

Sunday, November 16, 1980 B

The Bulletin

NEWS/VIEWS

SPOTLIGHT / A "stacked" probe?

Kennedy probe pushed mob role idea,

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The House Assassinations Committee's probe into the murder of President Kennedy was "stacked" to produce the conclusion that organized crime was involved, according to an investigator for the defunct committee.

Gaeton Fonzi, the investigator, said that G. Robert Blakey, the committee's chief counsel and an expert on organized crime, was predisposed to believe that mobsters were behind the slaying of Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963. And at the end of the investigation, he said, Blakey signed a contract to write a book outlining his conclusions.

See Parade magazine with this issue for G. Robert Blakey's own theory on the existence of a plot to kill President Kennedy.

Blakey, now a law professor at Notre Dame University in South Bend, Ind., denounced Fonzi's charge as "unquivocally false" and "gross." He said he decided gangsters had manipulated Lee Harvey Oswald into shooting Kennedy only after an exhaustive study of available evidence. His contract with New York Times Books, he stated, was not signed until the committee had been disbanded.

Gary Cornwell, Blakey's deputy and now an attorney with the Department of Energy, supported Blakey. He said Fonzi's version of events is marked by "omissions" and "outright lies."

Another committee staff attorney, however, said that Blakey indicated to him a belief that organized crime was involved a full year before the former chief counsel says he came to that conclusion.

Fonzi, a native Philadelphian who worked for *Philadelphia* magazine from 1959 to 1972, made his allegation about Blakey's theory of an organized crime conspiracy in an 80,000-word critique of the committee's work.

The critique, published in the current issue of *The Washington* magazine, said the "committee's inves-

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writer says

tigation was not adequate enough or honest enough to produce any firm conclusions about the nature of the conspiracy to kill President Kennedy."

The committee, which spent two years and \$5.5 million probing the murders of Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., concluded that "President John F. Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy."

The panel did not blame organized crime for the killing. In its report, issued in July 1979, it said:

"The committee believes, on the basis of the evidence available to it, that the national syndicate of organized

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crime, as a group, was not involved in the assassination of President Kennedy, but that the available evidence does not preclude the possibility that individual members may have been involved."

Blakey, who directed the probe from June 1977, when he replaced Philadelphia lawyer Richard A. Sprague as chief counsel, until its finish in December 1978, emphasized in a telephone interview that his conclusions about organized crime's involvement were his own and do not represent the committee's views.

In the article and in telephone interviews from Miami, where he is a principal in a magazine publishing firm, Fonzi criticized the Kennedy probe for a variety of reasons. Among other things, he charged:

- Blakey "restricted" the probe, shutting off promising areas of investigation, in order to produce a report in time to meet a congressional-dictated deadline.

- Evidence he turned up that Oswald had been seen two months before the assassination with a CIA officer was not properly explored.

- Blakey developed a close rela-

tionship with the CIA even though the agency was supposed to be one of the subjects of the inquiry.

"What the House Assassinations Committee did not do was conduct a full and complete investigation," said Fonzi. "There is not one investigator — not one — who served on the Kennedy Task Force of the Assassinations Committee who honestly feels he took part in an honest investigation."

Fonzi was hired by Sen. Richard S. Schweiker (R-Pa) to look into the Kennedy assassination in 1975 as part of a Senate Select Intelligence Committee probe. When the House authorized an inquiry in September 1976, Fonzi joined the staff as an investigator working out of Miami.

During his Senate work, Fonzi came across Antonio Veciana, a Cuban exile who claimed he had worked with a CIA officer named "Maurice Bishop" to topple Fidel Castro. Veciana, who served 27 months on a narcotics conviction in the 1970s, told Fonzi he had been with Bishop when Bishop met with Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas about two months before the assassination.

From Veciana's description, a police artist drew a sketch of Bishop. After Schweiker examined the sketch, he said it reminded him of David Atlee Phillips, who had just retired from the CIA after a career spent almost entirely in Latin America.

