

No Lieutenant Columbo in Mexico City

By Lisa Pease

Many researchers have felt that the Mexico City episode provides important clues to the true role of Oswald in the assassination of President Kennedy. The document most researchers call "The Lopez Report" goes a long way towards answering key questions and asking several others. But why has it taken until 1996 to see these major puzzle pieces unveiled at last? And equally importantly, why is there no equivalent investigation in the records of the Warren Commission?

On August 13th of this year, the report of former Warren Commission counsel W. David Slawson's investigative trip to Mexico City, written over 32 years ago, was finally released. The only remaining redactions consist of four instances of the name that would reveal the identity of John Scelso, the Mexico City Desk officer responsible for the CIA's original investigation into the Kennedy assassination. Slawson's trip report does not come anywhere near matching the sophistication and depth of the report Eddie Lopez and Dan Hardway wrote years later. However, instead of revealing much about Oswald in Mexico City, Slawson's report is more of a tip-off to the Commission's built-in predispositions and gullibility—if one can attribute what follows to simple naiveté.

To understand what happened to this original investigation, one need look no further than a representative sampling of that old TV series chestnut, "Columbo". Every episode had the same formula. The chief suspect (who always turned out to be the actual culprit) would attempt to befriend Lieutenant Columbo, offering to help "guide" him through the murky matter, hoping to lead Columbo away from his or her own guilt toward another, however inappropriate, conclusion. Unfortunately for history, the Warren Commission employed no Columbo. Instead they had the following situation. Bear in mind that Slawson told the HSCA he did not rule out the CIA as a

suspect at first. Letting Slawson's words speak for themselves:

At 3:30 in the afternoon [John Scelso] of the CIA came to the Commission offices and conferred there with Slawson, Willens and Coleman. This conference grew out of a suggestion made by Mr. Richard Helms of the CIA about two weeks previous, in which he had mentioned that it would be a good idea if a representative of his agency met with those persons from the Commission who planned to go to Mexico just before they left, in order to ensure that the CIA could properly advise us of any last-minute arrangements and properly alert its people in Mexico of our arrival.

We discussed whether we would journey to Mexico officially and openly or completely incognito, and Mr. [Scelso] offered to make arrangements to get us into Mexico completely unnoticed if we desired to do so.... We outlined to Mr. [Scelso] our entire proposed plan...and asked for his comments on how best to achieve our goals. His reply in every instance was that we should deal on the spot with the CIA representative. He repeated what Mr. Helms of the CIA had said a while ago that there is no substitute for the "case officer" being "on the spot."¹

Once inside Mexico City, the Warren Commissioners allowed themselves to be guided in their investigation by Clarke Anderson, the FBI's legal attaché and close associate of David Atlee Phillips,² along with another close friend and associate of David Phillips—the CIA Mexico City Station Chief Win Scott (referred to in the report, except for a single slip, as "Mr. A").

Of Mexico City itself, David Atlee Phillips once called it "a higger-mugger metropolis of cloak-and-dagger conspirators," filled with "a conglomeration of intelligence officers, agents, spies, provocateurs, and the shadowy figures of those who manage financial and communication nets to support international intrigue."³ Slawson remarked in similar fashion on this to the HSCA, saying:

The CIA told me that Mexico City was kind of spy headquarters so to speak for lots of countries, like Istanbul used to be in detective thrillers, the spies always met at Istanbul. Supposedly, Mexico City was somewhat in truth like that in the early 1960's and late 1950's.⁴

Oswald's visit there was always significant on this basis alone. And for the Warren Commissioners to go there with the CIA as their guide seems the height of naiveté, to put it mildly. How could one evaluate the possibility that Oswald was there on an intelligence mission if one was surrounded by intelligence operatives?

In later years, the HSCA questioned Slawson on this point, asking if he had ever entertained the idea that the CIA might possibly have been involved in the assassination. He responded:

No, I don't think I entertained very long the possibility that [James Angleton's closest deputy Raymond] Rocca or anybody else I had known in the CIA was involved in any way in killing Kennedy...I did not have that feeling about the CIA...My judgment of their character and so forth was far different I think from the judgment I made of the anti-Castro Cuban conspiracy groups in the United States.⁵

Slawson was, of course, wholly uninformed of the CIA's manipulation and control of these same anti-Castro Cuban groups. But had he been told, it might still not have mattered. Slawson readily admitted his affinity for his CIA friends such as Rocca, and Allen Dulles. Of Rocca he said, "I came to know one man particularly well, Raymond Rocca, and I came to like him and trust him both."⁶ Of Dulles he was even more effusive: "Allen Dulles and I became fairly close, I think...he was very smart and I liked him very much."⁷ When asked more pointedly about his feelings towards the CIA, Slawson said that working for the CIA "was something I briefly considered myself."⁸

As we've learned by 1996, the CIA was anything but forthcoming of what they knew about Oswald. Slawson's friend Ray Rocca neglected to impress upon Slawson the significant fact that his very own unit in CIA had a pre-assassination file on Oswald so closely held it was restricted, with access strictly monitored. But that's a topic for another article.

