

Op-Ed

Lee Harvey Oswald's little green book shows JFK wasn't the real target



President John F. Kennedy, Jacqueline Kennedy and Texas Governor John Connally sit in a car taking them in a motorcade from the Love Field Airport to the Dallas Trade Mart on Nov. 22, 1963. (UPI)

James Reston Jr.

In the hours after the Kennedy assassination, after Lee Harvey Oswald shot and killed Dallas Police Officer J.D. Tippit and was identified as the president's assassin, a Secret Service officer named Mike Howard was dispatched to Oswald's apartment. Howard found a little green address book, and on its 17th page under the heading "I WILL KILL" Oswald listed four men:

an **FBI** agent named James Hosty; a right-wing general, Edwin Walker; and Vice President Richard Nixon. At the top of the list was the governor of Texas, John Connally. Through Connally's name, Oswald had drawn a dagger, with blood drops dripping downward.

Special Agent Howard turned the address book over to the FBI and, ultimately, to the Warren Commission. Only some time later did he learn that the list with its hugely important insight into the killer's motive had been torn out of the book.

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I didn't hear about Howard until after I published my book "The Accidental Victim" three years ago on the 50th anniversary of the assassination. In it I argue a circumstantial case that it was Connally, not John F. Kennedy, who was Oswald's target in Dallas. It is the story of a smoldering grudge in which Oswald came to associate Connally with all the setbacks in his disastrous, hopeless life.

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This grudge got started in January 1962. Oswald was in the Soviet Union, where he'd gone after being honorably discharged from the Marine Corps. When the Marines learned he wanted to defect, Oswald's discharge was summarily downgraded to undesirable. (The defection was never consummated.) Oswald was angry and for good reason; his actions after his discharge had nothing to do with his three years as a Marine.

By early 1962, Oswald was disenchanted with Soviet life and wanted to return home. He was now saddled with a wife, Marina, and a child, and he knew that

someone with a ninth-grade education, who had spent time in Russia and had an undesirable discharge on his record, would have few prospects in America.

Oswald wrote a heartfelt plea to Connally, a fellow Texan and the head of the Navy Department, the civilian overseer of the Marines. In poignant terms Oswald asked Connally to redress what was a transparent miscarriage of justice. What he got back a month later, in February 1962, was a classic bureaucratic brushoff. The dismissive letter arrived in an envelope with Connally's smiling face on the front, bursting from a Texas star and announcing his bid for the Texas governorship.

In the months after Oswald's return to America, his worst fears were realized. He did, indeed, have serious trouble finding and holding jobs in Texas. According to the testimony of Russian emigres in Dallas who knew him during this period, every time his discharge came up in a job interview, Oswald froze, and his blame of Connally deepened.

In her testimony to the Warren Commission, Oswald's wife, Marina, definitively named Connally and not Kennedy as her husband's target. She repeated this belief in testimony to the U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1978. Dallas emigres also testified to Oswald's obsession with Connally. Moreover, there was ample testimony that Oswald bore no animus toward Kennedy. Indeed, he admired JFK's important initiatives like the president's efforts at detente with Russia.

Why was this evidence on motive ignored and buried in the official investigations? More pointedly, why is Oswald's little green book – which I've examined in the National Archives – missing that pivotal page? For many years, in a community college class he teaches, retired Special Agent Howard has put forward his view of the assassination: Connally, not Kennedy, was Oswald's target.

To the question of the missing address book page, Howard suggests two possibilities. J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI director, would not have wanted his agency, through agent Hosty, to be implicated in Oswald's murderous rage. As it turns out, Hosty had vigorously interviewed Marina Oswald over her immigration status just weeks before the assassination. An infuriated Oswald left a written threat at the Dallas FBI office in early November 1963. Hosty testified to Congress that on orders from higher-ups he deep-sixed the threat after the assassination. President Lyndon Johnson might have had an even stronger motivation: He would not have wanted Connally, his closest friend, to be identified as the catalyst for the crime.

For 53 years, a cottage industry has developed over the motive for the Kennedy assassination. It had to be connected to the Mafia or the Russians or the Cubans or Oswald's Marxist beliefs or Jack Ruby's petty crimes in the Dallas underworld. The public has embraced the notion that the greatest crime of the 20th century must have been the product of an equally grandiose conspiracy.

But none of these conspiracy theories hold up when the events of the six months before Nov. 22, 1963, are carefully studied. Oswald was no coldhearted professional assassin under orders. The real answer to the reasons he took aim are to be found in his frustrations and obsessions. And the real tragedy of Dallas lies in the accidental death of a president who just happened to be in the line of fire.

James Reston Jr. is the author of, among other books, "The Accidental Victim: JFK, Lee Harvey Oswald, and the Real Target in Dallas" and "The Lone Star: The Life of John Connally." He is a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center.