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Hoffa Tipster Gone; CBS Is Out \$10,000

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KEY WEST, Fla., Dec. 8—

About 4 o'clock last Friday morning, a tough-talking man who said his name was Chuck Medlin—identified by the Justice Department as an ex-convict—left the downtown Holiday Inn in Tampa, Fla., to try to find his cousin. He has not returned.

In his pocket, Mr. Medlin apparently carried almost \$10,000 that CBS had advanced in return for his promise to lead a television news team to the body of James R. Hoffa, the former president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters who disappeared last July 30.

Mr. Medlin's disappearance was part of a bizarre series of events—which shed some light

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on the vagaries of investigative journalism—that began about a week ago when Mr. Medlin persuaded a North Carolina freelance writer that he could produce Mr. Hoffa's body.

Before the story ended, it involved not only CBS but also an editor of Harpers magazine, the Tampa police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. And it led this last weekend to a fruitless boat search for Mr. Hoffa's body by a crew sent by CBS to film the story.

The New York Times learned of the situation last Thursday night in a telephone call from the freelance writer, Patrick O'Keefe, who said he felt that widespread publication of the story might protect those involved from any efforts at revenge for finding the body. A Times reporter was sent to Tampa early Friday, but when he arrived he found Mr. O'Keefe upset and Mr. Medlin gone.

Mr. O'Keefe had made several hours of tape recordings of interviews he had with Mr. Medlin and of his own negotiations with CBS, and from these tapes and from further interviews the story was unraveled.

Inquiry About Book

The series of events began at Greensboro, N.C., last Mon-

day when Mr. Medlin called the English department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and said that he wanted to talk about writing a book. A secretary referred him to Robert Watson, a poet who teaches creative writing at the university.

Mr. Watson said that there was such an aura of violence about Mr. Medlin that he quickly became terrified of him and told Mr. Medlin that writing a book about Mr. Hoffa's disappearance could best be done by a journalist. Mr. Watson said that he had given Mr. Medlin the names of a couple of newsmen, including Mr. O'Keefe, a 33-year-old journalist-teacher who had worked for The Associated Press in New York, Chicago and Rome and later for The Greensboro, Record.

The feeling of terror that Mr. Watson said he felt was reported by others who came into contact with Mr. Medlin last week. Until he walked off into the predawn darkness in Tampa on Friday, people around Mr. Medlin leaped to do his bidding, even trying to anticipate his wishes, while he coldly issued orders. He frequently uttered oaths, they said threatening to kill everybody in sight.

Mr. Medlin quickly persuaded Mr. O'Keefe, according to the writer, that he knew that Mr. Hoffa was dead and that he knew where the body was. He also persuaded Mr. O'Keefe that he was as tough as he said he was. Demonstrating how quickly he could move his hand, Mr. O'Keefe said, Mr. Medlin accidentally hit him in the left eye, giving him a shiner that turned from red to purple to yellow as the week more away.

Mr. O'Keefe said he took Mr. Medlin to his Tuesday journalism class where Mr. Medlin told a fascinated group of students that he had been a "hit man" for the teamsters union. (A Justice Department source said there were no indications that this was true.)

According to Mr. O'Keefe, Mr. Medlin said that he was in Greensboro to murder a union official who had alienated favor with his associates, and he had decided to tell what he

knew about the Hoffa disappearance because he had had a strong friendship with the one-time union leader.

Mr. Medlin said, the writer recounted, that he had learned the details of Mr. Hoffa's disappearance from a professional murderer in Miami. Mr. Medlin said he had "stuck a gun barrel down his throat" and that the man had told him that Mr. Hoffa had been shot to death on a fishing trip to Key West.

Mr. Medlin said, according to the writer, that Mr. Hoffa's body was encased in concrete, lying on the ocean floor in 12 miles of water two and a half miles off Key West.

Much of the story attributed to Mr. Medlin is manifestly untrue. The details given by Mr. Medlin do not fit the specifics of Mr. Hoffa's disappearance as reconstructed by federal investigators and by newsmen who covered it.

