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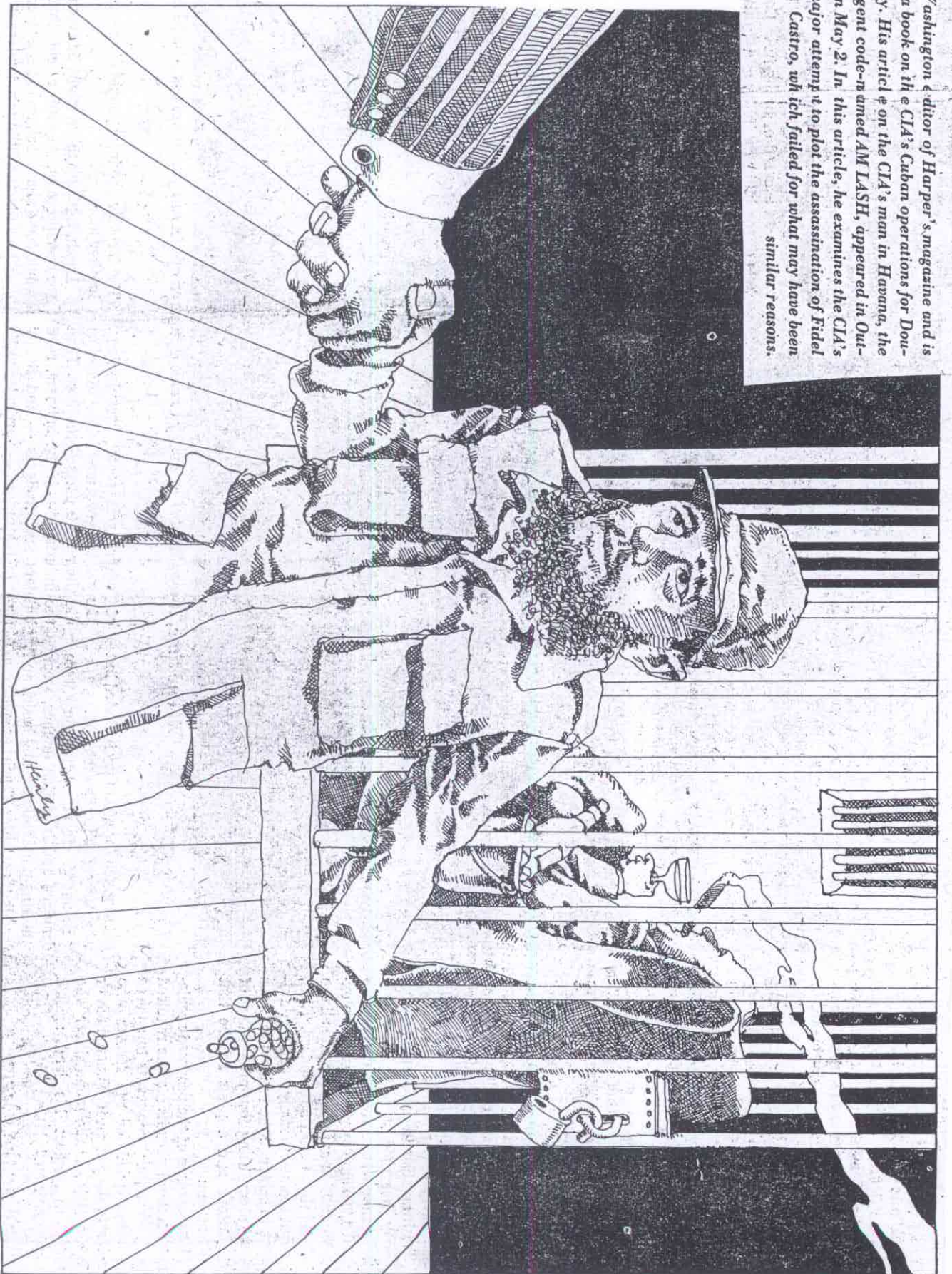
The Mafia,

The CIA

And Castro

By George Crile III

Critle is Washington & editor of Harper's magazine and is writing a book on the CIA's Cuban operations for Doubleday. His article on the CIA's man in Havana, the Cuban agent code-named AM LASH, appeared in Outlook on May 2. In this article, he examines the CIA's other major attempt to plot the assassination of Fidel Castro, which failed for what may have been similar reasons.



