

## By Dick Russell

Loran Hall was scared. He sat in his Long Beach, California, real-estate office on a Saturday afternoon late in May—10 days before he would invoke the Fifth Amendment at a hearing of the House assassinations committee. Every time the bell rang, he took a revolver from beneath a pile of papers and tucked it under his belt.

The day before, Hall had received a phone call. There had been several calls since May 19, when two congressional investigators served him with a subpoena to testify about the assassination of President Kennedy. Someone had left a dead cat in his front yard and a dead pigeon, with a Kennedy half-dollar in its bill, outside his office. Someone had threatened one of his kids at school.

Most of that Hall had attributed to "nuts and weirdos." But not yesterday's call. This one was explicit: "Santo is taking a yacht trip in the Bahamas on the 6th. He would like to return on the 8th."

Hall, who was scheduled to testify on June 7, said he had replied: "As far as I'm concerned, he can." The caller hung up. Hall believed the message concerned Santo Trafficante, Jr., alleged Mafia don of southern Florida and reputedly one of the most powerful mobsters in the country.

According to congressional sources, the House committee wanted to question Hall about his association with Trafficante—an association that apparently began in 1959, when Hall and Trafficante spent five months together in a Havana jail, and continued during the early '60s, when Hall was soliciting anti-Castro funds from wealthy Americans.

The committee was also interested in a taped interview given to investigators by Dutch journalist Willem Oltmans. In this interview Hall reportedly claimed that he had attended a meeting in Dallas during the summer of 1963; there, he said, he had been offered \$50,000 to kill Kennedy.

And House investigators wanted to ask Hall about his possible relationship with Lee Harvey Oswald. FBI reports had raised the possibility that Hall may have been seen with Oswald in Dallas two months before Kennedy's death—a time the Warren Commission had placed Oswald elsewhere.

Hall refused to answer all questions when he appeared before the committee on June 7; although he was scheduled to testify again, on September 14, his subpoena was continued, pending a new date. It has been rumored that the committee is trying to gather more evidence against Hall. The committee's chief investigator reportedly suggested that Hall might be granted immunity if he were to testify. But Hall has said that he's not inclined to trust the committee.

Early this summer, he agreed to an

interview with me—provided no tape recording was made. (A conversation between us in October 1976 was taped by mutual agreement.)

During our interviews, Hall spoke of Trafficante and of a plot, apparently funded by organized crime, to assassinate Fidel Castro in 1963. Hall said he participated in the plot, along with Trafficante and two other reputed organized-crime figures, Sam Giancana and John Roselli.

Hall repeated his account of the \$50,000 offer—made, he said, at a meeting in a Dallas oilman's office a few months before Kennedy was killed.

He also told me that shortly before the assassination he had heard Lee Harvey Oswald's name mentioned by a Cuban exile, but he denied that he and Oswald ever met. Hall spoke of efforts to implicate him in the president's death, in which he claims to have played no role. He said he believes some of these efforts may involve federal authorities.

Hall, 47, was raised in Wichita, Kansas. He quit high school to join the army, served in Germany as a sergeant, and went to Havana in 1959. He was working in Santo Trafficante's Hotel Capri casino when Castro seized power and began evicting the American gangsters who had thrived under Batista. In April of 1959, Hall was sent to a

quonset-hut prison in which Trafficante was being held.

"There were six huts altogether, and the rest were packed with wall-to-wall people," Hall says. "In ours, there was Santo, his son-in-law, and one of his dealers. I was the fourth. When you walked in, you saw like a living room in the front. There were four barrels, all with ice in them—water, fruit, wines and champagne, Coke and Pepsi. Santo had his meals catered. The food came out every night in a Cadillac."

Hall's story is corroborated by a CIA/Warren Commission report ["Memo to the Director, 27 Nov. '63"] declassified in 1976, which tells of John Wilson, a British journalist who had learned in Cuba of "a gangster-gambler named Santo who could not return to the U.S.A. because there were several indictments outstanding against him. Santo opted therefore to remain in prison for a period of time, paying Castro for his rather luxurious and definitely non-prisonlike accommodations. . . . While Santo was in prison, [he] was visited by an American gangster-type named Ruby."

According to the Warren Report, Jack Ruby visited Cuba in September 1959—the month Hall was released from prison. Hall says he never met Ruby.

