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Washington Merry-go-round By Jack Anderson

WASHINGTON — For years, the Central Intelligence Agency's darkest secret was its undercover association with Mafia hit men who were recruited for international murder missions. We finally broke the story that the CIA had used common gangsters in six attempts upon the life of Cuban Premier Fidel Castro.

Now we've learned that the CIA wanted to create its own branch of Murder, Inc. — a killer squad that would assassinate undesirable foreign leaders at \$1 million a head.

It has taken us years to dig out the ugly facts. We were able to report on March 3, 1967 that the CIA had "hatched a plot to knock off Castro." On Jan. 18, 1971 we began a series of three columns describing the six assassination attempts and naming the Mafia killers and their CIA contacts. Not until five years later did the Senate Intelligence Committee finally confirm our story.

The CIA recruited the hit men through Robert Mahen, a former CIA undercover operator, who had taken charge of the late billionaire Howard Hughes' Las Vegas empire and had developed mob contacts in Nevada.

Around the time that Mahen was setting up the Mafia plot against Castro, we've just learned, the CIA also approached a former narcotics official with intimate knowledge of the Mafia. He was Charles Siragusa, a former wartime intelligence officer who had become one of the Big Three in the Federal Narcotics Bureau and had

handled the bureau's liaison with the CIA.

The bureau had cultivated informants inside the Mafia and had compiled the best available files on the crime syndicate. Siragusa was a logical person, therefore, for the CIA to sound out about forming a Mafia hit squad to kill for the United States.

The retired Siragusa, breaking a silence of more than 15 years, told us about a strange conversation with a CIA official in Washington around 1960. After a few minutes of chit-chat, the CIA man made this startling suggestion: that Siragusa, drawing on his knowledge and contacts in the underworld, would recruit a crew of Mafia torpedoes for standby assassination duty.

They would be paid a bounty of \$1 million in fees and expenses for each kill. The CIA would assign the missions and underwrite the payoffs from its secret funds.

At this point, the visitor stopped, waiting for Siragusa's reaction. "At first I thought he was joking," Siragusa told us, still amazed at the recollection.

When he realized the proposal was deadly serious, he flatly rejected it. "In wartime, it's one thing," he told the CIA emissary, "but in peacetime, it's something different." He heard nothing more of the matter.

Siragusa speculated that the CIA selected him as the man to set up the murder squad because of his handling of two other special CIA requests. On the first occasion, three Spanish-

speaking CIA operatives had been arrested while pulling a Watergate-style break-in at the Chinese Communist news agency in Havana. Cuban police thought they had caught three small fry burglars and locked them up on an island off Cuba.

The CIA was desperate to get them back before their cover was blown. One knew the names of numerous CIA contacts in Cuba; in any event, the CIA makes every possible effort to rescue agents in peril.

The CIA turned to Siragusa, suggesting he enlist Mafia types for a rescue raid. This proved impractical; instead, Siragusa began dealings with a Chicago lawyer supposedly close to Castro's brother, Raul. The CIA authorized Siragusa to spend up to \$1 million to effect the rescue of the imprisoned agents by whatever means necessary.

The Chicagoan received \$10,000 from CIA funds but his efforts failed, Siragusa said. Eventually the three won their freedom through the legal efforts of a Havana attorney, retained by the CIA without Castro's knowledge.

Siragusa also said he was involved in the establishment of a CIA "safe house" in Greenwich Village in the 1960s. But unknown to him, the apartment was turned into a sex trap for foreign diplomats and informants.

We disclosed details of the entrapment operation on Feb. 5, 1975. It consisted of a one-way mirror and camera concealed behind a painting, with a bat-

tery of microphones hidden in a Japanese screen to provide the soundtrack.

With these devices, the CIA was able to photograph and record the diplomats, stripped of their pin-stripes, cawing with prostitutes on a CIA retainer. Siragusa said he had helped in obtaining the premises.

Footnote: We are satisfied after long talks with top CIA officials that the CIA has given up its love nests, murder plots and most other dirty tricks. We have learned that Siragusa was recently interviewed about the murder squad, by the Senate Intelligence Committee. Our calls to the committee for comment were unreturned.

WHO'S NEWS — President Carter has engaged heavily in telephone diplomacy. He has placed personal calls to a number of world leaders in an attempt to break down the diplomatic protocol.

— Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan., created a momentary flurry by protesting privately to the State Department that the wrong Panamanian had signed the Panama Canal treaty. Dole insisted that the Panamanian constitution required the president, a figurehead named Demetrio Lakas, to sign the treaty. The actual signature was that of Panama's strongman Omar Torrijos. But the State Department, in response to Dole's inquiry, insisted that Torrijos has the constitutional authority "to direct foreign relations."