By John Healy for The Washington Post

MANY ODD TRIBUTES have been offered to the American character, but few can rival that of Sen. Walter Mondale upon reviewing the total failure of the CIA's persistent efforts to kill Fidel Castro. "Thank God," he said, "we're just not very good at that sort of thing."

Most thoughtful observers seemed to draw the same reassuring conclusion. Even the American Mafia dons who had been recruited by the Agency to carry out Castro's execution were seen as too incompetent to be really evil. The portrait drawn by the Senate Intelligence Committee casts them more in the light of characters out of "The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight," bumbling after Castro but apparently never getting around to making an attempt on his life.

Such interpretations of these deadly undertakings are no doubt comforting, but they are unlikely to be more than exercises in wishful thinking. To begin with, Sen. Robert Morgan (D-N.C.) tells us "the theory that prevailed in the [Senate Intelligence] Committee was that the Mafia never tried to kill Castro, that we were being used."

The committee did not pursue this, but an independent examination of the available record of one of the key Mafia figures involved in the plot makes us consider the troubling possibility that at least some of the CIA's Mafia associates were working with Castro.

Such a combination would hardly have seemed likely in 1960 when the CIA set out to recruit the Mafia. Almost all the major underworld families had invested heavily

in Cuba and Castro was fast moving to seize their holdings. He had even put some of their members in jail. The Mafia's willingness to do the CIA's dirty work would not then have required explanation.

Sam Giancana and John Roselli are the two mobsters generally identified with the Mafia-CIA plot. But a third, Santo Trafficante Jr., was perhaps the most important of the three, for it was his men, both in Miami and Havana, who were supposed to carry out the murder.

Trafficante is generally identified as the don of southern Florida, but he is also one of the chiefs in the Mafia's loose national confederation. Once the Agency decided to turn to the mob, it was inevitable that Trafficante's assistance would be sought. Alone among the principal dons, he had lived in Cuba. He had built a large organization there and still had a number of associates in Castro's Havana. Moreover, his professional experience made him ideally suited for assassination work.

He had learned the business from his father, Santo Trafficante Sr., who came from Sicily in 1904 to Tampa, where he built and ran his crime family for the next 50 years. In 1954, a year after surviving a shotgun attempt on his life, Santo Jr. succeeded his father.

In the first few years of his rule, Tampa was plagued with gangland murders. He was himself a leading suspect in the 1957 barbershop execution of Albert Anastasia, the old chief of Murder Incorporated. Accompanied by a Cuban associate, Trafficante had been in Anastasia's New York hotel suite the night before the killing.

According to reports of the Senate Permanent Investigations Committee, Anastasia had been attempting to move in on Trafficante's Cuban gambling operations.

The following month, Trafficante was arrested at the Mafia national convention at Apalachin, N.Y. Ten years later, his eminence was again confirmed by his appearance at the La Stella Restaurant in New York with Carlos Marcello, Carlo Gambino and several other of the country's leading dons.

He was, in short, one of the major crime bosses in the United States and, significantly, the don most deeply affected by Castro's revolution. Not only were his gambling casinos seized but he had been jailed in Cuba. One would assume that such a man might have contemplated taking on Castro independently. At that time, in 1960, Castro's grip on Cuba was by no means secure. Once Trafficante accepted his CIA commission, Castro's days should have been numbered.

A Question of Loyalties

THE INITIAL PLOT called for poisoning Castro in his favorite Havana restaurant, where one of Trafficante's men worked. The CIA's Technical Services Division supplied deadly botulinum toxin which Robert Maheu, who was coordinating the mob's efforts for the CIA, passed to an exile associated with Trafficante at the Fontainebleu Hotel in Miami Beach. From there Trafficante's courier was to deliver the poison pills to the man in the Havana restaurant.

All of this took place in March and April of 1961, just

before the Bay of Pigs. Accounts vary as to why the plan failed. One version is that the authorization to administer the poison never came through; another, that Castro stopped going to the restaurant.

The most intriguing theory was proposed by the CIA's deputy inspector general, Scott Breckenridge, to a Senate staff member. Breckenridge, who had been responsible for investigating the CIA-Mafia plot, maintained that Trafficante had been providing Castro with details of the plot all along.

