

Book World

The Mob Conspiracy To Kill JFK

MOB LAWYER

By Frank Ragano and Selwyn Raab
Scribner's. 372 pp. \$22

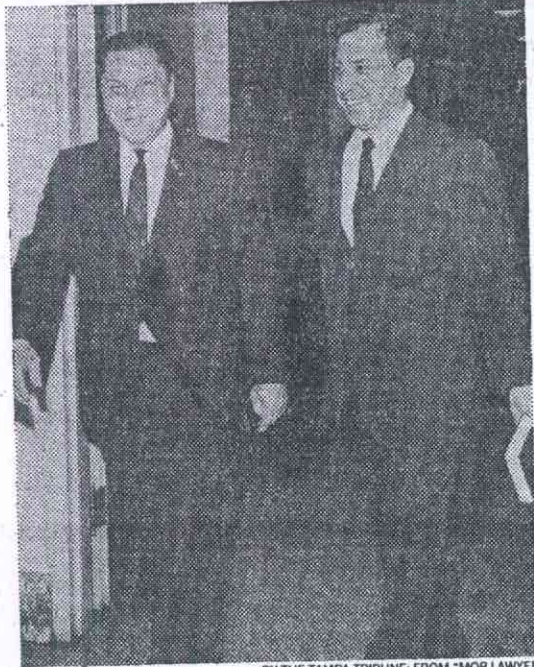
By Ronald Goldfarb

For all the wishful thinkers who seized upon the suggestion that the case should be closed on the Kennedy assassination, "Mob Lawyer" discloses some disquieting new information about three notorious, now deceased characters: Teamsters chief Jimmy Hoffa and Mafia bosses Santo Trafficante Jr. and Carlos Marcello. These disclosures bolster the House Assassination Committee's speculation that organized-crime figures, along with Hoffa, planned the crime of the century.

The authors—Frank Ragano was Trafficante's and Hoffa's longtime lawyer and friend, and Selwyn Raab is a veteran New York Times crime reporter—cannot be dismissed as assassination wackos. Ragano relates detailed, incriminating conversations with all three men; Raab reviewed Ragano's extensive documentation and checked it with knowledgeable sources.

What the book does *not* do, it should be noted, is connect any of these characters with Lee Harvey Oswald. Although Ragano and Raab offer much that is intriguing and horrifying to read, it remains quite possible that the trio's plans to kill Kennedy were just ideas and talk, and that Oswald's actions made those plans moot. Nonetheless, "Mob Lawyer" gives credence to the haunting notion that there might have been a conspiracy (with or without Oswald) to kill President Kennedy.

Ragano was the attorney and protégé of Trafficante, the Mafia's second-generation regional director of Florida (and pre-Castro Cuba). Through him, Ragano had dealings with Marcello, Trafficante's compatriot in New Orleans, and was introduced to Hoffa and became his admirer and an active insider in what was known as the Teamsters Bar Association. Gradually, he became Trafficante's and Hoffa's intimate and ac-



BY THE TAMPA TRIBUNE, FROM "MOB LAWYER"

"Mob Lawyer" Frank Ragano, right, with Jimmy Hoffa at the Tampa courthouse in 1962.

tive colleague. Crime reporter Nicholas Pileggi, writing in a foreword to the book, succinctly describes Ragano's role:

"He sorted out the kickbacks in the billion-dollar teamster pension-fund loans, pushed the mob-directed buttons that made movie stars and singers jump, kept his mob clients out of jail for years, and, unwittingly, may have delivered the murderous message between Hoffa and the mob that might have resulted in the death of JFK."

Ragano's biography of his career is full of naive rationalizations about the virtues of these men he cavorted with and represented (Trafficante was charismatic, Hoffa was a patriot), and self-serving criticism of the government's Gesta-po-like tactics, selective prosecution, use of spies as witnesses and intimidation of suspects' families. For decades he was blind to his own questionable habits. An example: He adopted the practice of some of Hoffa's legal team of waiving legal fees and instead taking 5 to 10 percent commissions for loans they were able to arrange for contractors and developers through Hoffa's control of the Teamsters' \$1 billion pension fund. The questionable arrangement bothered Ragano, but not too much. Between 1964 and 1967, he arranged \$12 million worth of Teamsters' loans netting him \$330,000 in commissions. He even arranged one loan in the middle of Hoffa's fraud trial.

Ragano admired Hoffa's "zeal" on behalf of the

rank and file whose funds they plundered, and deplored law-enforcement efforts to convict his client for "technical violations." Not one to notice an inconsistency, he boasts that had he not been able to dissuade another odious Teamster client, Frank Chavez, from killing Robert Kennedy for "getting" Hoffa, "I would have had no choice but to report his ravings to the authorities as a possible assassination plot." Quite a moral position for one who here claims to have been the messenger between the principals in an assassination plot against the president.

Ragano does tell interesting inside stories about the parole and later the rubbing out of Jimmy Hoffa that have the ring of truth, providing details, names and places. He relates Trafficante's story about the CIA-Mafia plot to kill Castro, filling in holes in the report of the Church committee, before which Trafficante committed perjury. Turns out, the mob pulled a scam on the CIA, which was pulling a scam on the world. "They paid us a lot of money and nobody intended to do a damn thing," Trafficante told Ragano. He takes his readers to private meetings with the dramatis personae of the Mafia in the 1960s, when it was in its heyday, and tells stories about some of their stars, such as Sam Giancana, who complained that his organization stole the 1960 election for Kennedy, "and he gets his brother to hound us to death." There is no honor.

Now retired, ill, broke and recently out of jail, Ragano says "it's my destiny" to tell the story. Cynics will wonder whether "Mob Lawyer" is merely the latest entry in the books-by-crooks genre. Except for the shocking disclosures about his deceased former clients, there is no reason to read this book. With them, however, it joins a select few that provide critical links in the circumstantial case that the mob planned JFK's killing.

Blinded by the treachery and intoxicated by the false friendship of Trafficante and Marcello and beguiled by the money and celebrity that came with representing Hoffa, Ragano now sees that he crossed the line from mob lawyer to criminal. As a witness, Ragano is subject to every conceivable attack on his ethics and credibility. But his story does mesh with much that we know about his trio of alleged conspirators. And, as we prosecutors used to tell juries in our organized-crime cases, you can't prove these crimes with witnesses like Eleanor Roosevelt.

The reviewer worked as a special prosecutor for Robert Kennedy in the Justice Department's organized crime and racketeering section from 1961-'64. His book about that experience is to be published next year.