

Gus Russo Marches On or Rust Never Sleeps

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The current issue of *American Heritage* (Winter 2009) contains an article that is actually featured on the cover. It is called, “Did Castro OK JFK’s Assassination?” It is by Gus Russo and Stephen Molton, and it is meant as a combination summary and excerpt from their new book *Brothers in Arms*. After having read Russo’s first book on the JFK case, *Live By the Sword*, and then suffered through both the TV specials he worked on—for PBS in 1993, and ABC in 2003—I admit that I didn’t have the stomach to read the whole book. But I felt it necessary to at least comment on the book via the article; I thought that would spare me a lot of unnecessary work and mental anguish. I was right.

Anybody who understands the game that Russo learned to play can quickly guess what the book is going to be like from the title. The work will generally concentrate on the United States’ Cuba policy from about 1959–63 to the near absence of anything else in the Kennedy presidency. It will then use many questionable sources from both the CIA and Cuba to cast the Kennedy brothers in the worst light. It will also try and take advantage of the reader’s lack of knowledge of the JFK case in order to distort certain subjects and episodes. The overall aim is twofold: (1) to slightly modify but support the Warren Commission; and (2) to trash the Kennedy brothers. These two aims are inextricably linked in the Russo and Molton scheme. That’s because the design is the oldest one in the CIA playbook on the JFK case: blame the assassination on Oswald, the Cuban sympathizer out to avenge the plots against Fidel Castro by killing the US head of state. This, of course, is what David Phillips thought of doing by bribing an Antonio Veciana relative working for Cuban intelligence in 1964 (see Gaeton Fonzi’s *The Last Investigation*, p. 143). But Phillips tried to work this same deception even earlier, on November 25, 1963, right after Oswald was killed by Jack Ruby. At that time he was using another of his assets from Nicaragua, Gilberto Alvarado. On that day, Alvarado walked into the American Embassy in Mexico City. He told the authorities there that, in September, he had seen Oswald with two Cubans at the Cuban consulate, and they passed money to Oswald while talking about a murder plot (see Anthony Summers, *Conspiracy*, pp. 415–9). In the former case, Phillips called off the effort, perhaps because the earlier Alvarado effort had fallen flat. Alvarado first failed a polygraph, and then confessed to manufacturing the story. On the subject of Phillips’ propaganda about the JFK case, in Part III of my review of *Reclaiming History*, I note that Ed Lopez and Dan Hardway of the House Select Committee on Assassinations came to an interesting conclusion about all these “Oswald killed JFK for Castro” stories which surfaced in the wake of the JFK murder—namely, that every story in this regard was linked to a David Phillips asset. The CIA/Phillips ploy had at least three goals: first, to conceal the actual perpetrators of the plot; second, to take advantage of Oswald’s undercover intelligence status; and third, to attempt to provoke a full invasion of Cuba in retaliation for the murder of the

American president. This last is something that the CIA and Pentagon wanted Kennedy to do for three years—yet he refused.

Russo reactivated this tall tale in his previous book, and he and Molton try to dress it up and re-run it again here. Predictably, they begin the article by apologizing for the Warren Commission: they write that the *Warren Report* was “in hindsight, as accurate as possible” (p. 20). So, clearly, they are headed for the concept that certain intelligence operations that Oswald crossed over had to remain hidden by the US government. Then the authors pull something that seems to me to be really dishonest: to impress upon the reader the idea that upper echelon leaders understood that the Commission could not tell the whole truth for national security reasons, they relate the famous conversation of September 18, 1964 between President Johnson and Warren Commissioner Richard Russell. In a taped call of that day, they both said that they did not believe the main conclusion of the *Warren Report*. In fact, Russell said, “I don’t believe it,” and LBJ replied with, “I don’t either.” (*ibid.*) The authors try and present this as both men not believing in the element of a conspiracy involving Oswald as the sole assassin; in other words, they understood Oswald was being egged and urged on by shadowy Cuban intelligence (G-2) cohorts. Yet, as Gerald McKnight makes clear in his fine study of the Commission, this is not what the two were discussing: Russell was talking to Johnson about his resistance to the single bullet theory that was being rammed down his throat by Chief Counsel J. Lee Rankin (*Breach of Trust*, pp. 283–4). So the proper contextual grounding of this phone call cannot be a conspiracy with just Oswald as the lone gunman. What the two men are objecting to—the single bullet theory—is the basis of Oswald as the lone assassin; without it, there is more than one assassin. By not fully informing the reader of the context, Russo and Molton distort its meaning.

