

Phil Shenon - a cruel and shocking twist

William Kelly

It's rare for a serious, seasoned reporter and respected journalist to take on the case of the murdered president John F. Kennedy.¹ So when former *New York Times* reporter Philip Shenon writes a book on the subject,² you take notice and hope he tries to get the story straight.

Shenon says that his interest in the subject was sparked by an anonymous former Warren Commission attorney who complained that they were not given the full facts, especially about the CIA-Mafia plots to kill Cuban premier Fidel Castro.³ Although a great deal was kept from the Warren Commission, Shenon believes they got it right: the president was killed by one man alone, Lee Harvey Oswald. Shenon told Dave Davies on National Public Radio (NPR):

'We'll never be able, totally, to rule out the idea that there was a second gunman because this scientific analysis is really much more art than science. But all of the most credible, technical, scientific research suggest that Oswald was the gunman in Dealey Plaza.'⁴

Oswald, in turn, was killed in police custody by Jack Ruby, a 'very troubled misfit, loser', and not part of any grand conspiracy.

But Shenon has a conspiracy theory of his own, one floated immediately after the assassination and discounted. In this Oswald, the lone wolf assassin, was encouraged and possibly supported by Cuban communists while he was in Mexico City a few weeks before the assassination. Logically, this then makes them confederates and accomplices in a conspiracy of sorts. As Shenon said in his NPR interview:

' . . . it's remarkable to discover that the CIA itself describes what

¹ The few that have: Seth Kantor, Earl Golz, Gaeton Fonzi, Dick Russell, Anthony Summers and Russ Baker.

² Philip Shenon, *A Cruel and Shocking Act: The Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination*, (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2013) <<http://tinyurl.com/y83ab9qc>> or <<https://www.amazon.com/Cruel-Shocking-Act-History-Assassination/dp/0805094202>>.

³ While some have speculated this was the late Arlen Specter, I believe it is Sam Stern, who complained to the House Select Committee on Assassinations about the same thing. See Samuel Stern, House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) Interview, 22 August 1978, <<http://tinyurl.com/yb4azr9w>>.

⁴ National Public Radio (NPR) interview with Philip Shenon on the Fresh Air Program. <<http://tinyurl.com/ybpbvvg0>> or <<http://www.npr.org/2017/08/10/542531879/the-final-documents-on-jfk-s-assassination-are-being-declassified>>.

happened after the Kennedy assassination as being a cover-up, that lots of clues in Mexico City especially, were never pursued. And if they had been pursued, it might have pointed to other people who at least know what Oswald was going to do. And one thing I've always tried to make clear is that you cannot shorthand this as, Castro did it. I don't think there's any credible evidence that Fidel Castro, personally, was involved in ordering Kennedy's assassination. But people around Mexico City who Oswald was dealing with may have felt very differently about, you know – at the height of the Cold War, some of those people may have wanted to see John Kennedy dead And isn't it possible that some of those people encouraged Oswald to do what he was going to do? Isn't it possible that some of those people offered help for him to escape afterwards?'

Central to Shenon's thesis are two key elements: a 7 September 1963 Castro speech and interview with the Associated Press; and Oswald's visit a few weeks later to Mexico City, where he reportedly attended a 'Twist party' at which he was encouraged to kill Kennedy. Neither are honestly dealt with by Shenon and the full facts refute his conspiracy theory.

Official documents released

There has been a flurry of news stories on this subject because of the release of previously sealed records on the assassination under the JFK Act of 1992. Shenon promoted his thesis in an article (co-authored with Larry Sabato) in Politico magazine, 'How the CIA Came to Doubt the Official Story', that presents a few documents from among those recently released.⁵ Among these are a letter from J. Edgar Hoover, not seen by the Warren Commission, that refers to an Associated Press (AP) news report on the interview Fidel Castro gave to the AP reporter Daniel Harker at the Brazilian Embassy in Havana on 7 September 1963. Picking up on the AP wire feed, the New Orleans newspaper *The Times-Picayune* ran a page 7 story, 'Castro Blasts Raids on Cuba – Says U.S. Leaders Imperilled by Aid to Rebels'.⁶

Shenon also promotes a CIA report to the Rockefeller Commission on possible Cuban connections to the assassination that leaves out significant details you will read here.⁷

Shenon on NPR:

⁵ Philip Shenon and Larry J. Sabato, 'How the CIA Came to Doubt the Official Story of JFK's Murder' <<http://tinyurl.com/yagu877h>> or <<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/08/03/jfk-assassination-lone-gunman-cia-new-files-215449>>.

