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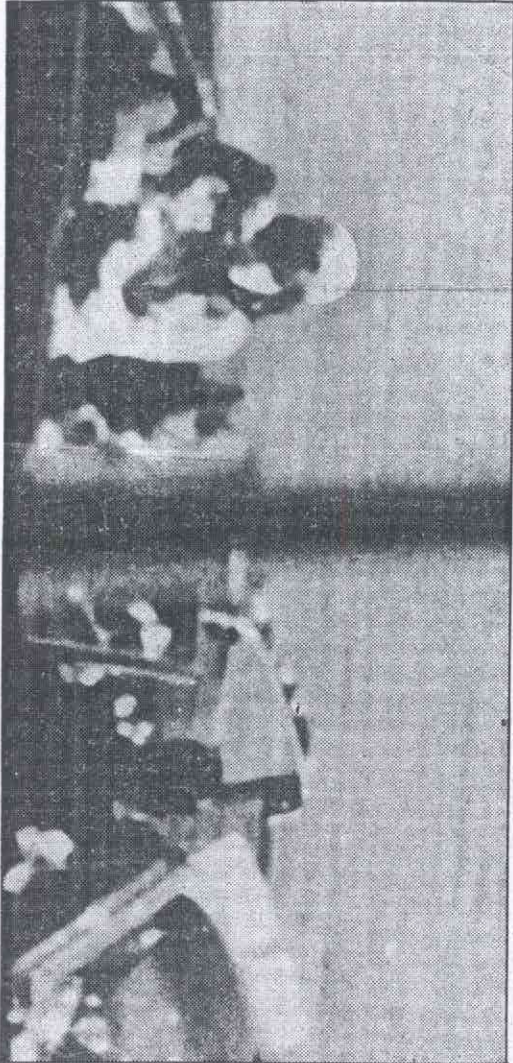
VIEW

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BOOKS • ART • ARCHITECTURE • DESIGN • ANTIQUES • COLLECTIBLES

SECTION

V



The frame from a film showing President Kennedy struck by an assassin's bullet in Dallas.

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*Did the mob order the
President's murder?
Or did Lee Harvey
Oswald act alone?
The tragedy in Dallas
was 25 years ago —
but the questions may
never die.*

Who targeted Kennedy?

Reviewed by
Dick Polman

There's something about those 5.6 seconds in Dallas that has forever seared the American psyche, and robbed us of our collective innocence. Every question prompts a slew of answers, answers that lead everywhere, into a labyrinth of riddles where logic means little.

Twenty-five years after President John F. Kennedy's head was shattered by gunfire in Dealey Plaza, Americans are still debating the number of shots fired, the origin of the shots, the number of gunmen, the loyalties of the gunmen, the paths of the bullets and the shady acts of powerful men who may have sought to manipulate history for their own financial or political gain.

Americans aren't accustomed to thinking in terms of conspiracy: Americans believe in the loner, the one rotten apple in a bountiful barrel. To think otherwise is to confront the possibility that malevolent forces can play a pivotal role in a democratic system.

As author John H. Davis writes in his new book, *Mafia Kingfish: Carlos Marcello and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy*: "It

FINAL DISCLOSURE

The Full Truth
About the Assassination
of President Kennedy

David W. Belin
Scribners, 249 pp., \$19.95

MAFIA KINGFISH

Carlos Marcello and the
Assassination of John F. Kennedy

John H. Davis
McGraw Hill, 580 pp., \$19.95

was one thing to tell the world that an unbalanced loner killed the President and then was quickly executed for his crime by a patriotic citizen . . . and quite another to admit that one of the most powerful crime families in the nation had been able to change the course of American history by violent means and get away with it."

Amid all the Kennedy nostalgia books that have flooded the market this year, two new assassination volumes have emerged. One of them, Davis' *Mafia Kingfish*, provides fresh

Carlos Marcello, left, the New Orleans organized-crime boss, masterminded the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, according to a new book, "Mafia Kingfish," by John H. Davis. Marcello's motivation, according to Davis, was to neutralize the President's brother, Robert, the attorney general. At right, John Kennedy, then a senator, speaks at a Senate Rackets Committee hearing in 1959, as Robert Kennedy, the committee's chief counsel, listens.

fuel for speculation about a Mafia contract on Kennedy. The other, *Final Disclosure*, by David W. Belin, the former counsel to the Warren Commission, argues that "the cunning deception of the American people," by "sensationalists" and "cultists" must end, and that we must once and for all accept Lee Harvey Oswald, the man in the sixth-floor window, as the sole guilty party.

Both authors undoubtedly would consider themselves to be truth sleuths, but Davis, a cousin of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, has a distinct advantage. Both men are writing for an audience that, since 1963, has grown skeptical and accustomed to looking for slime beneath the surface of events. Belin's point is that the old story is the true one: Davis, on the other hand, offers new slime aplenty, helped by 220,000 pages of freshly examined FBI documents—many of which the bureau failed to provide to the Warren Commission.