Russo and Molton follow this up with another distortion in aid of their “Oswald as Castro agent” agenda: they try to say that Johnson and Robert Kennedy controlled the Warren Commission investigation: in their terms, they “directed its focus” (Russo and Molton, p. 20)—see, LBJ and RFK suspected the whole Oswald retaliation story, and wanted to keep it from the public. This is more marlarkey. The Assassination Records Review Board (ARRB) has now declassified every transcript of the Warren Commission executive sessions. In addition, the working papers of the Commission, as held by Rankin, were also turned over. McKnight based his definitive volume about the Commission largely on these ARRB materials; and there is no trace in them of any direct influence by Johnson or RFK. The Warren Commission needed no such help in centering on Oswald alone as the killer. In reading the transcripts of the executive sessions and the testimony in the Commission volumes, it seems clear that the most influential commissioners were Allen Dulles, Gerald Ford, and John McCloy—and these three had their minds made up, virtually from the beginning. In fact, in a famous anecdote, Dulles passed out a book at an early meeting that described previous presidential assassinations as the work of disturbed misfits (McKnight, p. 92). Furthermore, Rankin was a long-time crony of J. Edgar Hoover, and the Commission was overwhelmingly reliant on the FBI for its information. The FBI had closed the case against Oswald in early December 1963; and on December 12, 1963, Hoover told Rankin that (a) Oswald was a skilled marksman; and

(b) the bullet on Connally's stretcher had come from Oswald's rifle (McKnight, p. 94). These were both false statements. Today, the former is universally agreed upon as false by everyone—except Russo. The latter would be proved false by a later interview of Parkland Hospital employee O. P. Wright, one of the two men who first discovered the bullet (Josiah Thompson, *Six Seconds in Dallas*, pp. 175–6). And the fact that Hoover lied about this key fact—and that Rankin accepted the lie—tells you all you need to know about the report being, in the authors' words, "as accurate as possible". It also tells you why both LBJ and RFK were essentially irrelevant to the proceedings of the Commission: once the FBI verdict was submitted, Hoover was not going to let the Commission stray from its essential findings—and with McCloy, Dulles, and Ford involved, he didn't meet much resistance. (I will touch on Johnson's actual influence later.)

But in spite of all the errors, distortions, and misrepresentations on just the first page of the excerpt, Russo and Molton insist they actually have the truth. And they add that they will now piece together and "tell the real story for the first time" (*op. cit.*, p. 20).

They begin by saying that Kennedy was in the grip of a Cold War paradigm that was especially true for Cuban relations. They say that President Eisenhower and Vice-President Richard Nixon had been plotting a coup in Cuba—furthermore, that assassination was part of it. Thus, the historical backdrop is dubious at the start. It is true that Eisenhower did OK a plan to overthrow the Castro government—but he was urged on in this by CIA Director Allen Dulles. It was Dulles who first proposed the trade embargo on Cuba, and urged Eisenhower to try to spread it to all American allies in order to isolate the island. Many commentators, including Harry Truman, have said it was this move which almost guaranteed that Castro would be thrown into the arms of the Russians—which may have been the crusty old Director's aim all along. (I have always respected Dulles' brains as much as I didn't the uses to which he put them.) In fact, in this whole preliminary Cuban–American discussion, there is no mention of Dulles or the CIA! That is incredible, because it is Dulles and the Agency which will continue with the overthrow plot, and push it on the new president after Eisenhower leaves office. This resulted in the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion; and its utter failure caused President Kennedy to fire its main architects: Dulles, Deputy Director Charles Cabell, and Director of Plans Dick Bissell. If you can believe it, in this article, the authors never mention this crucial information.

Instead, they jump immediately to November 1961 and Operation Mongoose—and then they distort that also. They say that RFK was closely involved with Mongoose, but they leave out the main reason: after they were deceived on the Bay of Pigs, the Kennedys did not trust the CIA any more. If you leave out the Bay of Pigs debacle, you can shove that crucial fact under the rug; and because this is Gus Russo, the essay tries to state that the Kennedys were part of the CIA's attempts to assassinate Castro. The problem here is that both the CIA Inspector General Report on the plots to kill Castro, and the records of Project Mongoose, have been declassified by the ARRB. No reasonable person can state today that those records reveal what Russo says they do. In fact, Russo still

uses the notorious liar Sam Halpern to try to insinuate the opposite. Halpern has been exposed many times by, among others, David Talbot and myself as being a fabricator on this issue. Russo and Molton then write that the Missile Crisis was precipitated over Mongoose—yet in what is probably the best book on the Missile Crisis, *The Kennedy Tapes*, the authors disagree; in a long and detailed analysis based on declassified Soviet records, they note that Khrushchev first surfaced the idea of shipping nuclear missiles to Cuba in April 1962. Why? This is one month after the US had completed its installation of Jupiter missiles in Turkey (Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 674). That same month, the US resumed nuclear tests in the Pacific. The combination of these two events—both in April 1962—coincide with Khrushchev's first private discussions of the matter with friend and Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan, and then with defense minister Rodion Malinovsky (*ibid.*, p. 675). Furthermore, when Castro was first approached about the installation, he was reluctant to accept it; he felt—correctly—that Cuba was being used to change the global balance of power (*ibid.*, p. 676). Castro felt that the deployment of the nuclear missiles would itself create an intense crisis. By ignoring all this new, relevant, and documented information, the authors can then distort the causes of the Missile Crisis.