Where Columbo would have kept his distance, Slawson reached out eagerly to accept the "guidance" proffered by the FBI and CIA.

Despite Evidence to the Contrary

Perhaps it was this set of predispositions that allowed Slawson to write a report which bore conclusions not supported by the evidence presented. Consider the following account:

Larson [another FBI agent in Mexico City] and Anderson then went into a discussion of the Hotel del Comercio investigation. Here, it appears that the conclusion of the Mexico investigators that no one at the hotel remembered Oswald and that the only evidence of his stay there was his name on the register was incorrect. Larson, after several interrogations, had found that the maid at the hotel did remember Oswald and was able to give some bits of information about him. For one thing, she, as did other witnesses, confirmed that he was always alone when she saw him....Larson had also found out that the proprietress of the little restaurant next door to the hotel was able to identify Oswald, although Larson was not completely certain how much she really remembered and how much she may have picked up by suggestion from newspaper reporters.⁹

In other words, it took Larson several trips to find anyone would could identify Oswald, and of those two, he had his doubts about one of them. Yet to Slawson's discerning mind, this was worth recording as evidence that Oswald had been seen in Mexico. Never mind, too, that when Larson et al. interviewed people from more than 300 silver shops trying to find the shop that made the silver bracelet on which "Marina" was inscribed, not one person could identify Oswald, and "subsequent investigation has shown that such bracelets are probably not sold in Mexico at all because they are made in Japan and the duty on importing them into Mexico would make their price non-competitive with local products."¹⁰

Undeterred, Slawson went on to report that Gutierrez, the supposed witness to Oswald having been at the Cuban embassy, had failed to identify the photo of Oswald leafletting in New Orleans as the man he had seen.¹¹

Still with little evidence of Oswald having been in Mexico, Slawson then turned to the topic of Silvia Duran. Dutifully noting that the FBI representative had called Duran a "Mexican Pepper Pot" and "sexy",¹² Slawson could not resist taking a moment in this official document on the Kennedy assassination to include: "The CIA later showed us some pictures of her which substantially confirmed this description."¹³

Slawson also recorded how Coleman "jokingly" mentioned how much they would like to have lunch with Duran to Luis Echevarria, who responded in kind, saying they would not have "as much fun as we thought because Duran was not a good-looking Cuban but only a Mexican."¹⁴ This, from a Mexican official, again duly recorded by a

supposedly serious investigator of the Kennedy assassination. In light of this, Liebler's illicit advances on Silvia Odio look like less of an aberration from the behavior of his fellow investigators.

Aside from their libidos, the interest the Warren Commission had in Duran was made explicit by Slawson: "It is only on details such as Oswald's physical appearance, said comments or remarks he may have made, etc., that we would like to interrogate Mrs. Duran further." No wonder, since Duran's description of Oswald did not fit the person the world saw killed by Jack Ruby in Dallas. Her Oswald was "blond, short, and dressed

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unelegantly [sic] and whose face turned red when angry."¹⁵

After giving a brief rundown of the FBI's leads on Oswald, Slawson determined that of all of them, Gutierrez's was the most credible. Remember, Gutierrez failed to identify a picture of Oswald as the man he had seen, yet this lead was "the only one that still seemed serious."¹⁶

Having exhausted Clarke Anderson's leads, Slawson and company returned to Win Scott. Scott gave them "a complete narrative of the CIA's activities in connection with Lee Harvey Oswald, beginning in September 1963 when they first picked up information that Oswald had appeared at the Russian and Cuban Embassies."¹⁷

Slawson records that Scott "understood that all three of us had been cleared for Top Secret and that we would not disclose beyond the confines of the Commission and its immediate staff the information we obtained through him without first clearing it with his superiors in Washington." Can you imagine Columbo agreeing to such terms? "We agreed to this," Slawson reported.¹⁸

Notwithstanding Slawson's credulity, some interesting tidbits are nonetheless revealed in this report. One such tidbit, worthy of more follow-up than the Commission gave it, was, in Slawson's own words, the "two-suitcase problem."¹⁹ According to

Slawson, the Warren Commission had evidence that Oswald had departed New Orleans with two suitcases. But by all accounts, he returned with only one, a single, small, blue zippered bag. What happened to the other bag(s)? Are we to believe Oswald traveled a week in Mexico with only a small zippered bag to carry his clothes?

