CRIME

The Mafia Bug

Shortly before dawn one morning last week, 1,200 plainclothesmen fanned out through metropolitan New York to serve 677 subpoenas in what Brooklyn District Attorney Eugene Gold expansively called "the most massive investigation of organized crime in the history of this country." Later Gold climbed into his aquamarine Cadillac and led two busloads of reporters to a gangland "summit headquarters"—a grimy, nondescript house trailer in a Brooklyn junkyard called Bargain Auto Parts Inc. Then, standing on a box inside the two-room trailer, Gold stripped away a section of ceiling insulation and tenderly removed a tiny microphone and a transmitter slightly larger than a pack of cigarettes. The bugging device, Gold explained, had been eavesdropping on the Mafia inner sanctum for six months, dutifully recording what his aides described as "a crime story bigger than Appalachin and the Valachi papers combined."

It was hardly that. Though Gold predicts that the evidence amassed by him could "break the back" of organized crime, doubters point out that no subpoena was served on Carlo Gambino, the ailing "boss of bosses." Nonetheless, the investigation affords an intriguing look at the workings of both cops and *capos* and if Gold is right could result in a stunning series of indictments that would attack New York's embattled Mafia clans on yet another front.

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GOLD DISPLAYING BUGGING DEVICE
Eavesdropping on an inner sanctum.

The investigation began in December when police, disguised as Christmas-tree salesmen, set up shop across the street from a Brooklyn bar frequented by mobsters. The surveillance led police to the junkyard trailer where Paul Vario, a *capo* in the Mafia family of Carmine Tramunti, either met or conferred on three phones with, according to Gold, "all the top members of organized crime." Gold, alluding to an "imaginative and innovative approach," is not saying precisely how the bugging device was planted, but it is known that an FBI informer who had unchallenged access to the trailer played a crucial role in installing the "Gold bug."

Setting up an observation post on the top floor of a high school across the street from the junkyard, police compiled a staggering mass of evidence. The bugging device provided more than 300 miles of tape-recorded conversations. Telephone wiretaps produced an additional 21,600 ft. of tape, and 36,000 ft. of color movie film and 54,000 photographs were taken of suspects entering and leaving the trailer. "The view from the summit has not been pretty," said Gold. "We have learned of deals involving the sale of narcotics, extortion and loan-sharking, corruption, coercion, bookmaking, policy, assault and robbery, burglaries, counterfeiting, hijacking, receiving stolen property, forgery, possession and sale of weapons, labor racketeering, stolen-auto rings, untaxed cigarettes, insurance frauds, arson of businesses, the cutting up of autos and boats, prostitution and violations of Alcohol Beverage Control Laws."

Promising indictments "within ten days," Gold said that a Brooklyn grand jury would be given evidence involving "nearly 200" legitimate businesses that have been infiltrated or taken over by the Mob. Subpoenas were served on Mafia Chieftain Tramunti, the compromise successor to the leadership of the once powerful family run by the late Thomas Luchese, and at least three local officials.

Also under investigation, primarily for accepting payoffs, were 100 policemen who visited the trailer. In one passage on the tape, Vario is heard to remark as a cop approaches the trailer: "Here comes that greedy son of a bitch." Then, as the cop enters, Vario says warmly: "Hiya, pal!" The bugging of the trailer was supposedly made public, in fact, because a high-ranking police officer on the take tipped off Vario and his cronies to the telephone taps.

Though some experts on the Mafia question whether a mobster of Vario's relatively low rank could run as important and widespread an operation as Gold claims, there is hope that the district attorney will be able to make at least some of his charges stick. Predicting "additional sensational developments" in the months to come, Gold says: "I think we could see a couple hundred of these fellows going to jail. That would be unparalleled."