When Russo and Molton go outside of Cuba, they have the same monomaniacal agenda. They actually write that after Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic and Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam were killed, “Fidel became even more certain that he was the next hit on the Kennedys’ list” (p. 24). This is ridiculous. In the case of Diem, Jim Douglass’s fine book *JFK and the Unspeakable* shows in exquisite detail that the responsible parties for the murder of Diem were Henry Cabot Lodge and Lucien Conein (see, especially, pp. 202–9). Not only did Kennedy not know what the two were up to, he was so distraught by what had happened that he decided to fire Lodge. As for Trujillo, he had become such a brutal dictator, even his Latin American neighbors urged the US to get rid of him somehow—yet there is no evidence that Kennedy ever knew of, let alone approved of, a plot; the actual assassination of the man was more or less a spur of the moment outburst (see William Blum, *The CIA: A Forgotten History*, pp. 196–7).

Around this point in the excerpt, Russo and Molton go into high gear and begin to describe their version of the plot to kill President Kennedy. To say it is flimsy is to give it too much credibility. Predictably, they trot out the mildewed and disputed Daniel Harker Associated Press story from September 1963. Every writer in this vein—Jean Davison, for example—uses this reportage, and none of them seem to note that Castro disputes the story as written (HSCA interview of Castro, April 3, 1978). And they also fail to note that there are *two* stories from this Castro encounter at the Brazilian Embassy in Havana. The second one, reported by the UPI and printed in the *New York Times* of September 9, 1963, does not say the same thing as the Harker AP story. The latter quotes Castro as saying, “If US leaders are aiding terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders, they themselves will not be safe. 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.” (p. 25) The UPI fourteen-paragraph story had none of this in it. As the authors note, the Harker story appeared in the *New Orleans*

Times Picayune. The unproven assumption is that Oswald read it, and that this helped ignite his homicidal tendency to kill Kennedy. So Russo and Molton give us a disputed newspaper story that was assumed to be read by Oswald as key evidence in his motivation.

What is the rest of the plot? Well, essentially it is a rerun of the script Gus Russo wrote for German film director Wilfried Huismann. The film he made out of Russo's work was called *Rendezvous with Death*, and was shown on German television in January 2006. This documentary was so full of holes, and used so many dubious witnesses, that Russo apparently decided to clean it up the second time around. For instance, it actually relied on the David Phillips-inspired and aforementioned Gilberto Alvarado story as its keystone—even though that fable has been discredited for decades; yet Huismann and Russo did not tell the audience this. Nor did they tell them about Phillips' association with Alvarado, or how this paralleled other efforts by Phillips. I should also add here that in the original telling, Alvarado said that he saw Oswald and the two G-2 agents in Mexico City on September 18, 1963—yet Oswald was not supposed to be in Mexico at that time.

Russo and Huismann then built on this phony foundation with people like Pedro Gutierrez. In the Gutierrez instance, Phillips found someone who got the date right: this guy said he saw Oswald in Mexico City on September 30, 1963. But he says he saw a payoff to Oswald right in front of the Cuban Embassy! That G-2 would arrange the murder of JFK right in front of CIA cameras is ludicrous.

Russo also found his Witness for All Seasons, Martin Underwood, a posthumous gig. Why, I don't know; maybe the Germans didn't know about his poor track record. But it seems that whenever Russo needs someone to bolster some unbelievable point of his, he trots this guy out. Underwood was an employee of Mayor Richard Daley, whom Daley loaned to Kennedy as an advance man for his 1960 campaign. Russo originally tracked him down for Sy Hersh and ABC to bolster one of the many fallacious tales spouted by the late Judith Exner. For the shameless Hersh, Underwood said that he saw Exner leaving a train with a bag of money in Chicago when she met Sam Giancana. Well, when Underwood was called to testify before the ARRB about this incident, the Hersh-Russo-Exner fabrication collapsed. Underwood "denied that he followed Judith Campbell Exner on a train and that he had no knowledge about her alleged role as a courier" (ARRB Final Report, p. 136).

