

A Cruel and Shocking Act: The Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination

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A groundbreaking, explosive account of the Kennedy assassination that will rewrite the history of the 20th century's most controversial murder investigation

The questions have haunted our nation for half a century: Was the President killed by a single gunman? Was Lee Harvey Oswald part of a conspiracy? Did the Warren Commission discover the whole truth of what happened on November 22, 1963?

Philip Shenon, a veteran investigative journalist who spent most of his career at The New York Times, finally provides many of the answers. Though *A Cruel and Shocking Act* began as Shenon's attempt to write the first insider's history of the Warren Commission, it quickly became something much larger and more important when he discovered startling information that was withheld from the Warren Commission by the CIA, FBI and others in power in Washington. Shenon shows how the commission's ten-month investigation was doomed to fail because the man leading it - Chief Justice Earl Warren - was more committed to protecting the Kennedy family than getting to the full truth about what happened on that tragic day. A taut, page-turning narrative, Shenon's book features some of the most compelling figures of the twentieth century-Bobby Kennedy, Jackie Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, J. Edgar Hoover, Chief Justice Warren, CIA spymasters Allen Dulles and Richard Helms, as well as the CIA's treacherous "molehunter," James Jesus Angleton.

Based on hundreds of interviews and unprecedented access to the surviving commission staffers and many other key players, Philip Shenon's authoritative, scrupulously researched book will forever change the way we think about the Kennedy assassination and about the deeply flawed investigation that followed.

A Washington Post Notable Nonfiction Book of 2013

Philip Shenon, the bestselling author of *The Commission: The Uncensored History of the 9/11 Investigation*, was a reporter for The New York Times for more than twenty years. As a Washington correspondent for The Times, he covered the Pentagon, the Justice Department and the State Department. He lives and writes in Washington, DC.

Prologue

There is no way to know exactly when Charles William Thomas began to think about suicide. Who could really know such a thing? Years later, congressional investigators could offer only their strong suspicions about what had finally led Thomas, a former American diplomat who had spent most of his career in Africa and Latin America, to kill himself. On Monday, April 12, 1971, at about four p.m., he put a gun to his head on the second floor of his family's modest rented house, near the shores of the Potomac River, in Washington, DC. His wife, downstairs, thought at first that the boiler had exploded.

Certainly two years earlier, in the summer of 1969, Thomas had reason to be disheartened. He was forty-seven years old, with a wife and two young daughters to support, and he knew his career at the State Department was over. It was official, even though he still could not fathom why he was being forced out of a job that he loved and that he thought-that

he knew-he did well. The department long had an "up or out" policy for members of the diplomatic corps, similar to the military. Either you were promoted up the ranks or your career was over. And since he had been denied a promotion to another embassy abroad or to a supervisor's desk in Washington, Thomas was "selected out," to use the department's Orwellian terminology for being fired. After eighteen fulfilling, mostly happy years wandering the globe on behalf of his country, he was told he had no job.

At first, he thought it must be a mistake, his wife, Cynthia, said. His personnel records were exemplary, including a recent inspection report that described him as "one of the most valuable officers" in the State Department, whose promotion was "long overdue." After he was formally "selected out," however, there was no easy way to appeal the decision. And Thomas, a proud, often stoical man, found it demoralizing even to try. He had already begun boxing up his belongings in his office and wondering if, at his age, it would be possible to begin a new career.

He did have one piece of unfinished business with the department before he departed. And on July 25, 1969, he finished typing up a three-page memo, and a one-page cover letter, that he addressed to his ultimate boss at the department: William P. Rogers, President Nixon's secretary of state. Colleagues might have told Thomas it was presumptuous for a midlevel diplomat to write directly to the secretary, but Thomas had reason to believe that going to Rogers was his only real hope of getting someone's attention. Thomas was not trying to save his job; it was too late for that, he told his family. Instead, the memo was a final attempt to resolve what had been-apart from the puzzle of his dismissal-the biggest, most confounding mystery of his professional life. Rogers was new to the State Department, sworn in only six months earlier along with the rest of Nixon's cabinet. Thomas hoped Rogers might be willing to second-guess the career diplomats at the department who-for nearly four years-had ignored the remarkable story that Thomas kept trying to tell them.

At the top of every page of the memo, Thomas typed-and underlined-the word "CONFIDENTIAL."

"Dear Mr. Secretary," he began. "In winding up my affairs at the Department of State, there is a pending matter which I believe merits your attention."

The memo had a title: "Subject: Investigation of Lee Harvey Oswald in Mexico."