⁶ HAVANA AP – by Daniel Harker: 'Castro Blasts Raids on Cuba – Says U.S. Leaders Imperilled by Aid to Rebels', 9 September 1963. <<http://tinyurl.com/yczvcgh5>> or <<http://static.politico.com/e9/d5/e052c650448ea8576d922d1657d0/timespicayune.JPG>>.

⁷ JFK Collection NARA RIF# 104-10268-10001 'Review of Selected Items in the Lee Harvey OSWALD File Regarding Allegations of CASTRO Cuban Involvement in the John F. KENNEDY assassination.' <<http://tinyurl.com/ycs5mbje>> or <<http://www.politico.com/magazine/f/?id=0000015d-a4cc-dd39-a75d-afdfd18d0001>>

'But in fact, these CIA documents from a couple weeks ago show that there was a real theory offered within the CIA that Oswald . . . would have seen a remarkable interview that Fidel Castro had given to the Associated Press in early September 1963, a story republished in The Times-Picayune newspaper in New Orleans, that – in which Castro made clear that he thought he was under threat of assassination by the Kennedy administration and that the Kennedy administration might face reprisals as a result of this assassination threat – the theory being that Oswald would have read that article, would have become enraged on Castro's behalf and then set out to get vengeance for Castro – to kill Kennedy before Kennedy could kill Castro. That is not to be shorthanded as Castro ordered Kennedy's assassination – no, not at all. It's just that Oswald felt he was acting in Castro's behalf by setting out to kill Kennedy.'

Following Hoover, Shenon suggests that Oswald was 'enraged on Castro's behalf' by the news report. *But there's no evidence Oswald even read it*, let alone that he was 'enraged' by it.

The AP interview indicates that Castro knew about the CIA plans to kill him; but Shannon fails to mention the headline and key element of the story, 'Castro blasts Raiders', in which Castro specifically mentions the CIA-backed JMWAIVE maritime raiders. These anti-Castro Cuban commandos were infiltrated into Cuba with high powered rifles that, as JMWAIVE boat captain and later Watergate burglar Eugenio Martinez said, 'were not to be used for hunting rabbits'. (Some of the JMWAIVE commandos were captured and paraded on Cuban TV with their weapons, and reportedly confessed to their CIA backing.)

While the AP article that Shenon speculates so enraged Oswald was published in the New Orleans newspaper on Monday 9 September, Castro's speech and interview were given two days earlier, on Saturday 7 September, at the Brazilian embassy, a key fact that Shenon also neglects to mention. This is especially significant because on that day two other significant meetings took place, one in Dallas and the other in Brazil.

On that day in Dallas, Lee Harvey Oswald was meeting with CIA case officer David Atlee Phillips and anti-Castro Cuban commando leader Antonio Veciana, founder of the militant Alpha 66 group that was attacking Soviet ships in Havana harbor.⁸ At the same time, Rolando Cubela (AMLASH) was meeting his CIA case officer in Brazil to discuss the assassination of Castro.⁹

As some CIA officers suspected, Cubela was a double-agent, informing Castro of his CIA contacts. This may explain why Castro chose the Brazilian embassy to deliver his message to Kennedy, a *double entendre* that was only understood by those knowledgeable about the CIA's meeting with Cubela, a key fact the CIA did not share with anyone, including the Warren Commission.

⁸ Anthony Veciana, *Trained to Kill* (New York: Skyhorse, 2017) pp. 122-5

⁹ <<http://www.historyofcuba.com/history/havana/Cubela.htm>>

Oswald in Mexico City

A few weeks later Oswald went to Mexico City to try to get a visa to Cuba, and visited the Cuban and Soviet embassies. There he was said to have been encouraged by the Cubans to kill Kennedy and is said to have bragged that was what he intended to do.

At the Soviet embassy he is said to have met with Valeriy Kostikov, known to the CIA as an assassination expert, while at the Cuban embassy he dealt with Sylvia Duran, a Mexican national who assisted Oswald in filing his visa application. While Duran claims she only met with Oswald at the Cuban embassy, and indeed told Shenon so, others have made the claim she invited Oswald to a 'Twist party' she hosted.

For those who missed the 1960s, that turbulent decade was ushered in by the Twist, a song written by Hank Ballard and a dance popularised by Chubby Checker – the first world-wide dance sensation. Sylvia Duran hosted a number of such 'Twist parties', including one that was said to have included Lee Harvey Oswald. It was at this party that it is alleged Oswald met the Cuban embassy personnel who encouraged him kill Kennedy.