Another tidbit comes from Scott, who told Slawson they had "picked up the name of Lee Harvey Oswald from commercial radio broadcasts and had begun compiling information on him from its Mexican files even before being requested to do so by CIA in Washington."²⁰ What was the nature of this information? Where is it now? Why did the Mexico City Station not get official sanction for such actions? What did they know that headquarters didn't?

The Hotel del Comercio and the Delgado Problem

This next revelation is recorded, then ignored, by Slawson. He wrote of the distance between the Hotel and the embassies, and of the difficulties getting from one to the other:

The embassies, although theoretically reachable from the Hotel del Comercio or the inter-city bus stations by local bus, are in practice so located that reaching them by bus would be much too complex for someone who was not familiar with the bus lines in Mexico City and especially for someone who did not speak Spanish fluently enough to get precise directions.²¹

This brings up a familiar problem. If Oswald did not speak Spanish and did not drive and was alone, how did he find and get to the Embassies from his hotel? According to Raul Luebano, the inspector in charge of the Mexican Immigration station at Nueva Laredo, Oswald crossed into Mexico in a car with a man and two women, none of whom spoke English. According to one of his inspectors, Oswald was dressed as a sailor and claimed to be a photographer.²² Accepting that account would solve the problem of getting Oswald to the embassy. But it also opens a huge can of worms as to who he was with and why. In fact, the FBI had already wondered aloud to the press how Oswald could have afforded to travel to Mexico alone, given his lack of employment, as well as his problems meeting his rent.²³

And if Oswald spoke Spanish, that became a problem in and of itself to the Warren Commission. The witness who told them Oswald *did* speak some Spanish was one they

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didn't want to give credit to for a number of reasons: Nelson Delgado. Delgado was with Oswald in the Marines. He gave the Warren Commission an incredible set of revelations which they, and apparently the FBI (who Delgado charged during his sworn testimony with altering his statements), needed to discredit.

Delgado said he taught Oswald some Spanish. Then he told of a trip he had taken to Mexico where he realized Oswald had been there before and knew his way around. According to Delgado, Oswald was a lousy shot and seldom passed rifle inspection. Delgado related a secret meeting Oswald had in the wee hours one night with men in suits on the base. And he said Oswald received mail with an official seal from the Cuban Consul in Los Angeles. He noted Oswald always had a lot of cash available. When he asked Oswald about the papers he received in Russian, Oswald made a point of explaining the paper was a *White Russian* publication, not *Communist*. Delgado mentioned Oswald's comments on supporting Castro (this was in 1959 when the CIA itself was supporting Castro), Oswald's interest in the Dominican Republic (another CIA target at that time), and that Oswald had talked of going to a school in Switzerland. *Probe* readers will recall that this school in Switzerland was so secret that it took the FBI and the Swiss government months to find it, begging the question of how Oswald had learned of it. And of course, Delgado assured the commission that all the people in his unit held "Secret" clearance, including Oswald.

In short, it was easier to presume Oswald did not speak Spanish than to give Delgado any credibility. This in spite of the fact that much of what Delgado alleged could be corroborated.

The Mexican Tapescape

As most researchers of the Kennedy assassination know, there have been conflicting stories as to the existence of tapes of Oswald in Mexico City. David Phillips and Richard Helms have both stated that any tapes they had were destroyed before the assassination. But the FBI reported that two of their agents had listened to such a tape after the assassination and concluded that the voice on the tape was not Oswald.

Slawson makes an interesting comment which relates to statements he made years later. If true, this is yet more evidence of the deliberate and continued deception over time by both Phillips and Helms. Slawson wrote,

"A's narrative plus the materials we were shown disclosed immediately how incorrect our previous information had been on Oswald's contacts with the Soviet and Mexican Embassies. Apparently the distortions and omissions to which our information had been subjected had entered some place in Washington, because the CIA information that we were shown by "A" was unambiguous on almost all crucial points."

