

By JIM WASHBURN
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

ATENTION CONSPIRACY FANS: Here's yet another Kennedy conspiracy tale for you. It's got a new cast of characters. It's got secretive government directives of suspect motive. An it's got conflicting stories.

Let's start in August of this year when Christopher Kamar, 33, of Newport Beach was examining the archives of his family's defunct business, Kamar Inc., in Torrance. It had been a toy company, so he was going through box after box of cuddly stuffed animals—known in the industry as "plush toys."

"There were nearly 1,000 boxes in three rooms," he recalled. "It was my third day of going through all the dirt and dust and whatnot. Everything was starting to look the same, then all of a sudden I opened up a large box and saw all these bodies with their heads chopped off. I'd heard stories growing up, but I was astonished to come across them."

The doll torsos, all in natty business suits, were collateral victims of that dreadful day in Dallas, Nov. 22, 1963. Originally they had been marketed for \$6.95, seated in musical rocking chairs that played "Happy Days Are Here Again." They had heads then, bearing the likeness of President John F. Kennedy.

On the evening of the day Kennedy was shot, comedian Lenny Bruce was booked to appear at Carnegie Hall. Sure, the show must go on, but what could he say? How could he even begin that night? He came onstage, stood silent at the microphone for a long tense while. Finally, he sighed and said, "Man, poor Vaughn Meader."

Just as Meader, the famed Kennedy mimic, was suddenly out of a job, so had Kamar's toy become unsuitable for store shelves.

"What was once 'lifelike plastic' to people overnight began to look waxen and dead to them," recalled Christopher's mother, Astrid Blaker, who had run Kamar Inc. with former husband Pascal Kamar, who designed the doll.

Family recollections and government documents differ, though, as to the date and nature of the dolls' fate. Christopher Kamar recalls being told