Following the Kennedy assassination, and even before the end of 1963, the party Oswald ostensibly attended had come to the attention of the FBI agent in Mexico City who had interviewed the participants and discounted the affair. Sylvia Duran's cousin was the Mexican poet and writer Elena Garro de Paz. In 1964 one June Cobb moved in with de Paz and says that she learned how de Paz, along with her daughter Elenita, had previously attended one of Duran's 'Twist parties' – the very one, in fact, that had also been attended by Oswald. Cobb took this information to a State Department officer, Charles W. Thomas, stationed at the US embassy in Mexico City and he sparked another investigation in 1965. Shenon devotes much of his book to this second 'Twist party' investigation.

Not mentioned by Shenon is the fact that June Cobb was a CIA asset (LICOOKY-1), who had served as Castro's secretary when he first took over power and had made the Havana Hilton his headquarters.¹⁰

Shenon on NPR:

'Well, there is this amazing story about what is described as the twist party, you know, Chubby Checker's "Twist" was very popular in Mexico City, too. And there were witnesses after the assassination who come forward to say that they remembered seeing Oswald at a party – a twist party, that he had been invited there by this vivacious, young Mexican woman who worked in the Cuban Consulate in Mexico City, a woman named Sylvia Duran, who had apparently given Oswald his help in preparing the visa application for Cuba and that people at this party had in the past talked openly about wanting to see President Kennedy dead.'

Others at the party included the communist writer Emilio Carballido, General

¹⁰ <<http://aarclibrary.org/a-cruel-and-shocking-misinterpretation/>>

Jose de Jesus Clark Flores, who appears elsewhere in the story allegedly giving Oswald money at the Cuban embassy, and 'two American Gringo beatniks'.

The CIA's 24 page report to the Rockefeller Commission,¹¹ requested by former Warren Commission attorney David Belin, and which Shenon takes seriously, claims that Elena Garro de Paz said:

'At the party she saw three Gringos, not drinking, not mixing and more or less just standing around together like bumps on a log. They were so obviously out of place that she asked someone in the Cuban Embassy about them and was told that "they were just passing through".'¹²

At the party Carballido and Cuban embassy officials were allegedly overheard talking to Oswald about killing Kennedy, and, so, the plan to kill the President was possibly 'hatched or encouraged' by the communists there.

On the day of the assassination, Elena Garro de Paz, the primary source of the story, was whisked away to the Hotel Vermont by a Mexican security officer Manuel Calvillo, who kept her incommunicado for a week 'for her own protection'. In contrast, Sylvia Duran was twice arrested and violently interrogated by Mexican security officers until she confessed to having a sexual affair with Oswald.

In subsequent interviews with Anthony Summers, Gus Russo and now Shenon, Sylvia Duran adamantly denied ever meeting Oswald outside of the Cuban embassy.

In his book Shenon says that the two Gringos who were with Oswald at the Twist Party were seen with him on the street the next day, and adds that one of them was an American film actor.

Although not mentioned in the CIA report to the Rockefeller Commission, nor by Shenon, among the recently released records is a CIA report that identifies the American film actor in Mexico City as Richard Beymer, of West Side Story and the Longest Day fame.¹³ He had twice called the Cuban embassy and asked for Sylvia Duran, calls picked up by the CIA's phone tap (LIENVOY).¹⁴

The two gringos

A few Google clicks away I found Beymer in a small Midwest town, his phone number in a public directory, and he answered the phone when I called. Yes, he was in Mexico to attend an Acapulco film festival, and was with a traveling

¹¹ <<http://tinyurl.com/yca8hnmj>> or <https://history-matters.com/archive/contents/church/contents_church_reports_rockcomm.htm>

¹² Text at <<http://tinyurl.com/yyc5mbje>> or <<http://www.politico.com/magazine/f/?id=0000015d-a4cc-dd39-a75d-afdfd18d0001>>.

¹³ See <<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000937/>>.

