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MYSTERY LINGERS

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The only time I saw President John F. Kennedy in person was on the Monday before his Friday assassination. It was in Miami Beach, and the president was being driven in a motorcade to a speaking engagement. He was in the open limousine that became his death car four days later. The motorcade was moving at high speed--around 50 mph--and so I got only a fleeting glimpse of him, smiling and waving to the crowd, as the procession whizzed past.

On the following Friday, Nov. 22, 1963, when the first shot rang out in Dallas JFK's car was traveling at 11.2 mph. This was disclosed in the Warren Report in 1964. Having seen with my own eyes the rapid pace of the presidential motorcade in Florida, I was amazed that it was moving so slowly when the president was murdered in Texas. Nevertheless, like most Americans at the time, I agreed with the Warren Commission that there had not been any fundamental lapse in the protective security provided JFK by federal law enforcement agencies.

Today, however, 35 years after the assassination, with the benefit of information either not available to or not properly assessed by the Warren Commission, we can clearly see that, as JFK assassination expert J. Fletcher Prouty writes in his book JFK: The CIA, Vietnam, and the Plot to Assassinate John F. Kennedy (1992), "many things which ought to have been done as matters of standard security procedure were not done." Both the FBI and the Secret Service committed very serious errors in the handling of JFK's protection; and, but for these errors, it is likely that the president would not have been slain. Driving him through Dealey Plaza at a speed that made him an easy target was simply one of these egregious blunders.

Less than three weeks after the assassination, 17 FBI officials (5 field investigative agents, 1 field supervisor, 3 special agents in charge, 4 headquarters supervisors, 2 headquarters section chiefs, 1 inspector, and 1 assistant director) were censured or placed on probation by J. Edgar Hoover for "shortcomings in connection with the investigation of [Lee Harvey] Oswald prior to the assassination." These administrative sanctions were kept secret from the Warren Commission and were not disclosed to the public until 1976 when the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities published its Final Report. Secret memoranda by Hoover, made public by

the Senate Select Committee in 1976, demonstrate that in his view the FBI's omissions amounted to major errors: there had been "gross incompetency," Hoover wrote, and the officials concerned "could not have been more stupid."

I will mention only two of the numerous errors that flabbergasted Hoover. First, Oswald's name had not been placed on the Security Index (a list of persons deemed dangerous to the national security), even though his background of subversive activities (e.g., defecting to the Soviet Union, agitating in favor of Castro's Cuba, and visiting the Soviet and Cuban embassies in Mexico City) obviously warranted it. Second, although they knew where he worked, Dallas FBI agents had failed to inform the Secret Service that Oswald was employed at the School Book Depository, in front of which the motorcade was scheduled to pass.

(In imposing these penalties, Hoover assumed that Oswald was the sole presidential assassin. However, even if he was wrong and Oswald had one or more accomplices, the FBI's bungling still made it easier for the assassination to be executed. The same is true even if Oswald was the patsy.)

But it was the Secret Service, not the FBI, which was principally responsible for protecting JFK, and in 1979 the House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations, which reinvestigated the Kennedy assassination, issued a Final Report concluding that "the Secret Service was deficient in the performance of its duties."

The defects in the Secret Service's performance were so striking that one respected JFK assassination scholar, Jim Marrs, concludes in his book Crossfire (1989) that they raise the suspicion "that some individuals within the Secret Service may have played a role in placing an underprotected president under the guns in Dealey Plaza." At any rate, as another distinguished scholar of the assassination, Michael L. Kurtz, writes in his book Crime of the Century (1982), "the reason for their [the Secret Service's] neglect remains one of the intriguing mysteries of the assassination."

Any enumeration of the Secret Service's mistakes must begin with the defects in the advance planning for the Dallas motorcade. Between March and November 1963, the Secret Service became aware of three significant threats to JFK. In March, an anonymous postcard warned that JFK would be assassinated while riding in a motorcade; in late October a right-wing extremist known to hate JFK was put under surveillance and then arrested in Chicago by police who found him in possession of a rifle, handgun, and 3,000 rounds of ammunition; and on Nov. 9 an ultra-right-wing, violence-prone Georgia racist was recorded on tape in Miami telling an undercover informer that JFK's killing was "in the working," and that Kennedy could be shot from an office building with a high-powered rifle that could be "disassembled" to get it into the building. Incredibly, however, as the Final Report of the House Select Committee

on Assassinations emphasized, none of this important information was "put to use with respect either to a protective investigation or to physical protection of President Kennedy in advance of the trip to Dallas."

The Secret Service committed other astonishing mistakes in the advance planning of the visit to Dallas. In violation of its own regulations, it arranged for the motorcade to make two 90 degree turns in Dealey Plaza, thus requiring the motorcade to slow down to less than 12 mph.

Shortly before the motorcade began, the Secret Service also reduced the number of police motorcycles alongside the presidential limousine from eight to four and ordered that they assume positions near the rear of the limousine instead of flanking it, seriously weakening escort security. The Secret Service also rejected a sensible Dallas police proposal that a patrol car filled with homicide detectives be inserted in the motorcade three cars behind the limousine.

The Final Report of the House Select Committee concluded that, due to these defects in planning, "the Secret Service agents in the Presidential motorcade were not adequately prepared for an attack by a concealed sniper."

The Secret Service also performed poorly at the time of the assassination. In violation of regulations the agent driving the limousine failed to accelerate the moment the shooting began. Instead he actually applied the brakes and slowed down, failing to speed away until the gunfire had ceased. In violation of regulations the other agent in the front seat simply sat there and made no attempt to move to the president and shield him or push him down.

The agents standing on the running board of the escort car inches behind the limousine also behaved sluggishly. Photographs show that while JFK is reacting to bullet wounds, they are standing there dully, some looking at him, some turning to look to behind them, but all of them doing nothing. Only one of them reached the limousine before it sped off, but by then the gunfire had ended and JFK was mortally wounded.

Ralph Yarborough, a U. S. Senator who witnessed the assassination, told the Warren Commission: "All of the Secret Service agents seemed to me to respond very slowly, with no more than a puzzled look... I am amazed at the lack of instantaneous response by the Secret Service when the rifle fire began."

"Somewhere along the line," wrote James Hepburn (pen name of Herve Lamarre, an official in the French intelligence service) in Farewell America (1968), "[the agents guarding JFK] had neglected the first rule of security: They had lost their

reflexes." The slow response of the agents may have been due to still another violation of Secret Service regulations--the previous night, nine agents, including four in the escort car, had been out drinking.

Three and a half decades after a youthful, idealistic president was shot to death in broad daylight in a major American city, it is difficult to disagree with Robert Groden and Harrison Livingston, who tell us in their book High Treason (2nd ed. 1989): "Kennedy was killed by a breakdown in a protective system that should have made an assassination impossible." Future releases of documents and information now classified or suppressed may reveal whether this strange breakdown in the protection of the 35th president was intentional or merely the result of negligence.