

Incendiary JFK Story Goes Up In Smoke

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Papers Linked to Monroe
Now Thought to Be Fakes

By Lloyd Grove
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Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative ace Seymour Hersh has been toiling for the past four years on "The Dark Side of Camelot," yet another exposé of John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert and their allegedly seamy secret lives among mobsters, spies and movie stars.

But Hersh planned to render those other hundreds of books passe—and make legions of historians gasp—by drawing on a cache of secret papers provided to him by the son of a long-dead New York lawyer. The documents were said to provide the strongest-ever evidence for such rumored Kennedy dirt as the annulment of JFK's supposed first marriage, the president's entanglement with mobster Sam Giancana, and—most sensational of all—his agreement to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars in hush money to his lover Marilyn Monroe.

Based largely on the promise of these startling revelations, Hersh's publisher, Little, Brown, has been gearing up for a blockbuster, ordering a huge first printing of 350,000 copies for the book's release in mid-November. ABC News, working with Hersh, has been planning a sizzling documentary for the November ratings sweeps.

But a funny thing has happened on the way to bestsellerdom: Hersh—who was in the habit of bringing copies of the secret papers to his interviews with Kennedy intimates and flashing them like a magician—has concluded at the 11th hour that many of the documents are fakes.

See HERSH, C8, Col. 1

'Kennedy Papers' Fakes

HERSH, From C1

"That's journalism," an otherwise uncommunicative Hersh said yesterday, attempting to minimize the controversy over the secret papers—whose apparent discrediting has required extensive revisions by Hersh to delete them from the 450-page book. "I'm sorry if people want to magnify and dramatize. . . . Big deal."

But ABC News, for one, thinks it is a big deal. Tonight's installment of "20/20" will feature a report on "the bizarre story of the 'Kennedy documents,'" says an ABC press release. The program will assert that some of the documents, particularly those involving the president and the film siren, are forgeries.

That charge is hotly disputed by Lex Cusack, son of the late Lawrence Cusack, a New York tax attorney and, according to his son, an informal JFK adviser. After his father died at age 66 in 1985, Cusack said he discovered about 300 pages of Kennedy papers in his father's private files—papers which he claims were authenticated by experts.

He agreed to let Hersh use the papers in 1995, and was later put on a \$25,000 retainer by ABC News. "I thought we were all on the same team," Cusack said yesterday, noting that he has received only half of his fee. He added that Hersh hasn't returned his phone calls since late August, when ABC anchor Peter Jennings surprised Cusack with a series of accusatory questions about his father's papers during an on-camera interview.

"I totally relied on Seymour Hersh," Cusack said from his Southport,

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—Gore Vidal

Conn., home, "and he continually reassured me of the correctness of what was going on, and of the veracity and authenticity of documents, and suddenly he totally abandoned it. What would your reaction be?"

"I'm glad he feels burned," Hersh responded. "If the experts we've hired—not one, not two, but three—are saying that he is committing etcetera . . . that seems appropriate."

Meanwhile, ABC News President David Westin said yesterday there is no guarantee he will follow through on plans to air the documentary based on Hersh's book.

"We haven't booked anything. We haven't made a final decision," Westin said of the November program, which is being prepared by an outside production company under the auspices of former ABC News producer Mark Obenhaus. "It depends on exactly what we have," Westin continued. "I don't think it's a question of enthusiasm. We're just making sure that what we have is compelling reporting rather than reviewing things that have been said before. And we have to be absolutely confident in the accuracy."

This hedging by ABC is "news to me," said a clearly concerned Sarah Crichton, publisher at Little, Brown, whose promotional push for the Hersh book could use a powerful boost from the network documentary.

Hersh, of course, could have expected a huge media windfall from the Marilyn Monroe revelation, and until June, was hopeful of its accuracy. Among those to whom he showed the Monroe documents—in which the

president seemed to be promising to give Monroe, through the screen of her mother, a million-dollar trust fund in return for her silence—was author and Kennedy intimate Gore Vidal.

"The marginal notes made by Jack seemed very much in his handwriting," Vidal told The Post's David Streitfeld. "You didn't forget it once you saw it—it was sort of a vigorous 9-year-old valiantly combating dyslexia."

These notes included, Vidal said, the president's stipulations to the deal: "No mention—," a cryptic reference to himself; "No mention R"—presumably Bobby Kennedy; and "No mention SG"—presumably mob chief Sam Giancana.

On an additional handwritten sheet, Kennedy had listed all of his siblings, with the amount toward the million dollars they would each pony up to pay off Monroe's blackmail.

"He was titling them—\$50,000 from one, and so on. He then tries to add it all up, and it's nowhere near a million. I thought it was extremely touching, the fact that he couldn't add."

Vidal said elements such as these gave the document the appearance of authenticity, but stressed that he didn't know. "Let us say if Sy Hersh has misunderstood all of this and been taken for a ride, he's been taken for a ride by a master. It's brilliant stuff."

"The last time I talked to Sy, I said, 'How are you doing sleuthing the Monroe thing?'" Vidal recalled. "And he said, 'It may prove all to be untrue.' But if he's having second thoughts about any documents, it's a sign of his integrity as a journalist. He's trying to look into the vast cesspool of American politics."

Staff writer David Streitfeld contributed to this report.