it to its original function - namely the gathering of information." [7]

One month earlier, on October 2, *Washington News* correspondent Richard Starnes had published a blistering attack on the CIA from Saigon (possibly inspired by U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, who was already preparing to be a Republican candidate for president in 1964):

SAIGON, Oct.2 - The story of the Central Intelligence Agency's role in South Viet Nam is a dismal chronicle of bureaucratic arrogance, obstinate disregard of orders, and unrestrained thirst for power....

Other American agencies here are incredibly bitter about the CIA. "If the United States ever experiences a 'Seven Days in May' it will come from the CIA, and not from the Pentagon," one U.S. official commented caustically. ["Seven Days in May" is a fictional account of an attempted military coup to take over the U.S. Government.] [8]

These complaints swelled to a crescendo after November 22. Exactly one month later, President Truman himself wrote in the *Washington Post*,

"I think it has become necessary to take another look at the purpose and operations of our Central Intelligence Agency.... For some time, I have been disturbed by the way CIA has been diverted from its original assignment. It has become an operational and at times a policy-making arm of Government. This has led to trouble and may have compounded our difficulties in several explosive areas. I never had any thought that when I set up the CIA that it would be injected into peacetime cloak and dagger operations." [9]

As David Talbot notes in *The Devil's Chessboard*,

“Truman’s explosive piece in The Washington Post, which instantly caught fire and inspired similar anti-CIA editorials in newspapers from Charlotte, North Carolina, to Sacramento, California. Syndicated columnist Richard Starnes, a *bête noire* of the spy agency, used the Truman op-ed to launch a broadside against the CIA, calling it ‘a cloudy organism of uncertain purpose and appalling power.’ Meanwhile, Senator Eugene McCarthy, another agency critic, weighed in with an essay for The Saturday Evening Post... bluntly titled, ‘The CIA Is Getting Out of Hand.’”[10]

And by the time of Helms’s testimony even McCone, the outside CIA Director appointed by Kennedy, “kept saying that he wanted to get out of the cloak-and-dagger business.”[11]

In other words, Helms’s motives for perjury in 1964, involved far more than the technicality that he had sworn an oath to protect the agency’s secrets. At risk in these crucial months was the preservation of the agency itself, or at a minimum the preservation of its operational capacity. The choice confronting him was not between two conflicting oaths. It was a choice between the survival of the CIA as he knew it, or the survival of America’s justice system and the rule of law as we then knew them.

Helms’s choice was unambiguous, as it was again in 1973, when he “falsely testified [to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee] that the CIA had not passed money to the opposition movement in Chile”. [12] He lied, at the expense of justice, to ensure that the CIA would survive. In this he would assuredly have had the support of Angleton. Angleton later testified to the Senate Church Committee that “it is *inconceivable* that a secret intelligence arm of the government has to comply with all the overt orders of the government.”[13]

The 1960s and 1970s Conflict: Public State versus Deep State

In *Dallas ’63* I argue that these two decades, the sixties and seventies, were a crucial period in American history, two decades in which the American constitutional state and its structural deep state (including the CIA) were opposing each other and struggling to see which power would prevail over the other.[14]

It is noteworthy that in 1973, when Helms perjured himself again, not only the agency’s but his own personal career were again at risk.[15] In December 1972, after the Watergate break-in, Nixon believed Helms “was out to get him;” and accordingly he banished Helms to be Ambassador in Iran. He then he gave orders to Helms’s replacement, James Schlesinger, “to turn the place inside out.”[16]

In *The American Deep State*, I argue that, by banishing Helms to Iran, Nixon had heightened a conflict between the two forms of power (the state and the deep state), a conflict in which he, and not Helms, would become the victim. I believe that Tehran became a new center for Helms’s machinations, in conjunction with the intelligence agencies of Iran, France, and Saudi Arabia.

In 1976, after it became evident the new president Carter would resume the efforts to trim the agency, Helms became part of an organized offshore network (the so-called “Safari Club”) of these foreign intelligence agencies, which resumed the covert operations (notably in Angola) that were being curtailed by the combined efforts of the president and Congress.[17] Then, in 1980 (in the so-called Republican October Surprise), CIA veterans combined with leaders of the Safari Club to defeat Carter’s bid for re-election, and elect instead Ronald Reagan,[18]

Given this evolution of events, I conclude that Helms's perjuries significantly affected the history of this country. They were a vital part of an on-going process whereby, after the Reagan Revolution of 1980, the constitutional deep state was now subordinated to the needs and priorities of the structural deep state (including, but not limited to, the CIA). One of these needs, ever since 1963, has been to preserve the threadbare fiction that Lee Harvey Oswald by himself killed the president, and no one in the CIA was involved in any way.