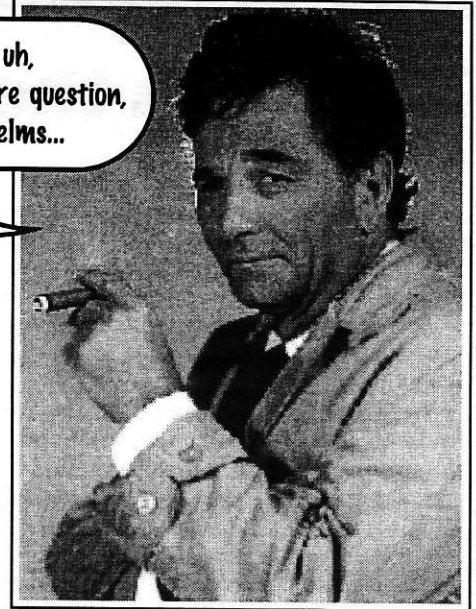
What was this "unambiguous" evidence that didn't surface until Slawson went to the CIA in Mexico City? In the 1993 *Frontline* special *Who Was Lee Harvey Oswald*, Slawson made the following statement:

My best recollection is they offered to us to listen. They said to us—it was Win Scott that—"Would you like to listen to the tapes" of this particular one. I can't remember now whether it was a wiretap or a bug. And Bill [Coleman] and I thought about it a minute and said, "Well, what are they like?" And so they played a little bit of it for us.²⁴

"Slawson says the tape was of poor quality and difficult to understand. He could not identify Oswald's voice."

The narrator added, "Slawson says the tape was of poor quality and difficult to understand. He could not identify Oswald's voice." Slawson has made similar comments in the past, including this, to researcher Gary Rowell: "Yes, we had access to the CIA tape of Oswald in Mexico City. I do not remember whether the voice sounded like his." Slawson added, "It puzzles me how you think I should know anyway since I never met him. He was killed, you know, in 1963."²⁵ This, despite the availability to Slawson of Oswald's voice recorded for all time in his debate with Bringuier by INCA. Bill Coleman also confirmed having listened to a tape from the CIA to Kennedy researchers, saying "We read the transcripts of what was actually said and we heard the words being spoken."²⁶ Coleman added that he thought

Oh, uh,
just one more question,
Mr. Helms...



the tapes were in the National Archives.

When Rowell tried to pursue the issue further with Slawson, he received the following curious reply:

I have forgotten the answers to most of the questions, and I do not think it proper or pertinent to any legitimate historical research to give you the few answers I do remember.²⁷

Conclusion

The significance of this report by Slawson is that it once again shows in stark detail the kind of evidence available to the Commission that they deliberately ignored, played down, or misrepresented. There are some, such as David Lifton, who have concluded that the Warren Commission was made up of "honorable men" who were simply misled. But Slawson's report shows otherwise. They had significant facts at their disposal that they chose to avoid or ignore or twist to fit their preordained conclusion. And after all these years, we are told it is not "proper or pertinent to any legitimate historical research" to be told the real answers to these mysteries.

America needed a Columbo. We were given only a David Slawson. ♠

Notes:

¹ Slawson's Report of the Warren Commission's trip to Mexico City, JFK Record #104-10010-10250, 4/22/64, CIA file of a Warren Commission-originated document, hereafter called the "Slawson Trip Report," page 5.

² David Atlee Phillips, *The Night Watch* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), pp. 163. Phillips called Anderson "affable" and "capable". Besides work-

ing closely together in Mexico City, Anderson and Phillips were together again in Santo Domingo, during which time, according to Phillips, they had daily meetings. In Mexico City, Anderson and Phillips sprung a trap for a retired military man who appeared about to give military secrets to the Cubans. The episode Phillips details matches closely the case of Eldon Hensen, the account of which for some reason resided in Oswald's set of files. See *Oswald and the CIA* by John Newman, pp.506-7 and p. 362, and compare with Phillips' account in *The Night Watch*, 162-164.

³ Phillips, p. 145

⁴ HSCA Vol. XI, p. 173.

⁵ Ibid., p. 52.

⁶ Ibid., p. 150

⁷ Ibid., p. 149

⁸ Ibid., p. 149.