He does not deny, however, that he met "American gangster types" while in pris-

on. One of them, according to Hall, was Johnny Roselli, who has been described as a recruiter for CIA-Mafia plots to assassinate Castro. Hall says he met Roselli again in the spring of 1963.

At that time, Hall was the leader of a group of anti-Castro Cubans who were working with other exiles to plan a second Bay of Pigs. He recalls that he got in touch with the Trafficante organization early in 1963. Then, about April, he says he was invited to a meeting in a Miami Beach hotel, where John Martino, reputedly a fringe Mob figure, introduced him and Cuban exile leader Eddie Bayo to Roselli and Giancana.

Hall describes the meeting: "Out of the other room came Santo Trafficante. Giancana looked at me and said, 'Is this the one?' Santo said, 'Yes,' and walked out. The only reason he was there was to verify me. We discussed money and whether Martino [an electronics expert] could make the necessary equipment."

Meetings continued, Hall says, until late May; as a cover, a story was circulated that two Soviet colonels were prepared to defect and testify that Russian missiles were still on Cuban soil. This story apparently convinced William D. Pawley—a retired U.S. Ambassador to Cuba and former assistant secretary of both State and Defense—that he should buy his yacht

to spirit the colonels into the United States. The cover may have also convinced *Life* magazine, which reportedly prepared to send a writer and photographer along on the rescue mission.

This basic story—without mention of Hall or an assassination plot—appeared in a 1975 copyrighted article in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. The article called the mission Operation Red Cross and reported that John Martino, the electronics expert, had helped to enlist Pawley's yacht and acquire \$15,000 in front money from *Life* magazine.

Richard Billings was the *Life* reporter assigned to cover Operation Red Cross. Billings is reluctant to discuss his involvement, except to say that he then believed the plan centered on the Soviet colonels' defection.

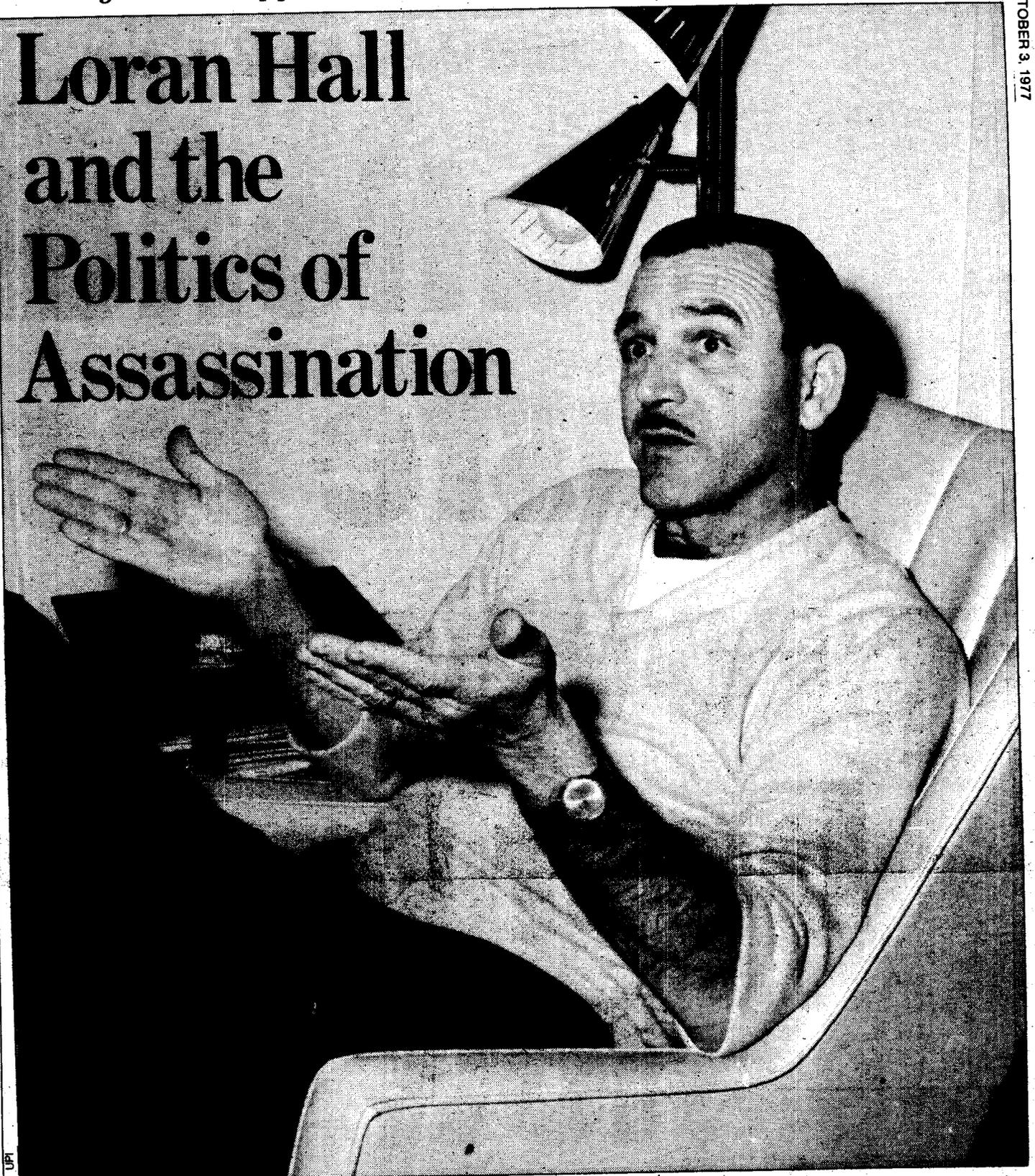
"I'm trying to find out some more things about the mission, things I didn't know before," Billings told me. "I'm still very curious about what else may have surrounded it. But at the time of the operation, I did not know of any involvement by Loran Hall."

