

The Plot To Kill the Pres AN EXPERT'S 1

THEORY

by G. Robert Blakey
and Richard N. Billings

Seventeen years after John F. Kennedy was gunned down in Dallas, his murder still has not been solved. The accused assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, apparently didn't act alone. Acoustical experts have detected a fourth shot, fired, they believe, by another assailant waiting in ambush behind a grassy knoll.

Did the late mobster John Roselli know who fired the mysterious fourth bullet? Did he later confide the terrible secret to me before his own violent death? G. Robert Blakey—Chief Counsel of the House Select Committee on Assassinations—believes so. He suspects that two of the Mafia's most sinister godfathers, Carlos Marcello and Santo Trafficante, were behind the plot to kill America's 35th President.

Roselli had agreed to knock off Cuban Premier Fidel Castro for the Central Intelligence Agency in hope that a grateful U.S. government would overlook his occasional transgressions. He cleared the project with his superior in the mob, Sam Giancana, and recruited the killers from Santo Trafficante's organization.

I learned about this Mission impossible not long after it failed, and my pursuit of the story led me to Roselli. In time, he came to trust me and to confide in me. He suggested that Trafficante's assassins had been captured by Castro, who had turned them around under torture and had directed them to kill John F. Kennedy. Roselli indicated that the plotters had recruited Oswald, a sharpshooter who couldn't be traced to them. But to make sure the President died, one of Trafficante's trusted triggermen fired the fatal shot from behind the grassy knoll. After Oswald was arrested, he had to be eliminated to keep him from implicating the mob. This contract was given to a local punk, Jack Ruby, who had ties to Trafficante.

Roselli's version of the Kennedy killing, which I made public, intrigued the House Assassinations Committee. Chief Counsel Blakey—a veteran of underworld investigations and a recognized expert on organized crime—had expected to debunk all the conspiracy theories, but the deeper he dug, the more he became convinced that elements of the mob had plotted Kennedy's death.

Blakey's book, written with Richard Billings and excerpted here, makes a strong, if circumstantial, case for the mob-did-it theory. The authors depend heavily upon recorded gunfire picked up by an open police mike at the assassination scene as acoustical evidence of a fourth smoking gun. Who else fired that critical fourth shot if it wasn't a hit man for the mob? The evidence is far less conclusive of a conspiracy by any other possible plotters. And there is the haunting testimony of Roselli.

—JACK ANDERSON

In our investigation, we had an abundance of information to evaluate. There was the evidence gathered by our Committee and by government bodies that had gone before us—the FBI and the Warren Commission principally, but also the Kefauver Committee, the McClellan Committee, and the Church Committee, to name only some of them. We also assessed the assassination literature (our bibliography consisted of 1021 titles). But the known facts needed the mucilage of a theory; they had to be held together by a coherent view of what happened in Dallas.

How sound was our conclusion that organized crime was responsible for the assassination of the President?

While the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby had all of the earmarks of a gangland slaying (a key witness shot down by a shadowy figure at close range in public), that was not the case in the assassination of the President. Nevertheless, the classic pattern might be altered when it was necessary to hide the true nature of the murder, as in the assassination of a high-level government official. Someone with no traceable ties to the mob would be selected to make the hit. He probably would not be a professional killer, and he would not be told enough that he could tie the mob to the murder in the event he was caught. Usually, the assassin himself would be murdered shortly after the hit.

Generally speaking, officeholders who have been victims of organized crime violence served at a relatively low level of government, and they have been in close contact with the underworld. There was always a motive for the killing—either the official was in hot pursuit of the underworld figures who ordered his killing, or he had somehow been compromised by them. Obviously, President Kennedy was not a low-level public official. His Administration was, however, in dogged pursuit of underworld figures, as the anticrime program of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, with the full backing of the President, marked a sharp departure from the past. That the mob had the motive seemed beyond serious question.

The question of compromise was more difficult to assess. Prosecutors and other law officers have been generally agreed that organized crime will not retaliate for what is done in the line of duty. On the other hand, it is just as well understood by prosecutors and police that there is a line that must not be crossed. You are all right, it is said, just as long as you do not "sleep with them"—that is, you do not take favors, either money or sex. For the prosecutor or cop or other government official who does cross the line and then takes action against them, retaliation awaits.

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENT PETERSEN

Ident THEORY

Rumors had circulated for years of a connection between **Joseph P. Kennedy**, the President's father, and organized crime. Not long before he died in 1973, mobster **Frank Costello** told author Peter Maas that he had been in the liquor business with Kennedy in the 1930s—before the repeal of Prohibition, which would have made it illegal. Costello had, he said, "helped Kennedy become wealthy." There had been a falling-out since then, and Costello was deeply angered over the way Kennedy had snubbed him. As expected, the Kennedy family maintained that there was nothing in the elder Kennedy's business records to show a relationship with Costello or that he was involved in illegally importing liquor.

It is doubtful that a relationship between Joseph Kennedy and the underworld, even if it had existed, would have done more than color attitudes toward the President. Standing alone, it would hardly be enough to make assassination thinkable.

