

Jack Anderson's Washington Merry-go-round

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BY JACK ANDERSON
With Les Whitten

WASHINGTON — Mafia mobster John Roselli may have taken the secret of the John F. Kennedy assassination with him to his death. He was brutally murdered a few weeks ago, his hacked-up body stuffed into an oil drum and dumped into Miami's Biscayne Bay.

Before he died, Roselli hinted to associates that he knew who had arranged President Kennedy's murder. It was the same conspirators, he suggested, whom he had recruited earlier to kill Cuban Premier Fidel Castro.

By Roselli's cryptic account, Castro learned the identity of the underworld contacts in Havana who had been trying to knock him off. He believed, not altogether without basis, that President Kennedy was behind the plot.

The Cuban leader, as the supreme irony, decided to turn the tables and use the same crowd to arrange Kennedy's assassination, according to Roselli's scenario. To save their skins, the plotters lined up Lee Harvey Oswald to pull the trigger.

Roselli could never be pinned down on names or details. It was also difficult to assess whether he knew what he was talking about or whether he merely described what he thought might have happened. Certainly there is no real evidence to support Roselli's story. But there are enough curious circumstances to justify telling it. Here are the fascinating highlights.

The ruggedly handsome Roselli, a flamboyant mobster with underworld contacts in Havana, was recruited by the General Intelligence Agency in 1960 to assassinate Castro. He had no authority, however, over the underworld elements in Havana.

They were under the loose control of Florida's Mafia chieftan, Santos Trafficante. His gambling enterprises in Havana had been closed down by Castro after the 1959 revolution. In fact, Trafficante had been lodged for a period in a Cuban jail, an indignity that didn't near Castro to him.

After Trafficante made it back to his Florida haunts, he left part of his organization behind in Havana. Some of his henchmen even managed to develop contacts in Castro's inner circle. These were the people Roselli wanted to use to knock off Castro.

But Roselli didn't have the stature inside the Mafia to make the necessary arrangements with Trafficante. So Roselli called in his patron, the Chicago godfather Sam "Momo" Giancana, to deal with Trafficante.

As Roselli's associates tell it, he

persuaded Giancana that it would be to their advantage to win the good will of the CIA. Convinced, Giancana flew down to Florida to make the preliminary arrangements.

He was in the middle of these delicate dealings, incidentally, when he learned that this favorite girl friend, singer Phyllis McGuire, had developed a romantic attachment in Las Vegas to comedian Dan Rowan. Enraged, Giancana wanted to fly straight to Las Vegas and end the romance.

But Robert Maheu, who had recruited Roselli for the CIA, talked Giancana out of it by offering to bug Rowan's hotel room and promising the angry mobster a full report.

Once Giancana and Trafficante set it up, Roselli used the Havana underworld to plot Castro's demise. At first, they

tried to plant poison pills, supplied by the CIA, in Castro's food. The pills would have made it appear that he died of natural causes. When this failed, snipers were dispatched to a Havana rooftop. They were caught.

The word reached Roselli that some of the plotters had been tortured and that Castro had learned about the whole operation.

The CIA called off the Roselli operation in March, 1963, but recruited a Castro associate named Rolando Cubela to murder Castro.

In an impromptu, three-hour interview with Associated Press reporter Daniel Harker, Castro indicated that he knew about the attempts on his life and warned that U.S. leaders also might not be safe. That was September 7, 1963.

According to Roselli, Castro enlisted the same underworld elements whom he had caught plotting against him. They supposedly were Cubans from the old Trafficante organization. Working with Cuban intelligence, they allegedly lined up an ex-Marine sharpshooter named Lee Harvey Oswald, who had been active in the pro-Castro movement.

According to Roselli's version, Oswald may have shot Kennedy or may have acted as a decoy while others ambushed him from closer range. When Oswald was picked up, Roselli suggested, the underworld conspirators feared he would crack and disclose information that might lead to them. This almost certainly would have brought a massive U.S. crackdown on the Mafia.

So Jack Ruby was ordered to eliminate Oswald, making it appear as an act of reprisal against the President's killer. At least this is how Roselli explained the

tragedy in Dallas.

There is no proof, of course. But there is some corroborative, circumstantial evidence. It has been established, for example, that Oswald visited the Cuban consulate in Mexico City two months before the dreadful day in Dallas. An informant named Sylva Duran first stated, then denied, that she had overheard the Cubans speak to Oswald about assassinating someone and had seen them slip him some money.

Several key CIA officials believed that Castro was behind the Kennedy assassination. Two days after the shooting, the CIA cabled from Mexico City that Ambassador Thomas Mann felt the Soviets were too sophisticated to participate in a direct assassination of the President but that the Cubans would have been stupid enough to recruit Oswald.

It has also been established that Jack Ruby indeed had been in Cuba and had connections in the Havana underworld. One CIA cable, dated November 28, 1963, reported that "an American gangster-type named Ruby" had visited Santos Trafficante in his Cuban prison.

Roselli was questioned about the Kennedy assassination behind closed doors by the Senate Intelligence Committee. The transcript is stamped "Top Secret." We can report, however, that Roselli did not tell the senators the same story that he had confided to associates. He said it was his opinion that the plot against Castro had backfired and that Castro had arranged for Kennedy's death. But Roselli stressed that this was merely his own speculation.

Sens. Richard Schweiker, R.-Pa. and Howard Baker, R.-Tenn., indicated that

they believed Roselli was holding back information. But the mobster insisted he could give them nothing but his opinion.

Footnote: As to the Giancana episode, Maheu refused comment. A spokesman for Rowan said he and Miss McGuire were "just old friends. There was no hot romance." Miss McGuire could not be

reached. On Roselli's tale of the Cuban connection, David Belin, Assistant Counsel of the Warren Commission, said he believed Jack Ruby was "not conspiratorially involved." He said he knew of no direct evidence of domestic or foreign conspiracy in the assassination of President Kennedy.

Jack Anderson and Les Whitten

Behind John F. Kennedy's Murder

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