Billings says *Life* never gave the mission financial backing. Hall agrees. "Time-Life didn't put up a dime," he says. "The money came from Sam Giancana. I saw Giancana give \$30,000 to John Martino to buy sup-

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*“At first I thought Congress was gonna try to find the truth,” Hall says. “But apparently they don’t want me to clear myself.”*

# Loran Hall and the Politics of Assassination



Hall says he's been made the scapegoat in a coverup of JFK's assassination.

UPI

Hall says he left Miami for New York in May 1963 because he believed he was under FBI surveillance. Before he could return, the mission—including his own group of anti-Castro raiders—took off for Cuba.

On the night of June 9, Eddie Bayo and nine others apparently left Pawley's yacht by speedboat and headed for the southeast coast of Cuba: they were not seen again. According to *Soldier of Fortune*, Pawley arranged for a CIA search party, but Bayo and his men weren't found.

Hall, who returned to Miami a few weeks after missing the boat, says he was first informed that Bayo's team was safe in the mountains of Cuba. Then, in September, he was told Bayo had died.

The team's fate may remain a mystery. Early this year Trafficante took the Fifth Amendment when he was subpoenaed by the House assassinations committee. John Martino, according to *Soldier of Fortune*, was "afraid of something" and never discussed the mission; he died of a heart attack in 1975. Giancana also died in 1975, after being shot. William Pawley committed suicide last January. And Johnny Roselli's body was found in an oil drum in Biscayne Bay last year.

Shortly after Roselli's death, columnist Jack Anderson reported that Roselli had told him he was convinced the last Mafia hit team sent to Cuba had been captured and persuaded to work with Castro. Roselli purportedly told Anderson that members of this team, who might have been Cubans from the old Trafficante organization, later returned to the U.S. to assassinate JFK and set up Oswald.

Could Roselli have been referring to the missing crew of Operation Red Cross? Hall wouldn't speculate but told me: "You gotta know that Santo Trafficante had Cuba locked up prior to Castro—the narcotics, the gambling, everything. When he got kicked out, he still had his connections. It might've been a thing where Santo says to himself, 'I can still insure my shipments of dope from Cuba to here. All I gotta do is put the word to Fidel that these guys are comin' over to put a hit on him.'"

This theory was first published in a 1976 *Washington Post* article by George Crile. In it, Crile quoted a Federal Bureau of Narcotics report that said Trafficante was "allegedly Castro's outlet for illegal contraband in this country." The article also quoted a Miami Cuban, Jose Aleman, who recalled Trafficante's telling him late in 1962: "Mark my words, this man Kennedy is in trouble, and he will get what is coming to him. . . . He is going to be hit."

Hall says he had no contact with Trafficante after the meeting in April 1963. Others aren't sure. Gerry Patrick Hemming, who had worked with Hall on anti-Castro activities, says Hall left Miami for Dallas shortly before November 22, 1963, "with plans to see Trafficante in St. Petersburg on the way."