Uneasy Feeling Recalled

Nevertheless, Harpers magazine, which Mr. O'Keefe had called about the story, was sufficiently intrigued to advance \$700 toward an article about it, and Mr. O'Keefe and Mr. Medlin flew to New York last Wednesday. Lewis Lapham, a Harpers editor, took one look at Mr. Medlin and suggested, he said later, that Mr. O'Keefe take him over to CBS.

Harpers magazine, which Mr. O'Keefe had called about the story, was sufficiently intrigued to advance \$700 toward an article about it, and Mr. O'Keefe and Mr. Medlin flew to New York City last Wednesday. Lewis Lapham, a Harpers editor, took one look at Mr. Medlin and suggested, he said later, that Mr. O'Keefe take him over to CBS.

"Lewis Lapham sent him over," said Don S. Hewitt, a CBS news producer, in telling how the television network became involved. Mr. Hewitt said that Mr. Lapham had reported that Mr. O'Keefe had handled two assignments for Harpers and seemed competent.

Mr. Lapham, who said he did not believe Mr. Medlin's story, said he felt uneasy in Mr. Medlin's presence because of an air of barely controlled violence. He said that when he

called Mr. Hewitt he suggested that CBS make as many checks as it could on Mr. Medlin.

Mr. Hewitt said that the only check CBS had made was with Mr. Lapham about Mr. O'Keefe's competence as a newsman. He also said he had thought Mr. Medlin very persuasive and that there might be truth to his story.

From Mr. O'Keefe's tape recordings, it appeared that news executives at CBS were terrified but at the same time fascinated by Mr. Medlin, just as college students at point, Mr. Medlin demanded beer, and a young woman secretary said, "I'd have to send out for it, we don't have it in the cafeteria."

"Send out, send out," her terrified boss said.

On Wednesday night, Mr. Medlin was interviewed on videotape by Morley Safer of the "60 Minutes" program. He said he was leading CBS to the body of Mr. Hoffa because he wanted to have the satisfaction of calling Mr. Hoffa's murderers to tell them that the body had been found. Then, he said, he wanted to have an hour in which to flee before CBS called the authorities.

CBS paid \$1,000 for the interview, Mr. O'Keefe said.

Hired as Consultant

The next day, the network hired Mr. O'Keefe as a consultant, agreeing to pay him a total of \$10,000 to lead a CBS news team to the body. There was no direct contract with Mr. Medlin.

Mr. Medlin maintained that he had killed numerous persons over the years, according to the tapes made by Mr. O'Keefe, and said he had been implicated in seven murders. He said that he had been diagnosed by Federal psychiatrists as being a schizophrenic psychopathic killer.

At one point, Mr. Medlin demanded to know who the women were who occasionally came into the room at CBS, and said that if any word of what he was doing leaked out, "I'll come back and kill everyone of you."

Once, seemingly piqued at some delay, Mr. Medlin began recited Mr. O'Keefe to come

with him. But he allowed himself to be placated by the announcement from CBS executives that the additional \$9,000 was on the way, according to Mr. O'Keefe's tapes.

The contract with Mr. O'Keefe had provided that the final \$9,000 would be paid only if Mr. Hoffa's body was found where Mr. Medlin said it was, and if CBS had an exclusive beat on it. But CBS pressed the money on Mr. Medlin in advance, giving it to Mr. O'Keefe, according to the tapes, to avoid direct payment to a participant in a new event. The network had been criticized some months ago for having paid H. R. Haldeman, former chief of staff to President Nixon, for an interview.

Travel to Florida

Because of heavy airline travel out of New York, Mr. O'Keefe and Mr. Medlin were unable to get reservations to Florida on the same plane as the producer and crew assigned to the project. They agreed to meet the news team at the Holiday Inn in Key West last Friday.