¹⁴ Beymer document see <<http://maryferrell.org/showDoc.html?docId=8009/>>. LIENVOY see <<http://tinyurl.com/y9ofqndy>> or <<https://www.maryferrell.org/showDoc.html?docId=5874&relPageId=107&search=LIENVOY>>.

companion, New York City bar owner Bradley Pierce, who is now a Catholic priest. And yes, they did go to Mexico City and did try to get a visa to Cuba. While Beymer was surprised he is mentioned in CIA reports, he does not remember Sylvia Duran specifically, but does 'vaguely recall being invited to a party', and attending a Twist party is something they would have done, being two footloose Gringos below the border. But no, he did not meet Lee Harvey Oswald, someone he thinks he would remember.

Bradley Pierce recalls more. Now Father Bradley, and patron of a Connecticut seminary, he recalls the trip to Mexico he took with Richard Beymer, but doesn't recall meeting Oswald or the Twist party, though he does remember the assassination. They had just gotten off the elevator of their hotel in Mexico City when they heard of Kennedy's killing in Dallas.

So they were in Mexico City at the time of the assassination, and since they were only in Mexico for two weeks, *they weren't in Mexico when Oswald was there*. Oswald's visit to Mexico city commenced on 27 September - i.e. two months before the later visit (at the time of the assassination) by Beymer and Pierce.¹⁵ (The dates on the CIA wiretap show Beymer called Duran at the embassy in late November and again in early December.)

The House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) investigated the 'Twist party' story. They reviewed the documentation of previous investigations by FBI and CIA personnel and interviewed many people who were said to have been at the party – but not Garro de Paz herself, who declined to cooperate with the Committee. They were unable to stand it up: the HSCA account of that investigation shows that Elena Garro de Paz had been extensively interviewed by US personnel, most of whom did not take her seriously.¹⁶ One of the CIA's accounts notes: 'GARRO'S chronology of the events she described as having occurred in the Mexican capital in September 1963 never coincided with the confirmed data of OSWALD'S presence there.'¹⁷

SHENON: You know, I desperately don't want to fall down the rabbit hole of the Kennedy assassination. You know, people do become obsessed with this. It is fascinating. I think it's – you know, it is the event in my lifetime that changed the way Americans think about their government and about truth.

And it's really made so much of our – you know, I think you can look

¹⁵ There are many sources that the visit was in September and they include: <<http://aarclibrary.org/a-cruel-and-shocking-misinterpretation/>> and <<http://tinyurl.com/y7ezdjsc>> or <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/10/21/will-trump-release-the-final-jfk-assassination-documents-a-deadline-looms-pressure-grows/>>.

¹⁶ See <<https://www.maryferrell.org/showDoc.html?docId=799#relPageId=249&tab=page>>.

¹⁷ In a 157-page file called 'Helms Hearing Duplicate', a collection of papers gathered by former CIA director Richard Helms as he prepared to testify to the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1978. See <<http://tinyurl.com/ycadjhog>> or <<https://www.maryferrell.org/showDoc.html?docId=147162&search=Oswald#relPageId=90&tab=page>> at p. 89.

back to the Kennedy assassination as the event that turned so much of our public conversation toxic and full of conspiracy theories and full of the assumption that we're not being told the truth by our government. And trying to bring as much truth as possible to what can be determined about this, I think there's real value to that today.'

For those of us who have gone 'down the rabbit hole of the Kennedy assassination', trying to determine 'as much truth as possible', it isn't just the Castro Cuban commies who must be scrutinised, but everyone who associated with the alleged assassin, including the anti-Castro Cubans, intelligence officers and others who became entwined in the assassination story.

It is pure speculation on Shenon's part that Oswald even read the news reports of Castro's interview; and that he attended the 'Twist party' in Mexico and was enticed to kill the president by Cubans had been discredited. But Oswald most certainly did attend a party in Dallas where he was encouraged to commit a political assassination – that of General Edwin Walker, a crime he is also accused of committing.¹⁸

But will that party get the attention, a book and the publicity that Shenon has given the 'Twist party'?

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William Kelly is a New Jersey based freelance journalist and historian. He is the author of two books – *300 Years at the Point* and *Birth of the Birdie*, and is working on *The Divine Skein at Dealey Plaza - How JFK Was Killed and How They Got Away With It*. He was the recipient of the 2013 Mary Ferrell Award for his work on the 11/22/63 Air Force One Radio transmissions and is the co-chairman of the Research Committee of Citizens Against Political Assassinations (CAPA-US.org). His articles on the assassination of President Kennedy are posted at JFKCountercoup.blogspot.com.

¹⁸ See telephone interview I conducted with Volkmar Schmidt in January 1995 at <http://jfkcountercoup.blogspot.co.uk/2008/01/volkmar-schmidt-interview.html?m=1>.