⁹ Slawson Trip Report, pp. 13-14

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 15

¹¹ Ibid., p. 15

¹² Ibid., p. 16

¹³ Ibid., p. 16

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 12

¹⁵ From Silvia Duran's 10 page signed statement, forwarded to the CIA's Mexico City Station on 11/27/63, reprinted in the Lopez Report, p. 186

¹⁶ Slawson Trip Report, p. 18

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 18

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 19

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 43

²⁰ Ibid., p. 20

²¹ Ibid., pp. 25-26

²² *New York Herald Tribune*, 11/26/63. In the same article, Eugene Pugh, U.S. agent in charge of the Custom's office on the American side of the border, said Oswald had been checked at the border by American Immigration officials. He said this was "not normal" as Americans were not required to check in with immigration, adding "but U.S. immigration has a folder on Oswald's trip". *Probe* hopes the ARRB will pursue this folder.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ From Frontline special which aired 11/16/93.

²⁵ *The Investigator Special Edition* #1, p.19

²⁶ Ibid., p. 21

²⁷ Ibid., p. 20

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one of which contained film.

¹⁶ Dallas FBI field office file, #100-10461, Odum report of 1/30/64 interview with Ruth dictated on 1/31/64 and typed on 2/3/64

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ FBI #105-82555/#100-10461, report of 1/31/64 interview with Ruth Paine, dictated on 1/31/64 and typed on 2/1/64

¹⁹ FBI #105-82555/#100-10461, report of 1/31/64 interview with Michael Paine, dictated on 1/31/64 and typed on 2/3/64

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ FBI #105-82555/#100-10461, Bulky Exhibit Inventory Receipts, two versions, dated 1/31/64 and 2/8/64

²⁵ 2/2/64 cover letter with Airmail from Dallas to FBI Lab

²⁶ FBI #105-82555/#100-10461, report of 1/31/64 interview with Michael, dictated on 1/31/64 and typed on 2/3/64

²⁷ See Warren Commission Exhibit #2003 at Vol. 24, p. 333.

²⁸ FBI #105-82555/#100-10461, teletype dated 1/31/64

²⁹ *Assignment: Oswald*, p.86, by James P. Hosty

³⁰ See Warren Commission Vol. 9, p.444

³¹ See Warren Commission Vol. 10, p.313 and p.325. It is not clear if Shasteen's relationship with Odum originated with the FBI investigation into the assassination or if it was pre-existing.

³² See HSCA, Vol. 12, p. 373

³³ See HSCA, Vol. 12, p. 390

³⁴ See p. 211 of Gary Savage's book, *JFK: First Day Evidence* and *Dallas Morning News* reports by Earl Golz dated 6/15/78 and 8/7/78.

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Oswald's possible association with the KGB or Cuba. So Pincus' present attempt to hose down more fires should have been expected.

Because of this built-in resistance, both by CIA-allied newspapers, and politicians, we at *Probe* suggest an investigation along the line that Maxine Waters was wise enough to suggest. That is, one without compromised Congressmen. She suggested a "Citizens Commission," one similar to the United Nations Truth Commission which

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reported so accurately on the El Mozote massacre in El Salvador. As Peter Kornbluh, who has investigated the Iran/Contra scandal for ten years, has stated:

This current scandal is really about our U.S. government-sanctioned covert actions and the real harm that some of them do, not only to the targets but to our country and the people's trust in government . . . I can almost guarantee you that unless we expand this debate to include the overall role of agencies like the CIA, we'll be back here again sometime next year.

We agree. Like *In These Times*, we would like to see the CIA abolished, or at least its covert action arm. But if there is to be an inquest, let it be a broad, real, and honest one. If not, both the Agency and its covert apparatus will survive. This time, let's be sure the multi-headed hydra is slain. ♦

R.I.P. Larry Ray Harris

J. Gary Shaw alerted the research community to a sad milestone through the Internet on October 5th. Debra Conway relayed a message that Shaw's friend, Larry Ray Harris died at the age of 44 in a car accident on October 4th in Atlanta. He was buried in Atlanta on October 9th. Harris and Shaw co-wrote the book *Cover-Up* which first appeared in 1976 and was then re-issued in 1992. The book was valuable, not just for its helpful text, but for its fine gallery of photographs. It was one of the books the HSCA used in the preliminary stages of its investigation to get a bearing on the JFK case. Harris was a longtime researcher in the Dallas area and he became an expert on both the Dallas police and the murder of Dallas policeman J. D. Tippit. He was a contributor to Penn Jones fine newsletter *The Continuing Inquiry* in the seventies, and he was a panelist at the ASK Conferences in Dallas that began in 1991 and ran for four years. Harris was always as helpful as he could be to researchers trying to pursue facts in his areas of expertise and would always send materials he had upon request. He was a genuine gentleman whose presence will be missed by those who knew him and his work. ♦