Mob lawyer's claim fuels JFK controversy

By Bruce Frankel

NEW YORK — Conspiracy buffs and those skeptical about the official explanations of President Kennedy's assassination received a boost Tuesday from two sources. outgoing

Frank Ragano became the first person to claim a role in the killing. He told the New York Post he carried a message from Teamsters boss Jimmy Hoffa to Mafia godfathers demanding a "hit" on the president.

Rep. Henry Gonzalez, D-Texas, said he will introduce legislation to open sealed Kennedy assassination records when the House reconvenes later this month.

Nearly 75% of those questioned in a new Time/CNN poll of 1,500 adults believe the truth hasn't been told about the assassination. The poll had a margin of error of 2.6 percentage points.

The idea of a mob role isn't new. But, "he's what we've been waiting for for the last 20 years — the older guy who's gotten an attack of conscience and who knows secrets," says Jack Newfield, who interviewed Ragano for the Post.

But Steven Brill, author of Teamsters, says Ragano "was a peripheral figure.... Hoffa didn't order those guys to do anything. They ordered Haifa.... When he forgot he was their tool is when he got killed."

Ragano says he now believes he conveyed a fatal message from Hoffa in early 1963 to Florida mob boss Santos Trafficante and New Orleans mob boss Carlos Marcello.

The story supports the conclusion in 1979 of the House Select Committee on Assassinations that Marcello, Trafficante and Hoffa had the "motive, means and opportunity" to kill the president. The panel never questioned Ragano.

A panoply of conspiracy theories have flourished from almost the first reports of Kennedy's shooting right-wingers in Dallas, the Mafia, Castro, the Soviet Union, the CIA and the FBI have all been "linked" to the crime.

Hoffa's daughter, Barbara Ann Cramer, 53, a Missouri administrative law judge, says that Ragano has other motives. Now appealing a second tax-evasion conviction, he "is a desperate and very sick man," trying to sell "his books by attacking a dead person. Nowhere in my heart do I believe my father is capable of doing such a thing," says Cramer, who is battling the Justice Department to open FBI files on Hoffa's 1976 disappearance.
Lawyer Says Hoffa Told 2 Mob Bosses to Have President Kennedy Killed

According to an April 11, 1967, FBI report, Ragano told agents in an interview that he had been driving through New Orleans with Marcello and Trafficante when the car radio blared out the latest item about District Attorney Jim Garrison’s investigation of the Kennedy murder.

Ragano, who was in the back seat, said Trafficante listened for a moment, then turned to Marcello and stated: “Carlos, the next thing you know, they’ll be blaming the president’s assassination on us.”

The House Assassinations Committee, after an inquiry in the late 1970s, concluded that Kennedy “was probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy.” The committee said that Marcello and Trafficante had “the motive, means and opportunity” to take part in the murder, but the panel said it had no direct evidence against them.

Ragano, 68, now writing his autobiography and appealing a three-year-sentence for income tax evasion, did not testify before the committee. He was Trafficante’s lawyer as well as Hoffa’s for many years, and was present with 13 top Mafia bosses from around the country, including Marcello and Trafficante, when they were arrested at a Queens, N.Y., restaurant in 1966 to discuss what police described as “matters of national importance” to organized crime.

Ragano could not be reached for direct comment yesterday, but he told the New York Post that he delivered Hoffa’s message to Trafficante and Marcello at a meeting in the Royal Orleans Hotel in New Orleans a few days after meeting with Hoffa at Teamsters headquarters here. Trafficante has since died. Marcello is 81 and reportedly suffering from Alzheimer’s disease.

According to the New York Post account, Ragano told them, “You won’t believe what