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PROGRAM The Today Show

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SUBJECT Interview with Summers and Phillips

TOM BROKAW: There's a new book out that you're going to be hearing a great deal about. It was written by this man over here, Anthony Summers. He's a British journalist, a former BBC investigative reporter who took some time off a few years ago to begin writing books. He says he has uncovered important new evidence now possibly linking CIA agents with a conspiracy to assassinate John F. Kennedy.

And a man who knows all about that, who shows up in the book, in one form or the other, is David Atlee Phillips, who was the CIA's Latin American station chief during the Kennedy years.

First, Mr. Summers, we're going to begin with you. What prompted you to write this book after all the attention that this investigation and assassination has received already?

ANTHONY SUMMERS: You know, I think there's a great national weariness about the Kennedy assassination because of the years of rumor and counter-rumor. I was brought into the case reluctantly when Congress's Assassinations Committee was working two or three years ago. First I did a documentary which was shown on the BBC and over here. And when I went down the road and did the journalism, started wearing out the shoe leather, I found that I was seeing relevant, important witnesses who had never been visited by the media before and in some cases had never been visited by -- even by law enforcement.

That somewhat shocked me, and I started working on what has ended up as the book.

BROKAW: We can't go through this, obviously, para-

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graph by paragraph. But let me, if I can, just try to summarize what you concluded about Lee Harvey Oswald, based on your investigation. That he was a kind of a double agent, that he posed as a very pro-communist sympathizer, pro-Castro, pro-Soviet Union. But, in fact, you conclude, in a way, that he was really a right-winger, he was a kind of low-level CIA operative, and that he had connections with the CIA before the assassination of John Kennedy.

Is that a fair...

SUMMERS: I think to say "the CIA" at any point in this whole story is wrong. American intelligence was and is an octopus with many legs. And I don't conclude, as such, that he was definitely anything at all.

I think, however, it's too simplistic just to say that he was a lone left-wing zealot.

What I would also like to add is that I think the starting point of this book and any new consideration of the Kennedy assassination is the fact that last year Congress's Assassinations Committee, which you all paid for, concluded that there was a conspiracy, in the sense that there were two gunmen in Dealey Plaza. The directions that the committee looked to for its conspiracy were the anti-Castro movement and organized crime. Lee Harvey Oswald, apparently -- the Lee Oswald that we know from official reports in the past -- fitted neither of those frames.

BROKAW: Let's jump now to a man by the name of Antonio Vesiano (?), who was an anti-Castro leader, who was a member of Alpha 66.

SUMMERS: He was the civilian leader of Alpha 66, which was one of the most militant and best-known anti-Castro guerrilla groups in 1963. Yes.

BROKAW: He told you that he saw Lee Harvey Oswald in the company of who?

SUMMERS: Vesiano says that his U.S. intelligence case officer, who was code-named, according to him, Morris Bishop, was during 1963 attempting to subvert American national policy by causing trouble in the wake of the missile crisis, a very dangerous time, between the United States and the Soviet Union over Cuba. He says that about eight weeks before the assassination, he saw Morris Bishop, his case officer, in the company of Lee Oswald.

And he also says, which I think, in a way, is much more disquieting, that after the assassination, his case officer asked him to fabricate, to help fabricate evidence linking Oswald with Castro Cuban diplomats.

BROKAW: And there has been some suggestion that this man Mr. Bishop is the same man who's our other guest here this morning. And he's here to deny that.

We're going to show you the artist's rendering made by Mr. Vesiano and this man, who is, as you know, David [At]lee Phillips. He was the Latin American station chief at the time. There is a remarkable physical similarity.

Would you agree with that, Mr. Phillips?

DAVID PHILLIPS: There is some similarity. Yes.

BROKAW: But you met Mr. Vesiano, didn't you, now?

PHILLIPS: Yes, I have. Indeed, I have.

BROKAW: Had you met him before the Senate investigators brought him to you to be interviewed by you?

PHILLIPS: I met him in 1976 when the investigation first began.

Mr. Brokaw, I do want to say that I have mixed emotions about being on this program.

BROKAW: I understand.

PHILLIPS: I don't want to promote the sales of this book, but I do appreciate the opportunity to defend myself, which the author did not.