But why would Santo Trafficante, of all people, do this? One possible explanation is proposed in a July 21, 1961, report on Trafficante by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics: "There are unconfirmed rumors in the Cuban refugee population in Miami that, when Fidel Castro ran the American racketeers out of Cuba and seized the casinos, he kept Santo Trafficante Jr. in jail to make it appear that he had a personal dislike for Trafficante, when in fact Trafficante is an agent of Castro. Trafficante is allegedly Castro's outlet for illegal contraband in the country."

The report goes on to summarize contradictory reports on Trafficante's relationship with Castro but, because of its date, the allegations quoted are of great interest. Back in 1961, the Mafia's anti-Castro credentials were impeccable. The informants relied on by the narcotics agents may have been wrong in their conclusions, but it is hard to think of a possible self-serving motive for fabricating such a story.

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Associated Press

Havana, 1959: Santo Trafficante's arrest.

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There are other indications that there may have been some working arrangement between Castro and the mob. Several reliable witnesses — most notably Grayston Lynch, who was a senior case officer with the CIA in Miami for eight years — assert that during the crucial early 1960s Castro relied on Cuban Mafia contacts for much of his intelligence in the exile community. And once again Santo Trafficante emerges as a central figure, for Castro is reported to have paid off his Mafia agents through the Florida numbers racket — Bolita — which Trafficante runs.

Here another Bureau of Narcotics report — this one prepared by agent Eugene Marshall — is instructive: “. . . Fidel Castro has operatives in Tampa and Miami making heavy Bolita bets with Santo Trafficante Jr.'s organization. The winning Bolita numbers are taken from the last three digits of the lottery drawing in Cuba every Saturday night.” According to this report, prior to the drawing, these operatives communicate with Cuba and advise which numbers are receiving the heaviest play. The Cuba lottery officials then rig the drawing. . . .” According to this report and others, Castro's agents were robbing Trafficante of a large share of his profits. The Narcotics Bureau was afraid that, if Trafficante's Bolita operation were ruined, he would concentrate even more on the drug trade.

But Trafficante was in an even better position than the feds to know about raids on his profits. Had he chosen to, he could have solved the problem overnight by shifting the payoff numbers from the Havana lottery to the weekly dog races in Miami, as he finally did in the late 1960s. If, then, these reports are to be believed, Trafficante's Bolita may have served as one of the paymasters to the Cuban intelligence network in the United States.

Divided Loyalties

TO THOSE ONLY loosely familiar with Cuba in the 1950s, and the Mafia's intricate role there, it must seem absurd to suggest that the underworld could collaborate with Castro's intelligence. But the Mafia is not a monolith and not all of its branches had been Castro's enemies. The Mafia had placed most of its bets on the dictator Fulgencio Batista, but it had also served as the gun runners for the revolutionaries. Castro, as well as most other important Cuban revolutionary leaders, had previously dealt with and relied on one or another underworld family for arms to carry on the fight.

As the owners and managers of the luxury hotels and gambling casinos in old Havana, the Mafia had played a pervasive role in Cuban life. Soon after Castro's victory its leaders were no longer welcome in Cuba as its operations were progressively closed down; but it still had friends and former business associates high in Castro's government. The complexity of the Mafia-Castro relationship is exemplified by the ambiguities that surround the imprisonment and release of Trafficante himself in 1959.

It was a time when thousands of enemies of the revolution (and Trafficante clearly seemed to fall into this

category) were being summarily taken out and shot. The Bureau of Narcotics report suggests the possibility that he had agreed to work with Castro and that the jailing was designed to provide cover. But officially, he got out of Cuba thanks to the services of his resourceful lawyer, Rafael Garcia Bango. Bango is himself another good example of that era's ambiguities — not least because his brother Jorge was and is one of Castro's closest friends and advisers. (He is Castro's regular handball partner and is the minister of sports, a prestigious post in Cuba.)

After getting Trafficante out of Cuba, Bango stayed on for the turbulent first seven years of the revolutionary government. Then, in 1966, he left for Miami, where he came to the attention of a federal anti-crime strike force which had Trafficante under surveillance. According to one strike force official, the two men had what amounted to a “father-son relationship.” Eight months later Bango was arrested and jailed in Spain for passing counterfeit American money.