J.F.K., the

After the Assassination, Most of the Toys Were

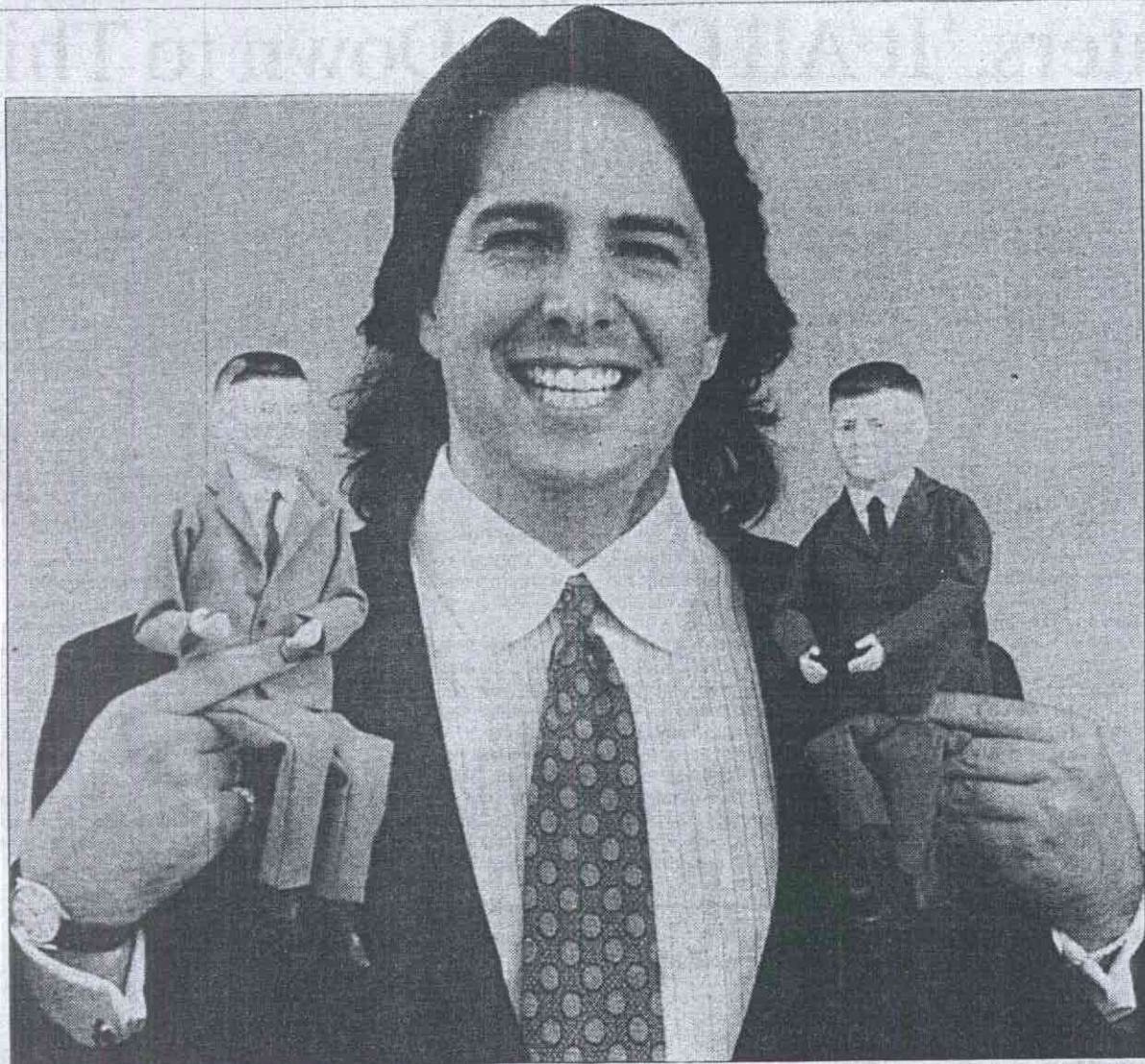
Doll

Destroyed—but 50 Escaped

by his father—currently traveling out of the country—that the dolls were driven off the market at the behest of the White House before the assassination. His mother agrees there was White House pressure, but says the toys remained a hot item on the market until Kennedy was assassinated.

In either event, when the dolls were returned, the company decapitated them and threw thousands of the little J.F.K. heads into dumpsters. One can only imagine the uniquely traumatizing effect that might have had on city sanitation employees on collection day.

The resourceful Kamars then created a line of Ma and Pa Kettle dolls to seat in the rocking chairs, while the business-suited Kennedy torsos got a new head that eerily foreshadows later revelations about J.F.K.'s love life; that of the Playboy rabbit. Over the next couple of years, the company was able to sell off the hare-headed dolls and recoup its losses.



GLENN KOENIG / Los Angeles Times

Chris Kamar again is marketing the Kennedy dolls that his parents manufactured, then tried to destroy, in the 1960s.

And there ended the story of the Kennedy rocking-chair doll—until August, when Christopher Kamar plunged his hands into the newly discovered box of torsos and found one with a head, then another and another—50 in all—stored at the bottom of the box, along with the artwork for the original packaging.

"I'd heard the story of this doll around the dinner table when I was growing up, but I didn't realize the significance of what I was looking at until I came across the complete dolls," Kamar said. Once he recognized the piece of family history he'd found, he realized it might well have a wider interest.

Toward that end, he has made reproduction rocking chairs—non-musical this time—and is packaging each of the seated, newspaper-reading dolls in a deluxe case with a Lucite dome and a gold-and-parquetry-trimmed walnut base. Each is signed by his father and

accompanied by a copy of the original packaging as well as a booklet reproducing the White House correspondence regarding the doll.

Kamar says he has already sold one for \$25,000 and is taking bids for the rest of the series, starting at \$30,000 for No. 1. He hopes to get at least \$20,000 a pop for the rest. He's keeping No. 50 for himself. They are being made available through his Costa Mesa-based business, Kingdom of Promotions.

Sure, \$30,000 might seem a little steep for a doll, compared to the four Toyota pickups you could buy for the same amount. Bea DeArmond of the Doll Museum in Anaheim says \$45 would be a more reasonable price for the doll. She has sold several that she found in a Pie 'N' Save in 1964.

Kamar says the rarity, history and designer-signed packaging of the J.F.K. doll justify the price.

"I don't know where anyone will ever see anything like this otherwise,

and with only 50, that means only one person per state will have one," he reasons. His goal is to make enough to be able to restart his family's company which was liquidated two years ago.