Welcome to America, Mr. Summers.

SUMMERS: Good morning.

PHILLIPS: I accuse you of assassination. The dictionary tells us there are two definitions of that. One is killing people and the other is viciously denigrating a person, as in to assassinate a man's character.

You've written a book which encourages the reader, indeed cajoles the reader, to believe that I was somehow involved in the Kennedy assassination. You've done that by writing a book which supports your contentions, putting in things, and then throwing in a barrel of question marks.

Well, in the short time that we have, I think you owe me the answer to three questions.

One. You say you interviewed all the relevant witnesses. Mr. Summers, why didn't you interview me?

Two. I'm going to ask you, in this section on Vesiano and Bishop, did you write this alone, or did someone else work with you? Did you have a collaborator? Specially, a man named Guitom Fonzi (?). I ask you that.

And third. I ask you to explain what you don't say in this book. What was Mr. Vesiano doing during 1974 and 1975?

SUMMERS: I'd like first of all to answer you on your first point, which is you say that I -- effectively, that I assassinate your character in the book. What I actually do is to report what the Assassinations Committee itself said in its report and in Volume 10 of its appendices, which is precisely what we were talking about just now, which is that the Assassinations Committee considered the possibility that you might have been the said Morris Bishop.

I have made no suggestion in the book, indeed I specifically disclaimed the notion that Morris Bishop, let alone David Phillips, was involved in the assassination. I have merely indicated that there may have been a connection between Lee Oswald and Morris Bishop.

BROKAW: We have a moment or so left here. We're going to continue with this in the next half-hour. But let's get through the three questions.

Why didn't you interview him?

SUMMERS: I didn't interview him because I -- his name did not surface publicly at all until after the Assassinations Committee report came out. And I have been...

PHILLIPS: My name did not surface publicly? This is my third appearance on the Today Show.

SUMMERS: Not so far as this particular issue is concerned.

PHILLIPS: I have been on the BBC in London twice, French national television, Canadian television.

SUMMERS: Not so far as this matter of Bishop is concerned.

PHILLIPS: I beg your pardon. It surfaced in...

BROKAW: Did you write it in connection -- did you write it with someone else, this section of the book?

SUMMERS: Absolutely not. I wrote the book entirely on my own. But I have had access to committee sources, which is

the normal, part of the normal work of an investigative reporter.

BROKAW: And the third part of the question.

SUMMERS: What was the third part of your question?

PHILLIPS: What was Mr. Vesiano doing during 1974 and '75?

SUMMERS: In 1974 and 1975, as I have not mentioned in my book...

PHILLIPS: You have certainly have not mentioned it.

SUMMERS: And I have not mentioned it because it is not mentioned in the final report of the Assassinations Committee. Mr. Vesiano was serving time in a federal prison in connection with narcotics offenses.

PHILLIPS: Uh-huh.

SUMMERS: I have no problem with that. There's a long and complicated background to that issue. The point is that in 1963, Mr. Vesiano was, as the readers of Time magazine and Life magazine would know, the leader of one of the top anti-Castro guerrilla groups in this country.

BROKAW: All right. Mr. Phillips, Mr. Summers, we're going to come back to more of this.

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BROKAW: Picking up where we were not too long ago on this program -- in fact, about 10 minutes ago -- we have with us an investigative reporter from Great Britain by the name of Anthony Summers who's written a book called "Conspiracy" about the assassination of John Kennedy. We also have with us a former CIA agent, Latin American station chief of the CIA. His name is David [At]lee Phillips. They are here together because Mr. Phillips' name comes up frequently in a book written by Mr. Summers about the possibility of a conspiracy involving some CIA operatives and members of that intelligence apparatus and the assassination of John Kennedy.

Mr. Phillips asked a series of questions of Mr. Summers a few moments of those. Most of those, I gather, were at least answered. Maybe not to your satisfaction.

PHILLIPS: Partially.

BROKAW: Partially answered.

Well, let's get back to this business of Antonio Vesiano, who is a key figure in all of this. He says that he worked for a CIA man by the name of Bishop who was seen in the company of Lee Harvey Oswald before the assassination of John Kennedy. And there is a suggestion in this book, and also in the Senate investigation, that you might be one and the same man as Mr. Bishop.