How can we make the American people more aware that elements of the CIA lied about the assassination in 1964, and are still lying today? How are we to deal with the widespread climate of denial in our media and academies?

To pursue the truth about these matters is to position oneself outside the mainstream-supported structure of ideas. And we have learned from experience that there are severe limits to the amount of assistance we can expect in that pursuit from either Congress or the courts.

The truth, however, can be a powerful political weapon. So can justice. So I hope we will all continue to dedicate ourselves to this very slow, but undying and rewarding effort, to make truth and justice prevail.

Notes

[1] See Scott, *Dallas* '63.

[2] David Robarge, "DCI John McCone and the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy," *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol .57 No. 3 (September 2013), http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB493/docs/intell_ebb_026.PDF.

[3] Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, 224; cf. 239: "McCone kept saying that he wanted to get out of the cloak-and-dagger business." The response of Thomas Karamessines, Helms's Assistant Deputy Director of Plans, was to order that no more messages "to DCI [McCone]... too confusing" (Handwritten CIA record, "Document Concerning Name Trace Requests and Results," NARA #104-10015-10013

[4] Philip Shenon, "Yes, the CIA Director Was Part of the JFK Assassination Cover-Up," *Politico*, October 6, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/10/jfk-assassination-john-mccone-warren-commission-cia-213197>. I have described this suggestion that the assassination was a plot that "backfired" as a "Phase Three" story, following (but not in time) the Phase One Story that Castro (or the KGB) did it, and the Phase Two Story that "Oswald acted alone." See Peter Dale Scott, "William Pawley, the Kennedy Assassination, and Watergate: TILT and the "Phase Three" Story of Clare Boothe Luce," *GlobalResearch.ca*, November 28, 2012, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/william-pawley-the-kennedy-assassination-and-watergate-tilt-and-the-phase-three-story-of-clare-boothe-luce/5313486>.

[5] For my similar hypothesis that the 9/11 plot was piggy-backed on an authorized operation, see Scott, *The American Deep State* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 133.

[6] Tom Wicker et al., "C.I.A.: Maker of Policy, or Tool?" *New York Times*, April 25, 1966; quoted in James Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 15; cf. Jack Anderson, *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 3, 1967.

[7] *New York Times*, November 20, 1963, letter from Harold W. Thatcher, of Forty Fort, Pa.; cf. <http://jfkcountercoup.blogspot.com/2012/04/rex-blows-collins-radio-cia-cover.html>

[8] Richard Starnes, *Washington News*, October 2, 1963. As James Douglass points out, the Starnes story was discussed at a National Security Council meeting the same day: "The President then asked what we should say about the news story attacking CIA which appeared in today's *Washington Daily News*. He read a draft paragraph for inclusion in the public statement but rejected it as being too fluffy. He felt no one would believe a statement saying that there were no differences of view among the various U.S. agencies represented in Saigon. He thought that we should say that now we had a positive policy endorsed by the National Security Council and that such policy would be carried out by all concerned."

[9] Harry S. Truman, "Limit CIA Role To Intelligence," *Washington Post*, December 22, 1963, <http://www.maebrussell.com/Prouty/Harry%20Truman's%20CIA%20article.html>.

[10] David Talbot, *The Devil's Chessboard* (New York: Harper, 2015), 569.

[11] Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, 239.

[12] Melvin Allan Goodman, *Failure of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 286.

[13] Mangold, *Cold Warrior*, 351.

[14] Scott, *Dallas '63*, 170-78. Cf. Scott, *The American Deep State*, 101-08.

[15] President Nixon had long mistrusted both Helms and the CIA, and was looking for ways to be less dependent on them. Meanwhile Helms was very close to former CIA officer Howard Hunt, now working for Nixon; and Hunt may well have been informed Helms of Hunt's trip to Miami in April 1971, to recruit Cuban exiles for a new operational group, outside the CIA, that would be backed by the Nixon White House. See Stanley Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 113, 200-03 ("close to Hunt"); E. Howard Hunt, *Undercover: A Memoir of an American Secret Agent* (New York: Berkley, 1974), 144; cited in Lamar Waldron, *Watergate, the Hidden History* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012), 472 ("operational group").

[16] Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*: 374; Scott, *Dallas '63*, 174.

[17] Scott, *American Deep State*, 26-27.

[18] Scott, *American Deep State*, 27-29, 103-06.

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