Palestinian emigrant Pascal Kamar, 70, had imported wooden furniture from the Middle East until the late 1950s, when he designed and marketed a wiry little doll called Hexter, which sold a couple of million copies.

By 1962, he and Blaker, who was then his wife, were well established in the toy business.

One day, he decided a Kennedy doll would be a good idea. "We didn't vote for him, but [Pascal] thought it would be a good product," Blaker said.

Pascal spent months in Japan putting the design into production, came back with a prototype in October, 1962, and salesmen displayed the doll at a toy fair in February, 1963, taking \$1 million in orders.

The first major shipment came from Japan in June, but the rocking chairs arrived broken. A second load sank, Blaker said. They finally were shipped to stores in early August.

The Broadway ran a full-page ad in The Times announcing the doll as "the adult toy of the year." ("Adult toy" had a different connotation then, innocently meaning the 11-inch J.F.K. was intended more as a conversation piece than a kid's plaything.)

In May, the Kamars had sent gifts of the doll to Kennedy and to political rival Barry Goldwater. In a letter dated June 3, 1963, Kennedy's personal secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, wrote back:

Dear Mr. Kamar: I have been pleased to acknowledge, with thanks, the miniature rocking chair-music box you recently sent to the President. He very much appreciated your thoughtfulness in bringing your newest product to his attention.

The letter signed off with "the President's cordial good wishes." Once the product was in the stores, however, the White House response was far less

cordial. In correspondence Christopher Kamar recently obtained from the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library in Boston, Lee C. White, assistant special counsel to the President, wrote to the National Better Business Bureau complaining the doll was a "violation of the President's policy" and said anything the Bureau could do to stop the product would be appreciated.

The matter was, in turn, referred to the Los Angeles Better Business Bureau with the stated goal of getting the manufacturer to discontinue production. On Aug. 27, White was sent word that the Broadway had been contacted and had stopped selling the doll and that the cooperation of Kamar was being sought in discontinuing it.

On Sept. 4, Kamar sent a desperate-sounding telegram to the President, reading, in part:

We have thousands of dozens J.F.K. on Rocker in our warehouse that need to be sold. If this pressure is kept up we will be in grave financial condition. Please refer to your personal letter of some months ago. This item is tastefully made and we find it strange our own government is trying to put us out of business.

Christopher Kamar says his understanding of the story was that the dolls were indeed recalled and beheaded well before Kennedy was killed. Blaker says, however, that she is certain they had remained on the market until the assassination despite the pressure.

She very well recalls the hour Ken-

nedey was shot, not only in common with the horror and loss the nation felt, but because her and her husband's fortunes were tied up in the doll. She had been at the hairdressers when the word came on the radio. She came home "and my husband's hair had actually turned gray. It was incredible. He was shocked beyond belief. All his work and everything we owned were tied up in that product."

The company went through a very trying period after that and barely remained afloat. They eventually rebounded, to the degree that they manufactured the popular E.T. dolls in the early '80s, before the pair divorced and eventually dissolved the company.

Please see **DOLLS, E5**

DOLLS

Continued from E3

Why would the offices of the most powerful nation in the world be concerned with a \$6.95 made-in-Japan doll?

Christopher Kamar says it was because an election year was coming and the toy depicted Kennedy in a rocking chair, which might

bring to mind the President's barely-spoken-of health problems when people went to vote.

Blaker said she'd also heard the objections were election-related. Her Broadway contacts told her the White House objected to the "Happy Days Are Here Again" tune, because the Republicans had been successfully ridiculing it.

Kamar was only 3 when Kennedy died. It might seem like a kid's dream to have toy manufac-

turers for parents, but he says, "The funny thing is I never really had an appreciation for my dad's talents until I matured. I was going off to military and private schools getting an education, so I wasn't playing with the toys.

"Later, I saw how much care and work he put into them. I started working for the company when I was 15, riding my bike there and working in the warehouse. One job I remember was replacing little

improved beepers into a bear called Dear Heart. It was the first toy with a mother's heartbeat."

He went on to design some of the company's toys and says he has many more designs he would like to implement if marketing his J.F.K. find provides the needed capital.

"It would be a wonderful world if it was Kamar's product that revitalized Kamar and allowed me to open up the doors again," he said.