But in all fairness -- you accuse Mr. Summers of saying that you have been identified as that man. In his book, he makes it plain that "the Assassination Committee, considering whether former Mexican CIA officer David Phillips was Bishop, was not satisfied by his denials, nor by Vesiano's. So the search for Bishop continues."

Are you satisfied that he is not Mr. Bishop, Mr. Summers?

SUMMERS: No. I've merely reported what Congress's Assassinations Committee said. I think it is significant, certainly, that the committee, not me -- no coup of mine -- but the committee found a former CIA case officer who worked in Miami at the same time that Mr. Phillips was involved in anti-Castro operations, and he did say that he was almost positive that David Phillips did use the code name, or the cover name Morris Bishop.

PHILLIPS: I certainly would like to have an opportunity to talk to that gentleman, whose name is not given in the book. It's a pseudonym and that sort of thing.

SUMMERS: A cover name.

PHILLIPS: Throughout this book, it says that the committee doubted me, they didn't believe what I was saying. I deny that.

And I suggest that you, Mr. Brokaw, might contact Congressman Richardson Pryor, who was the head of that Committee on Assassinations, and ask him if that charge is true.

Now, when the program closed a few minutes ago, we had from Mr. Summers the admission, which was not in his book, that Mr. Vesiano spent 1974-75 in prison.

SUMMERS: Because it wasn't in the report, either.

PHILLIPS: I beg your pardon. It certainly was in the report.

SUMMERS: It was not in the primary report.

PHILLIPS: It was in the appendix of the report.

SUMMERS: In the appendix.

PHILLIPS: And the incredible part about it, which changed this whole entire story of Mr. Vesiano, is the circumstances.

Now, the fact that Mr. Vesiano...

BROKAW: He was put in -- he was put in federal penitentiary on drug charges.

PHILLIPS: Yes. And the fact that he's an ex-convict doesn't mean that his story is not necessarily true, except in context.

SUMMERS: The whole of the rest of the record of Antonio Vesiano is one of a courageous exile leader, whatever one thinks of exile politics. And his associates down the years say that he's a man of absolute integrity. And he has absolutely no crime record whatsoever.

BROKAW: Isn't it possible...

PHILLIPS: No crime record.

SUMMERS: Apart from the one case...

PHILLIPS: Mr. Brokaw, I must say one thing. It says in the report that he came out of the prison and immediately told the congressional investigator that he thought he was in there because of the CIA. He told another witness that he thought the CIA had framed in. This gives a whole new light...

SUMMERS: It did not arise like that. He did not volunteer information. He was visited in the prison because of his role -- not in the prison. He was out of prison by that time. He was visited while on parole because of his past as an anti-Castro leader.

PHILLIPS: Mr. Summers, I'm quoting the same material you used for your book. He said he thought he was framed by the CIA. That's a motivation.

SUMMERS: Excuse me. You said just now -- and I want to catch you on your points, because you're coming out with them one after one -- after the other. You said that you felt that the committee was wholly satisfied with your -- with your responses in general. Now, what the report actually says, in a long footnote, is that...

PHILLIPS: A footnote.

SUMMERS: Yes.

PHILLIPS: Written by Mr. Fonzi.

SUMMERS: Is that the committee suspected...

PHILLIPS: Mr. Fonzi, the man that you said had...

SUMMERS: It's in the final report of the committee...

PHILLIPS: Mr. Fonzi had nothing to do with the book.

SUMMERS: It's in the final committee report, a congressional report. Now, it says that the committee suspected that Vesiano, the witness, was lying when he denied that the retired CIA officer -- that's Mr. Phillips -- was Bishop, to protect the officer from exposure.

For his part, David Phillips, the retired officer...

PHILLIPS: I probably won't get...

SUMMERS: ...aroused the committee's suspicion when he told the committee...

PHILLIPS: I deny that I aroused the committee's suspicion.

SUMMERS: That's what it says in the congressional report.

PHILLIPS: No, that's written in a footnote...

SUMMERS: But I'm reading from the report.