His tone was formal and polite, which was certainly in character for Charles William Thomas, who used his middle name in official correspondence to avoid confusion with another Charles W. Thomas who worked at the department. He wanted to be remembered as a diplomat-to be diplomatic-to the end. He knew his memo outlined potentially explosive national-security information, and he wanted to be careful not to be perceived as reckless. He had no interest in leaving the State Department with a reputation of being some sort of crazy conspiracy theorist. At the end of the 1960s, there were plenty of craven, headline-grabbing "truth-seekers" peddling conspiracies about President Kennedy's assassination. Thomas did not want to be lumped in with them in the history

books-or in the classified personnel archives of the State Department, for that matter. His memo contained no language suggesting the personal demons that would lead him to take his life two years later.

Secretary Rogers would have had easy access to the details of Thomas's career, and they were impressive. Thomas was a self-made man, orphaned as a boy in Texas and raised in the home of an older sister in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He served as a navy fighter pilot in World War II, then enrolled at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, where he earned both a bachelor's and a law degree. Foreign languages came easily; he was fluent in French and Spanish and, over the years, developed a working knowledge of German, Italian, Portuguese, and Creole; the last had been valuable during a diplomatic posting in Haiti. After Northwestern, he studied in Europe and received a doctorate in international law at the University of Paris. In 1951, he joined the State Department and served initially in hardship posts in West Africa, where, despite several severe bouts of malaria, he was remembered for his good humor and enthusiasm. His friends said he was "the diplomat from central casting"-six feet tall, blond, preppy handsome, articulate, and charming. Early in his career, colleagues assumed he was destined to achieve the rank of ambassador, running his own embassy.

In 1964, Thomas was named a political officer in the United States embassy in Mexico, where he was posted for nearly three years. Mexico City was considered an especially important assignment in the 1960s since the city was a Cold War hot spot-Latin America's answer to Berlin or Vienna. There were big Cuban and Soviet embassies, the largest in Latin America for both Communist governments. And the activities of Cuban and Soviet diplomats, and the many spies posing as diplomats, could be closely monitored by the United States with the assistance of Mexico's normally cooperative police agencies. The CIA believed that the Russian embassy in Mexico was the KGB's base for "wet operations"-assassinations, in the CIA's jargon-in the Western Hemisphere. (It would have been too risky for the KGB to run those operations out of the Russian embassy in Washington.) Mexico City had itself been the scene of Kremlin-ordered violence in the past. In 1940, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin dispatched assassins to Mexico City to kill his rival Leon Trotsky, who was living there in exile.

Mexico City's reputation as a center of Cold War intrigue was cemented by the disclosure that Lee Harvey Oswald had visited the city only several weeks before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas on Friday, November 22, 1963. Details about Oswald's Mexico trip were revealed in news reports published within days of the president's murder, giving birth to some of the first serious conspiracy theories about foreign involvement in the assassination. Everything about Oswald's stay in Mexico, which had reportedly lasted six days, was suspicious. A self-proclaimed Marxist, Oswald, who did not hide his Communist leanings even while serving in the U.S. Marine Corps, visited both the Cuban and Soviet embassies in Mexico City. It appeared he had gone there to get visas that would allow him, ultimately, to defect to Cuba. It would be his second defection attempt. He had tried to renounce his American citizenship when he traveled to the Soviet Union in 1959, only to decide to return to the United States from Russia three years later, saying that he had come to disdain Moscow's brand of Communism, with its petty corruptions and

mazelike bureaucracy. He hoped Fidel Castro and his followers in Havana would prove more loyal to the ideals of Marx.

In September 1964, the presidential commission led by Chief Justice Earl Warren that investigated Kennedy's assassination, known to the public from the start as the Warren Commission, identified Oswald as the assassin and concluded that he had acted alone. In a final report at the end of a ten-month investigation, the seven-member panel said that it had uncovered no evidence of a conspiracy, foreign or domestic. "The commission has found no evidence that anyone assisted Oswald in planning or carrying out the assassination," the report declared. While the commission could not establish Oswald's motives for the assassination with certainty, the report suggested that he was emotionally disturbed and might have decided to kill the president because of "deep-rooted resentment of all authority" and an "urge to try to find a place in history."

And in the final days of his employment at the State Department in the summer of 1969, those were the conclusions that Charles Thomas wanted someone in the government to revisit. Was it possible that the Warren Commission had it wrong? Thomas's memo to Secretary of State Rogers outlined information about Oswald's 1963 Mexico visit that "threatened to reopen the debate about the true nature of the Kennedy assassination and damage the credibility of the Warren Report. . . . Since I was the embassy officer who acquired this intelligence information, I feel a responsibility for seeing it through to its final evaluation," he explained. "Under the circumstances, it is unlikely that any further investigation of this matter will ever take place unless it is ordered by a high official in Washington."

The details of what Thomas had learned were so complex that he felt the need to number each paragraph in the memo. He enclosed several other documents that were full of references to accented Spanish-language names and obscure locations in Mexico City; they offered a complicated time line of long-ago events. His central message, however, was this: the Warren Commission had overlooked-or never had a chance to see-intelligence suggesting that a plot to kill Kennedy might have been hatched, or at least encouraged, by Cuban diplomats and spies stationed in the Mexican capital, and that Oswald was introduced to this nest of spies in September 1963 by a vivacious young Mexican woman who was a fellow champion of Castro's revolution.