For the German TV special, Underwood—who later worked for LBJ—passed on a secret report, which he only wanted revealed after his death. The secret report alleged that Winston Scott, CIA Mexico City station chief, told Underwood that one of Castro's top G-2 agents, Fabian Escalante, was in Dallas on the day of Kennedy's murder—and the CIA missed that fact the implication being that the Agency's miscue caused JFK's murder.

One problem with this story is that, contrary to the claim above, Underwood told this story while he was alive. And a further problem with it is that he could produce no "report" when the ARRB asked him for it. Russo had given the

ARRB notes, but Underwood said he wrote those notes for use in Hersh's book; that is, they were written in the 1990s, not in the 1960s when Russo and Huismann say the "Underwood Report" originated. Yet Underwood insisted that Scott had told him this. But when he did send the ARRB his notes from Mexico, they only briefly mentioned Scott, and there was no mention at all of the JFK assassination. When the ARRB asked him to testify under oath, Underwood wisely and understandably declined (ARRB Final Report, p. 135). One last problem with the fabled "Underwood Report": Scott's biographer, Jefferson Morley, spent years researching the man's life. In 2008, he published his book on Scott, entitled *Our Man in Mexico*. There is no mention of either Underwood or the Escalante story in the volume. Did Scott only tell the Escalante story to Underwood? Why?

Realizing this was all thin gruel for anyone familiar with the JFK case, Russo and Huismann came up with a new witness. This is a guy named Oscar Marino—which is a pseudonym. Marino said that Oswald volunteered to kill JFK, and Russo and Molton repeat this claim for this article. What is this based upon? Well, when Vincent Bugliosi called Russo, Russo said it was based upon Alvarado's allegation (*Reclaiming History*, End Notes, p. 736)! With that, we know what to think of Marino: he has all the credibility of Underwood. But that didn't matter to Russo and Molton; as I said, they repeat the quote here (p. 29).

In *American Heritage*, Russo and Molton say that Oswald's shooting at General Walker in April 1963 was supposed to be an audition for G-2. Furthermore, the authors say that Oswald ordered the rifle used in that shooting, the Mannlicher Carcano. Here is the problem with that: if it is so, then the bullet changed both color and caliber from April to December—because, as Gerald McKnight notes, the original bullet was silver in color, and not of the 6.5 mm caliber used in the Carcano (*Breach of Trust*, pp. 48–9). The FBI and the Warren Commission altered its color and dimension to incriminate Oswald. Somehow, Russo and Molton leave out that pertinent fact.

From here, the authors transition to Oswald's trip to Mexico City. They say that Oswald was declined a visa to Cuba at the Cuban Embassy because of his erratic behavior. Not accurate. Whoever was at the Cuban Embassy—Oswald, or an imposter—was declined because he wanted an in-transit visa to Cuba; the ultimate destination was Russia. Oswald could not get a visa at the Russian Embassy; *this* is why the Cubans turned him down. The authors then relate how Oswald went to a local university to get some student leftists to vouch for him, in his pursuit of a visa. They say that when Oscar Contreras, the leader of the group, called the Cuban Embassy, he was told to forget it, since Oswald was unstable. Again, not accurate: Eusebio Azcue told Contreras that he should forget Oswald—or whoever impersonated him—because he was probably an *agent provocateur*; in other words, he was a CIA operative and this is why Contreras did not help (Gaeton Fonzi, *The Last Investigation*, p. 290). This undermines their whole thesis—so the authors leave it out.

The summary ends in a crescendo of unintended satire. The authors write that because of the assassination, LBJ ended the secret war against Cuba—but the assassination almost forced a nuclear war against Russia, based on Oswald's

activities in Mexico City (Russo and Molton, p. 29). What the authors leave out is that Johnson now eliminated the back-channel that Kennedy had been working on to create détente with Castro; and that move caused the freeze-out in relations between the two nations, which was to persevere for 45 years. They also leave out the fact that the fear of nuclear war with Russia was largely created by the phony Mexico City tapes that the CIA sent to Dallas and Washington the night of the assassination—the ones that contained an imposter's voice, not Oswald's. And the whole idea that Oswald was meeting with a KGB agent in Mexico City to plan the murder of Kennedy was a fiction set up before the fact by James Angleton and David Phillips (see John Newman, *Oswald and the CIA*, Chapters 18 and 19). It was this false pretense of threatened nuclear war that frightened Johnson (James Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable*, p. 231). This fear was used to coax Earl Warren into helming the Warren Commission, and conducting it in such a shameful manner. This also undermines the authors' phony thesis.

That's pretty important information to keep from the reader--but it's par for the course for Russo and Molton. *American Heritage* should be ashamed of itself for putting such a worthless piece of tripe into its magazine—let alone on its cover. Shame on you.