PHILLIPS: Listen, I find myself in the position of having to prove a negative. I'm a writer, too. I've written three books. Now, let's say that I have a theory, and the theory is that Willard Scott's job here, it's really just a cover. Willard Scott is Santa Claus. So if I write a dishonest book, I can convince a lot of people that Willard Scott gets thin and goes down chimneys.

SUMMERS: Mr. Brokaw, I think -- I think that your audience should also know that when Mr. Phillips said that he had mixed feelings about appearing on this program, one needs to point out that he's on this program not because this program sought him out, or, indeed, because I would have wanted him to be on this program, but because he volunteered. He wrote to NBC in the advance of the program...

PHILLIPS: To defend myself.

SUMMERS: Just in case the program might be doing an item on my book. Thus has a very...

PHILLIPS: Mr. Summers, you have not accused me of taking dimes from parking meters.

SUMMERS: No.

PHILLIPS: You've accused me of being involved in the Kennedy assassination.

SUMMERS: I have done nothing of the sort.

PHILLIPS: It's false. You...

SUMMERS: I have not done...

PHILLIPS: The promotional material sent out by your publisher to this media, to the media, to book reviewers says, "The most serious accusations in the book concern a specific senior American intelligence officer."

SUMMERS: No, it does not say that. It says...

PHILLIPS: I beg your pardon.

SUMMERS: It does not say that. It says that the most specific serious allegation is the allegation that there was a link between a man named Morris Bishop and Lee Oswald. And nowhere in the book do I suggest that I know who Morris Bishop is.

PHILLIPS: It's right there.

SUMMERS: I do report the congressional -- it is not. I report the congressional committee considering...

PHILLIPS: May I have one last word?

BROKAW: You may have one last word, then Mr. Summers may have one last word. And then we have to move on to other words.

SUMMERS: I report merely that the congressional committee considered in its final report, and elsewhere, the possibility that you were Morris Bishop. You are the only name they mention as a possibility. But I have drawn no conclusions. And I certainly would now.

BROKAW: All right. Your final word, Mr....

PHILLIPS: All right.

Mr. Summers is trying to sell his book. I've read only one review. It was in The Times of London. It noted that he has a previous book, a conspiracy book, and they called that a book of immense silliness. And finally that review ended with his theory, and it stated flatly...

SUMMERS: I have to come back on that.

PHILLIPS: ..."It won't wash."

BROKAW: It won't wash.

SUMMERS: I have to come back on that one. This is the same tactic as you used in a BBC interview against the congressional investigator Fonzi. In fact, in general, in all the other serious newspapers in England, and so far in this country, my book's been reviewed well.

You called the congressional investigator a man who'd written about his paranoia about the Kennedy assassination.

PHILLIPS: That's true.

SUMMERS: The fact is -- I know the article very well. I've got it in my file here -- it's a tongue-in-cheek article by a serious journalist.

PHILLIPS: Entitled "Me and My Paranoia."

SUMMERS: That's right. And it's a tongue-in-cheek article written at the beginning of the '70s.

Mr. Fonzi is a man with a string of American investigative reporting awards from bar associations and elsewhere.

BROKAW: All right, let's move on, if we can, to your final to conclusion about it. What you generally conclude, this personality and other names beside, is that Lee Harvey Oswald -- Lee Harvey Oswald was, as I say, a kind of double agent, a man who was, in his heart, a hard conservative right-winger who was anti-Castro.

SUMMERS: No. I say that we cannot exclude that possibility.

BROKAW: But that's the general conclusion that one will have from reading the book. I mean almost everything that you develop leads in that direction.

SUMMERS: I say we can't ignore the evidence that points

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in that direction.

BROKAW: And that there ought to be another investigation.

SUMMERS: Yes. The chief counsel of Congress's Assassinations Committee, Professor Blakey, has said that there should be a Justice Department unit set up and a grand jury to work for a year to see whether arrests could be brought in the conspiracy to kill President Kennedy, which he regards as certain. He says the only way to find out is to do it. And I think that's what the Justice Department should do.

BROKAW: Mr. Summers, Mr. Phillips, obviously, as we said at the outset, we could not settle all the matters here or tidy up all the loose ends. But at least...

PHILLIPS: Goodbye, Mr. Summers. We'll be seeing each other again.

SUMMERS: No doubt.