Mr. O'Keefe and Mr. Medlin went to Florida on a flight that stopped at Tampa. Mr. Medlin decided he wanted to spend the night there and he and Mr. O'Keefe checked into the downtown Holiday Inn. Before leaving New York, according to Mr. O'Keefe, Mr. Medlin said he would hold the \$9,000 that CBS had given Mr. O'Keefe, explaining that it would be safe with him because people were just naturally afraid of him. Mr. O'Keefe said he had given it to him.

Mr. Medlin said, on the O'Keefe tapes, that he could terrify people just by looking at them. "It was something I was born with," he said.

At the Tampa motel, Mr. Medlin began drinking vodka, and during the evening a young woman who he said was his cousin came to the motel, Mr. O'Keefe said.

Mr. O'Keefe said that the young woman became upset at suggestions Mr. Medlin had. Mr. O'Keefe said, Mr. Medlin said he was going to bring her back, and departed.

Mr. O'Keefe waited in vain for him to return. During the day in Friday, he said, his tele-

phone in the motel room rang at several different times, but no one ever spoke on the phone. He thought it might be Mr. Medlin checking to see if he was still there.

Reports Disappearance

Friday afternoon, he called CBS in New York to report Mr. Medlin had disappeared. Remembering Mr. Medlin's threats to kill everybody, Mr. Hewitt said he became alarmed for Mr. O'Keefe safety and directed him to take refuge at the Tampa Police Department.

Mr. O'Keefe did, arranging through the motel manager for a police car to pick him up at the rear door of the motel. Mr. O'Keefe, who resembles the actor Michael Pollard, said that he was not afraid of Mr. Medlin. He said he believed Mr. Medlin's story.

But he went to the police department, nevertheless, and stayed there for several hours. Meanwhile, CBS had called the F.B.I. in New York City. Two agents interviewed CBS officials in New York and Mr. O'Keefe by telephone at the Tampa police station.

When the F.B.I. said in New York that it did not feel that Mr. O'Keefe was in immediate danger, Mr. Hewitt said, he told Mr. O'Keefe to call the Tampa office of the F.B.I. Mr. O'Keefe refused. He said he though Mr. Medlin might return and that he did not want to put the F.B.I. on his trail.

Flies to Key West

The Tampa police told Mr. O'Keefe that he could spend the night at headquarters if he wanted to, but that they would not investigate. He decided to return to the moel.

On Saturday, Mr. O'Keefe flew to Key West, where the CBS news team was waiting to begin looking for Mr. Hoffa's body.

Using directions provided by Mr. Medlin before he disappeared, the news team searched the ocean off Key West on Saturday afternoon. It did not find Mr. Hoffa's body.

Mr. Hewitt said then that the F.B.I. had identified Mr. Medlin as an ex-convict named Clarence Newton Medlin, in his 40's, and had said he had connections to the teamsters' union and had been at the Federal prison at Lewisburg, Pa., when Mr. Hoffa was.

A Justice Department source confirmed that Mr. Medlin had been in the Lewisburg prison in 1970 while Mr. Hoffa was being held there, but the source

did not know the charge on which Mr. Medlin had been convicted.

CBS urged the F.B.I. to dredge off Key West. The F.B.I. did not dredge.

Yesterday, the CBS news team was back in its boat on the ocean looking for the body once again. It did not find it.

Today the CBS team made another search off Key West, and Mr. Hewitt said it would spend at least one more day searching. A member of the team said a skin diver had been hired to help.

Mr. Hewitt, asked if CBS had any regrets, said: "I wish I hadn't given the money in advance to Pat O'Keefe". He said he should have realized that Mr. O'Keefe would be traveling with a man who could exert enough pressure to get the money away from him.

He said that the experience would not deter CBS from trying to develop news exclusives from tipsters.

He said that he did not feel CBS had been "taken."

"The New York Times thought enough of this man's story to send a reporter to Tampa and Key West," he said.

The F.B.I. declined comment about the extent of its interest in the situation.

A Justice Department source said in Washington that the department believed that CBS had been "ripped off."