In November 1959, **Judith Campbell**—a 25-year-old, dark-haired divorcée who, though pretty enough to be a starlet and under contract to Warner Brothers, MGM, and Universal, had never made it in the movies—met **Frank Sinatra** and began an affair with him. Sinatra was at the time leader of the "Rat Pack," a fast-living bunch of actors and entertainers whose escapades attracted a number of hangers-on, including John Roselli, a Las Vegas figure who represented the interests of the Chicago mob in the Desert Inn and the Stardust.

On Sunday evening, Feb. 7, 1960, as he was sitting at Sinatra's table in the Sands Lounge in Las Vegas, John Kennedy was introduced by Sinatra to Judith Campbell, and a relationship began. They met again on March 7 at the Plaza Hotel in New York City, which was the first contact involving intimacy, according to Campbell. During the affair, which continued until March 22, 1962, there were repeated liaisons in Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Chicago, Palm Beach, and at the White House. They were also in regular contact by telephone.

At the same time, Campbell was in contact with a number of shady individuals—with Paul "Skinny" D'Amato, a New Jersey underworld figure who reportedly represented Sam Giancana's interests at the Cal-Neva Lodge in Lake Tahoe, Nevada; with John Roselli; and with Giancana himself. It was an investigation of Roselli that brought Campbell to the attention of the FBI.

On March 22, 1962, **J. Edgar Hoover** lunched with the President. White House records showed that the last contact with Campbell occurred later that day.

Campbell had been introduced to Sam Giancana by Frank Sinatra at the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami Beach on March 28, 1960. She claimed she was not intimate with Giancana for more than a year and a half, but she acknowledged meeting with him several times while she was "dating" the President. On more than one occasion, she saw Giancana immediately

continued

before or after being with Kennedy.

Kennedy's relationship with Campbell was quite possibly of significance with respect to the assassination. Campbell conceded in her book that perhaps she had been "used [by Giancana] almost from the beginning." As mobster Mickey Cohen put it to his biographer, Frank [Sinatra] got... [Kennedy] all the "broads he could ever have used. And these girls were not unknowns. They were all starlets...." From the mob's point of view, Kennedy had been compromised. He had crossed the line.

Our conclusion that elements of organized crime participated in the plot to assassinate President Kennedy was independently confirmed by information that **John Roselli**, the mob figure, secretly provided to **Jack Anderson**, the syndicated columnist, between early 1967 and Aug. 7, 1976, when Roselli's body was found in an oil drum floating in Dumbo Bay near North Miami Beach, Florida.

In May 1966 the FBI threatened to deport Roselli unless he cooperated in its investigation of Mafia activities. Roselli contacted Sheffield Edwards, who as director of the CIA's Office of Security had been one of the planners of the Castro assassination plots. Edwards notified the FBI that Roselli wanted to "keep square with the Bureau," but he was afraid he would be killed for "talking."

It was during this period (March 1967) that Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson published a report that **Fidel Castro** had ordered the assassination of President Kennedy in retaliation for the CIA-Mafia plots. The information had apparently come from Edward P. Morgan, a lawyer for Robert Maheu, the CIA-Mafia go-between. Roselli, through Maheu, had also contacted Morgan.

Roselli and four associates were convicted on Dec. 2, 1968, of organizing a scheme to cheat in card games at the exclusive Friars Club in Beverly Hills. He was sentenced to five years in the federal penitentiary at McNeil Island, Washington.

Following his release from McNeil Island in 1973, Roselli was in direct touch with Anderson. Bit by bit over the next two years, Roselli, according to Anderson, confided to him what he knew about the Kennedy assassination, on the condition that Anderson not reveal his identity. The details that Roselli supplied in their face-to-face meetings, according to Anderson, linked the Mafia directly to the assassination. It was the work of Cubans connected to **Santo Trafficante**, according to Roselli, and **Lee Harvey Oswald** had been recruited as a decoy. Oswald may have fired at the President, but the fatal shot was fired from close range. Once Oswald was captured, the mob arranged to have him killed by **Jack Ruby**, who, Roselli told Anderson, had not been in on the assassination itself. (Anderson told us that Roselli had characterized Ruby as just a "punk.") Roselli said it was also his theory that Castro was behind the assassination. He said he knew that a team that had been sent to kill Castro had been captured and tortured, and he believed that Castro might have formed an alliance with Trafficante to kill Kennedy.

In making a credibility assessment, we were impressed by the fact that certain aspects of Roselli's account came tellingly close to what we knew to be the truth. An important aspect of Roselli's statements to Anderson—the fact that the fatal shot

had been fired from close range—was not shown to be true (at least to the extent that a shot was fired from the grassy knoll, although it actually missed) until our investigation in 1978. Roselli could not, in short, have been aware of the fact of a shot from the knoll unless he had inside information.