Hall claims that he didn't see Trafficante and that he was not in Dallas on the day of

the assassination. "I was in Monterey Park, California, shaving, when the news came on TV," he says. "I'd just taken my wife to her job and I was getting ready to go out and apply for work."

A few months before the assassination, Hall says he attended the portentous meeting in Dallas at which he was offered \$50,000. The meeting began as a fund-raiser for his anti-Castro cause, Hall says, but then "a man who owned a trucking company in Dallas jumped up and offered me \$50,000 to blow Kennedy away." Hall says that oilman Lester Logue, in whose office the meeting allegedly occurred, immediately disassociated himself from the offer: "Logue said he'd have nothing to do with it and broke the meeting up."

When I telephoned Logue, he denied that any such meeting took place. "Sure, I knew Loran," Logue said. "I helped him when he and a group of Cubans were ostensibly making raids into Cuba. It had nothing to do with Kennedy. There's no point in my answering Hall's charge because, of

course, it's a fabrication."

Hall says, "I've volunteered to take a voice analysis and a lie-detector test concerning the meeting we had in Dallas. And I would welcome Lester Logue and his attorney to the session. If he'd like to, he can take the test with me."

The day Kennedy was shot, a Cuban refugee named Sylvia Odio fainted when Lee Harvey Oswald's face appeared on her TV screen. Odio later told the Warren Commission that Oswald and two Latins, who called themselves Angel and Leopoldo, had solicited funds at her Dallas apartment on the night of September 26, 1963. When Leopoldo telephoned her the next day, she told the commission, he said Oswald was an "expert shotsman" who felt Kennedy "should have been assassinated after the Bay of Pigs" and who was soon to be introduced "to the underground in Cuba."

After hearing Odio's testimony, the Warren Commission asked the FBI to investigate. On September 16, 1964, FBI agents visited Loran Hall in California. The FBI's report said Hall had admitted visiting Odio with a Mexican-American named Lawrence Howard and a man named William Seymour, who looked slightly like Oswald.

The Warren Commission concluded that Odio had been mistaken when she identified Oswald as one of her visitors. Then, just after the report went to press, Odio examined photographs of Hall, Howard, and Seymour—and said she was certain they were not the men who had visited her. She again told FBI investigators that she could identify Oswald as one of those who

came to her apartment on September 16.

Odio's testimony is considered significant because the Warren Commission had concluded that Oswald was on a bus trip between New Orleans and Mexico City on the night Odio says she was visited by him. Hall, like Odio, disagrees with the commission.

Hall says, "When I read in the Warren Report what I supposedly told the FBI, not one statement resembled what I really said. I never told the FBI I'd seen Mrs. Odio. I told the agent Mrs. Odio's name and picture didn't strike a note with me. He said, 'Well, could there be a possibility you've ever met her?' I said, sure, I'd met hundreds of people in Dallas, Texas."

The reasons for the FBI's first visit to Hall remain unclear. Hall says he believes it was part of a conscious effort to use him as the scapegoat in an assassinator coverup.

Hall says he also believes that the Kennedy assassination and the plan to kill Castro are related. "I think [the Castro mission] has an absolutely direct bearing on the assassination," he told me. "I'd go so far as to say I probably sat as close as I'm sitting to you now to some people who had a part in it. But I really can't be sure who they are."

Hall told me that he had been willing to talk to the House committee until investigators Clifford Fenton and Ken Klein duped him at a meeting in Los Angeles. Hall said he had set up ground rules by which he would give an informal deposition in the presence of radio newsman Art Kevin, whom he trusted.

Kevin, who acted as an intermediary between Hall and the committee, says, "Hall wanted me there as a back-up, to make sure his words wouldn't be twisted. The committee agreed, then turned around, ordered me to leave, and subpoenaed him. They made a willing witness into a hostile witness."

Fenton, the committee's chief JFK investigator, says no such agreement was made. "Hall's name has come up enough times with other witnesses that we feel he might have evidence that's really material to this case. But there's no way we could have a reporter present while we interviewed."

To which Hall replies: "At first I really thought Congress was gonna try to find the truth. But they apparently don't want me to clear myself. For 14 years, it seems every agency in the world has kept me from getting my story out. Why should it be any different now?"