

Serious issue in JFK-Mafia link is murder

How do you know it's a Mafia hit?
By William Safire

THE REVELATION that the president of the United States had regular access to a woman who may have been controlled by two Mafia gangsters hired by the CIA to kill Fidel Castro has had the expected reaction: Prurient interest, compounded daily, in the logistics of White House sex, whether Jackie knew, etc.

Forget all that. The serious issue in the Kennedy-Mafia connection is murder — "murder most foul, as in the best it is." Not hanky-panky, not graft, not abuse of civil liberty — but murder and attempted murder at the highest level that spans 15 years.

The Church Cover-up Committee likes to say it "has had no hard evidence" of Kennedy's knowledge of the murder assignment of his girlfriend's boyfriends. "Has no evidence" is a rhetorical trick, intended to leave the impression that no evidence could be found, but can really mean that no thorough search for evidence was conducted.

The first murder target was Castro, against whom the Kennedy men and the Mafia shared a hatred. The second might have been Kennedy himself, in retaliation or self-protection. The most recent, only six months ago, was Sam Giancana, the Chicago mobster who failed to carry out his mission to hit Castro, and who presumably encouraged one of his

girls to nourish a White House-Mafia liaison.

Giancana was shot dead in his Oak Park, Illinois, home, after the Church committee had decided to subpoena his testimony. He is the only person in American history to be murdered just before he was to appear in front of a congressional committee.

What was the reaction to this unique event? Church committee sources, Mafia sources and Chicago police sources (who share an interest in forgetting Giancana) all put out the line that the murder was probably an old Mafia grudge fight, unrelated to any impending testimony. Church's colleague in cover-up, Sen. John Tower of Texas, promptly declared that Giancana would not have been "a particularly valuable witness."

I don't believe any of that pap. I suggest that two and two make four: That Sam Giancana took seven .22-caliber slugs in his head and body to keep him from telling all he knew.

And how has the Senate, so sensitive to contempt, reacted to the first murder of a witness to be called before a Senate committee? Did Chairman Church demand that the FBI enter the case to explore this most effective obstruction of justice?

No. An FBI spokesman informs me that nobody has asked the FBI to investigate, and not one agent has ever been assigned to the case. Sam Skinner, U.S. attorney in Chicago,

adds that murder is not a federal crime, so he's out of it. Chicago police reply that the murder took place in the suburbs, outside their jurisdiction, and they're out of it. (The two Chicago policemen who had been parked outside the Giancana house, and who suddenly left their post, just before the murder, will probably get a medal.)

That leaves the investigation of the murder of the only Mafia hood who might have penetrated the White House in the hands of Cook County State's Attorney Bernard Carey, a good man doing the best he can, but life in Cook County is a struggle: A local judge was able to block search of the dead Giancana's safe for several months. (When it was finally opened, the judge's name appeared on a list of those who gave generous wedding presents to Giancana's daughter.)

The Cook County grand jury is not thinking in terms of national, or Mafia-wide, implications, and has not even called John Roselli, Giancana's lieutenant. "We've had difficulties," admits Carey, "we get a runaround from federal authorities."

A couple of local cops in suburban Oak Park still show an interest, and have found the murder weapons. Unlike Church, at least one cop on the scene thinks the mobster's impending testimony was the cause of his demise.

"Giancana had something to say,"

says Lt. Donald Corkle of the Oak Park police. But what of Giancana's fabled willingness to sit in jail without talking, which he had done before? Why should the Mafia worry about him spilling secrets of a White House penetration to the Senate committee?

"He just got out of the hospital the day before he was killed. He sure didn't want to go to jail, not in the shape he was in. They knew that, and they got worried about him."

Not an important witness, Tower assures us. Not relevant, Church insists. Forget it; just a gangland "termination with extreme prejudice."

But the dead body of Sam Giancana lies across Frank Church's path to the presidency. Only the appointment of a special prosecutor at the request of the Senate — a new "untouchable" with full powers to explore the White House-Mafia connections that led to Giancana's murder and cover-up — will uncover a potential scandal that most Washington politicians and journalists wish would go away.

Church cannot slam back down the lid of Pandora's box now that he has glimpsed the evil that lurks therein. As that great matchmaker of Mafia hoodlums, good-looking women and a president of the United States used to croon: "All — or nothing at all."

Safire, a former aide to President Nixon, is a columnist for the New York Times.