Of the scores of assassination books published in the last two decades, *Mafia Kingfish* is unique, focusing not on the assassination but on the man who has emerged in recent years as a prime conspiracy suspect. At the peak of his power 20 years ago, Carlos Marcello, based in New Orleans, headed the

oldest Sicilian crime family in the United States. With an estimated annual income of \$2 billion from gambling, drugs, prostitution and legitimate investments, his family was the largest industry in Louisiana, according to Davis' law enforcement sources. Unlike most dons, Marcello had always operated as a lone wolf. His underworld peers respected his power so much that he alone was allowed to stage "hits" without getting their approval in advance.

Rather than taking the predictable approach—profilling Marcello only in the context of the assassination—Davis does the reverse, giving us Marcello's 78 years of life, from his boyhood origins to his current senility, and treating the assassination as one pit stop on the long and bloody road to the federal penitentiary.

Nine years ago, the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that the underworld had the means and motive for the deed; this book clarifies that scenario by drawing us into Marcello's perichai world. The question, of course, is why the weight of all this admittedly circumstantial evidence (See KENNEDY on 4-V)

Dick Polman is an Inquirer staff writer.



From "Mafia Kingfish." Copyright © Christopher R. Harris



named Edward Becker, whose credibility was verified by House probes a decade ago, Marcello told him in 1962 that he intended to neutralize the attorney general by killing his brother: "Ya know what they say in Sicily: If you want to kill a dog, you don't cut off the tail, you cut off the head." Becker says Marcello told him that he'd set up a "nut" to take the heat, "the way they do in Sicily."

Twenty-five years later, Becker reiterated to Davis his conviction that the threat was serious. Most Mafia bosses, he is quoted as saying, wouldn't conceive of killing a president, because "they tend to be very patriotic, pride themselves on being so American. But Carlos ... was in a category all by himself. ... They have their own code [in Louisiana], their own rules. ... Hell, a little Napoleon like Carlos, killing [Kennedy] was nothing. ... He was just someone who was standing in his way."

Davis details the web of relationships that tied Marcello to Lee Harvey Oswald to David Ferrie to Jack Ruby. According to Davis, Ferrie was an adviser to Marcello and the two met frequently in the weeks immediately preceding the assassination. Ferrie also was seen often in New Orleans with Oswald during the summer of 1963, Davis reports. Oswald's uncle worked for Marcello. And Oswald, according to wiretapped comments made years later by Marcello himself, worked that summer as a runner in the crime chief's gambling network.

And then there's Ruby, the sleazeshow proprietor, depicted by Belin and other Warren Commission defenders as a grief-stricken loser who shot Oswald to spare Jacqueline Kennedy a return trip to Dallas. But as Davis claims, Ruby was a man with serious underworld ties, going back to his native Chicago, where he ran errands for lieutenants of Al Capone. (The Warren Report simply said that Ruby had a few shady friends.)

Ruby was tight with the Marcello family, Davis reports, and Dallas was Marcello turf. Ruby had been seen visiting Marcello-owned haunts in New Orleans. As one law enforcement source told Davis, "Everyone I knew was flabbergasted that the Warren Commission and the FBI never mentioned any of this in their reports."

Davis believes that one element of the plot went awry — that Oswald, the perfect pro-Castro "nut" who once had defected to the Soviet Union, was to have been killed right after Kennedy was. Davis doesn't know what went wrong. But he believes that Ruby was enlisted, possibly at the last moment, to kill the captured Oswald before Oswald was able to prove his claim, shouted to reporters, that he had been a "patsy."

Nowhere in Belin's apologia for the Warren Commission does he begin to address the world in which Ruby lived. Instead, he points out that Ruby repeatedly told a rabbi who visited him in prison that he acted alone to kill Oswald. That satisfies Belin, who is outraged that the rabbi was never called by the House panel; such a character witness, he believes, would have put to rest all the conspiracy paranoia. Besides, he writes, "so-called Mafia hit men do not kill their victim when the area is surrounded by police officers so that the gunman can be immediately captured."

On the contrary, writes Davis, "the quick and extraordinarily public silencing of the suspected assassin ... before he could reveal the details of the murder plot was a Mafia practice going back to the farthest origins of the old Sicilian brotherhood. The purpose was to serve notice to other possible witnesses to the murder conspiracy as to what might happen to them if they decided to talk."

Davis concedes that his circumstantial evidence proves nothing, which is why Belin scoffs at "conspiracy cultists" and at those who persist in "theorizing about the influence of the Mafia in America." One is tempted to embrace Belin's plaintive cry: "If the citizenry cannot believe the findings of an independent commission chaired by the chief justice of the United States ... whom can you trust?"

In Woody Allen's film *Annie Hall*, Carol Kane chides Allen for his Kennedy obsession and scoffs, "Then everybody's in on the conspiracy — the FBI and the CIA and J. Edgar Hoover and oil companies and the Pentagon and the men's room attendants at the White House?"

And Allen says, "I would leave out the men's room attendants."