We learned from the analysis of the acoustics evidence that the shot from the grassy knoll, fired some 111 feet from the limousine, preceded the fatal head shot, which was fired by Oswald from the Texas School Book Depository, by less than seven-tenths of a second. The gunman behind the picket fence on the knoll could not have heard the report of Oswald's rifle due to the near-simultaneous sound of his own weapon. He had watched as Oswald fired the first two shots—missing completely on the first and just wounding the President on the second. Then, as he squeezed the trigger, the President's head exploded, so he must have believed—and have told the men who sent him to Dealey Plaza—that it was his shot that killed the President. Roselli's report that Kennedy was killed by a close-range ambush therefore had the ring of inside information to it, information that could only have originated with the gunman himself.

The same was true of Roselli's report that Cubans were Oswald's co-conspirators, since Oswald did, in fact, have a number of associations with Cubans. The efforts of the Warren Commission to dismiss these associations seemed to us to be strained and artificial. Taken together with the fact of the second gunman and the Roselli account of how Oswald was recruited by Cuban agents of Santo Trafficante, they formed a pattern, we believed, that could be stitched into a tapestry depicting the true nature of the plot.

Roselli made two appearances before the Church Committee. On June 24, 1975, he told in detail of his part in the CIA-Mafia plots, and 10 months later, on April 23, 1976, he was grilled about his Castro retaliation theory. He told the Church Committee that he had no evidence to support it. It was following Roselli's appearance on June 24, 1975, that a contract for his murder was approved by the national organized-crime commission, according to Nicholas Gage of *The New York Times*, who said his information came from a Mafia figure who was in a position to know.

If Roselli was killed for what he knew about the assassination, and if the killing was related to the CIA-Mafia plots, what about the murder of **Sam Giancana**, who had come to Miami on Sept. 24, 1960, to plot the assassination of Castro with Roselli and Trafficante? Like Roselli, Giancana was being pursued by the authorities in the period following the CIA-Mafia plots.

In 1974, Giancana appeared before the grand jury on four occasions and met with federal investigators three other times, but according to Peter Vaira, the chief of the Department of Justice Strike Force in Chicago in 1974, he was "evasive and uncooperative." Privately, Giancana told friends he would do anything to keep from "rotting in jail," but he assured mob leaders that he was not cooperating.

On Thursday, July 19, 1975, staff representatives of the Church Committee arrived in Chicago to arrange for Giancana's appearance in Washington to testify about the CIA-Mafia assassination plots. That evening Giancana was in his basement with someone he apparently knew and trusted. As with the President, it

was a bullet in the back of the head that ended his life. But Giancana was shot also in the mouth and neck—seven times in all.


David Shippers, the government lawyer who had pursued Giancana, thought he had been silenced. "When there's a hit like this one—shots in the face and throat," Shippers observed, "it is typical of a Mafioso killing—in the throat to show you've been talking, and in the mouth to show you won't talk any more." Yet it was unclear what Giancana might have been talking about—mob activities in Chicago, the CIA-Mafia plots, the assassination of President Kennedy? Members of Giancana's family thought they knew. One of his daughters, Antoinette, insisted that her father had been killed "by the same people responsible for killing the Kennedys."

On Nov. 22, 1963, Attorney General **Robert F. Kennedy** presided over an organized-crime meeting attended by Kennedy's senior staff and U.S. attorneys from around the country. He was at Hickory Hill, his Virginia estate, for lunch, when he heard the news from Dallas. Late that afternoon, he was with Edwin Guthman, his press assistant. "I thought they might get one of us," he said, "but Jack, after all he'd been through, never worried about it. ... I thought it would be me."

Those who knew Robert Kennedy best talked of the depths of his suffering during this period. Many also speculated that there was more to it than merely the loss of his brother. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., for example, reported a conversation with Kennedy on Dec. 9, 1963, when he said that there could be no serious doubt that Oswald was involved, but there was still argument as to whether he had done it by himself or as part of a larger plot, "whether organized by Castro or by gangsters." Kennedy knew about the CIA-Mafia plots. Could they have led to retaliation?

On Sept. 28, 1978, as our public hearings were drawing to a close, the final witness before our Committee was **Judge Burt W. Griffin**, who in 1964 was one of two Warren Commission attorneys responsible for the Ruby aspect of the investigation.

Judge Griffin put his finger on a crucial fact, one often overlooked in analyses of the President's death: the great problem of obtaining "proof of conspiracy" in a free society. He directed our Committee's attention to the "reality that under the American system of civil liberties and the requirement [for a criminal conviction] of proof beyond a reasonable doubt ... it is virtually impossible to prosecute or uncover a well-conceived and well-executed conspiracy." Almost prophetically, Judge Griffin said: "The few successful ... [prosecutions of a sophisticated conspiracy] ... almost always result from accidental discover[ies]." That explained, he suggested, why our society had "almost totally failed in its efforts ... to prosecute the organized commission of crime."

It was difficult to disagree with Judge Griffin's perceptive comments. Yet there is another point that must be made. Truth has a way of taking care of itself. Chaucer said it well, as our investigation showed: Murder will out. 

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