The woman, Thomas was told, had briefly been Oswald's mistress in Mexico City.

As he wrote the memo, Thomas must have realized again how improbable-even absurd-this might all sound to his soon-to-be former colleagues at the State Department. If any of his information was right, how could the Warren Commission have missed it?

In the body of the memo, he identified, by name, the principal source of his information: Elena Garro de Paz, a popular and critically acclaimed Mexican novelist of the 1960s. Her fame was enhanced by her marriage to one of Mexico's most celebrated writers and poets, Octavio Paz, who later won the Nobel Prize in Literature. A sharp-witted, mercurial

woman, Garro, who was in her midforties when she met Thomas, spoke several languages and had lived in Europe for years before returning to Mexico in 1963. She had done graduate work at both the University of California at Berkeley and, like Thomas, the University of Paris.

The two had become friends on Mexico City's lively social circuit and, in December 1965, she offered the American diplomat a tantalizing story. She revealed-reluctantly, Thomas said-that she had encountered Oswald at a party of Castro sympathizers during his visit in the fall of 1963.

It had been a "twist party"-Chubby Checker's hit song was wildly popular in Mexico, too-and Oswald was not the only American there, Garro said. He had been in the company of two young "beatnik" American men. "The three were evidently friends, because she saw them by chance the next day walking down the street together," Thomas wrote. At the party, Oswald wore a black sweater and "tended to be silent and stared a lot at the floor," Garro recalled. She did not talk to any of the Americans or learn their names. She said she learned Oswald's name only after seeing his photograph in Mexican newspapers and on television after the assassination.

A senior Cuban diplomat was also at the party, she said. Eusebio Azque, who held the title of consul, ran the embassy's visa office. (In the memo, Thomas said that Azque's other duties included espionage; the U.S. embassy believed he was a high-ranking officer in Castro's spy service, the Dirección General de Inteligencia, or DGI.) It was Azque's consular office in Mexico City that Oswald had visited in hopes of obtaining a Cuban visa.

Garro, a fierce anti-Communist, loathed the Cuban diplomat. Before Kennedy's assassination, she said, she had heard Azque speak openly of his hope that someone would kill the American president, given the threat that Kennedy posed to the survival of the Castro government. The October 1962 Cuban missile crisis, and the bungled CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion a year before that, would have been fresh in Azque's memory. Garro recalled a party at which she and other guests overheard a "heated discussion" in which Azque supported the view that "the only solution was to kill him"-President Kennedy.

Also at the party, Garro said, was a notably pretty twenty-five-year-old Mexican woman who worked for Azque at the consulate: Silvia Tirado de Duran, who was related to Garro by marriage. Duran was an outspoken Socialist and a supporter of Castro, which helped explain how she had gotten a job working for the Cubans. Thomas found a copy of the Warren Commission report in the embassy's library and could see that Duran's name appeared dozens of times in its pages; the commission determined it was Duran who had dealt with Oswald during his visits to the Cuban mission in Mexico. She had helped him fill out his visa application, and it appeared that she had gone out of her way to assist him. Duran's name and phone number were found in a notebook seized among Oswald's belongings.

Garro told Thomas that she never liked Duran, both because of Duran's left-wing politics

and because of what Garro described as the younger woman's scandalous personal life. Duran was married to Garro's cousin, but it was widely rumored in Mexico City that she had had a torrid affair three years earlier with Cuba's ambassador to Mexico, who was also married; the ambassador had offered to leave his wife to be with Duran. "Garro has never had anything to do with Silvia, whom she detests and considers a whore," Thomas wrote. (It would later be determined that the CIA had both Duran and the ambassador under surveillance in Mexico; the agency would claim it could document the affair.)

It was only after the Kennedy assassination, Garro said, that she learned that Duran had briefly taken Oswald as a lover. Garro told Thomas that Duran had not only bedded Oswald, she had introduced him around town to Castro's supporters, Cubans and Mexicans alike. It was Duran who had arranged Oswald's invitation to the dance party. "She was his mistress," Garro insisted. She told Thomas that "it was common knowledge that Silvia Duran was the mistress of Oswald."

Thomas asked Garro if she had told this story to anyone else. She explained that, for nearly a year after the assassination, she had kept quiet, fearing her information might somehow endanger her safety, as well as the safety of her twenty-six-year-old daughter, who also remembered seeing Oswald at the party. In the fall of 1964, however, just after the Warren Commission had ended its investigation, she found the nerve to meet with American embassy officials in Mexico City and tell them what she knew. To her surprise, she said, she heard nothing from the embassy after that.

In his memo to the secretary o...

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