Phillips has denied under oath that he is Bishop. Veciana, at various times, has said he isn't sure if Phillips is Bishop, that Phillips could be Bishop, or that Phillips was not Bishop.

Fonzi said he believes Veciana was purposely vague in attempting to identify Phillips because he hoped to renew his relationship with the CIA. The CIA, Veciana has said, gave him a lump sum payment of \$253,000 for the 13 years he worked with the agency against Castro.

If Veciana had seen his CIA case officer with Oswald, said Fonzi, it would represent a significant break in the case.

The committee chose to disregard Veciana's story of seeing Oswald and a CIA officer together.

Fonzi said Blakey came to the committee from the Cornell University Institute on Organized Crime with a predilection for thinking mobsters were behind the assassination.

"As soon as he was appointed, Blakey drew upon his contacts in that organized-crime-fighting fraternity to select key senior counsels for the committee," Fonzi's article

states. "When Blakey was finished hiring, the House Assassinations Committee was stacked to find an organized crime conspiracy in the John F. Kennedy assassination."

Cornwell, Blakey's deputy, denied this. Cornwell said only he and one other staff attorney had worked on organized crime. The others were drawn from various segments of the legal profession, he said.

Fonzi said the committee could not come up with concrete evidence of a conspiracy until acoustics experts determined that a police radio tape contained the sounds of four gunshots being fired when Kennedy was murdered. Since Oswald's rifle could not possibly fire more than three rounds in the time required, this indicated the presence of a second gunman.

"Blakey finally had the hook on which to hang his organized-crime conspiracy theory, and he wasn't about to let it slip away," said Fonzi. "G. Robert Blakey, publisher's advance in hand, went back to Cornell to write a book about it."

Blakey said Fonzi is "obsessed" by the Kennedy case and was "frustrated" because he failed to connect the intelligence community to the assassination.

He cooperated with the CIA, Blakey said, to get access to its files. And the only restrictions placed on investigators, he added, were those imposed by the investigators themselves. With the committee due to go out of existence at the end of 1978, he said, priorities had to be established, and Fonzi and the other investiga-

tors established them.

"When I joined the committee, I thought the Warren Commission was probably right, that Oswald acted alone," said Blakey. "If anything, I thought this was the last thing organized crime would get involved in. And I took some heat, including heat from Fonzi, when I resisted suggestions from the staff that organized crime might be involved."

Blakey said he was certain FBI surveillance of mob leaders either would have prevented them from attempting the assassination or would have uncovered such a plot. But when FBI logs were examined by the committee, he said, he discovered two things:

- The surveillance of mobsters was not nearly as complete as he believed it was.

- Telephone taps showed mobsters uniformly hated Kennedy because of his brother Robert's crackdown on organized crime.

Blakey said it was sometime after February 1979 that he concluded organized crime was part of the conspiracy. The conclusion was based on a knowledge of how mobsters work and the fact that they had motive and opportunity. Oswald, he said, probably was a tool who didn't know of organized crime's role.

According to Blakey, his book, titled "A Plot to Kill The President," will be published in January and will detail his findings. He stressed that he did not agree to write the book until after the committee had disbanded.

In his article, Fonzi quotes committee staff attorney James E. McDonald, who was in charge of the Organized Crime Task Force, this way:

"Most of us on the team felt we never made the link (to organized crime). But at our meetings, it was obvious that Blakey wanted that. He wanted that link more than anything

else.

"When Blakey sold me on joining the committee, we had a long discussion over the phone. This was in late February (1978). He was intimating he had some new evidence, and he finally asked, 'Well, who do you think killed Kennedy?' I said I didn't

know. And he said, 'Think, think about it.' And I guessed, 'Castro? Cuban exiles? I really don't know.'

" 'Think,' he said. 'What's so obvious.' By that time I was just confused. Finally he blurted out, 'Organized crime killed Kennedy.' "