Significantly, Bango is now back in Cuba. That an important mob attorney, whatever his family connections, should find life palatable in the new Cuba is at least curious. But there seem to be nothing but contradictions in the lifestyles of Trafficante and his friends.

Mysterious Gratitude

FOR THE NEXT PART of Trafficante's history we must turn to Jose Aleman, an exile in Miami who became involved with Trafficante in 1962 through his cousin, Garcia Bango. Aleman had been a rich young revolutionary in Havana, one of the leaders of the almost successful 1957 attack on Batista's presidential palace. His then considerable wealth had enabled him to maintain a base in Florida where he owned the Tradewinds Motel and much other Miami real estate, including the Miami Stadium. The Tradewinds figured prominently in the revolution, for by 1957 most of the leading revolutionaries in Havana had fled into exile, including many of Castro's followers, and most ended up by staying there at Aleman's expense.

After the revolution, Aleman returned to Cuba and stayed a year before he was forced into exile again — this time as a counter-revolutionary. On arriving in the United States, he was met by George Davis of the FBI with a subpoena to appear as a witness against a Mafioso named Norman Rothman at a trial in Chicago.

Aleman had had frequent dealings with the Mafia when he was buying guns for the revolution. He had met Rothman in 1958 when the latter was trying to save his Cuban investments by ingratiating himself with the anti-Batista forces. Rothman offered to flood Cuba with fake currency in order to bankrupt the economy and bring down the government. In return he wanted to be able to maintain his gambling operations. Aleman had rejected his offer. He tried to avoid testifying, but the FBI reminded him that, if he did not cooperate, he might be subject to prosecution for illegal gun running.

Aleman's relationship with the FBI had initially been

hostile. The Tradewinds "was an armed barracks," explained George Davis, who was assigned to monitor the exile activities, and the FBI had tried to close it down. But by late 1958 the Bureau had cause to change its mind. Aleman had visited the State Department to warn that Fidel Castro was a Communist, and he persuaded one of the Communist revolutionaries staying at the Tradewinds to brief the FBI on the nature of the party in Cuba.

All of this stood Aleman in good stead with the Miami FBI office, particularly after Castro revealed his political affiliations. And after his testimony in the Rothman trial, Aleman's relationship with the Bureau grew very close. The FBI men came to rely on him, not only as a useful source of information, but as a guide to understanding the customs and thinking of the exiles. "Jose's a real nice fellow," the now retired Davis remarked. "He's a reliable individual."

After his appearance at Rothman's trial, Aleman continued to meet regularly with his contacts at the FBI to report on exiles he suspected of being Castro agents. He also told them of an extraordinary series of meetings with Trafficante.

Trafficante's Indiscretion

WHEN ALEMAN'S FATHER died, his stepmother inherited most of the fortune and the inheritance taxes were so high that Jose Jr. (who had already lost his land holdings in Cuba to the revolution) was forced to sell the Miami Stadium and the Tradewinds Motel. By 1962 he was in debt, with his only asset the three-story Scott Bryan Motel, on Collins Avenue and 33d St., in Miami Beach.

Some time in September of 1962 an old revolutionary colleague who rented an apartment at the motel told Aleman that Trafficante wanted to see him. The colleague explained that Trafficante felt indebted to Aleman's cousin, Garcia Bango, and wanted to express his gratitude by helping Aleman out of his financial difficulties. He was prepared to arrange a sizeable loan from the Teamsters Union. Aleman's friend assured him that the loan was perfectly legal and that it had already been cleared by Jimmy Hoffa himself.

Aleman was understandably wary — particularly since he had so recently testified against a Mafia leader. But sure enough, the Tampa godfather did visit Aleman at the Scott Bryan and offered him the loan — \$1.5 million to replace the ramshackle motel with a 12-story glass wonder, complete with a penthouse apartment for Aleman.

Aleman says that Trafficante spent most of the evening philosophizing. "He spoke almost poetically about democracy and civil liberties." But then he turned to the Kennedys: they were not honest, they took graft and they did not keep a bargain. He complained about their attacks on his friends, saying, "Have you seen how his brother is hitting Hoffa, a man who is a worker, who is not a millionaire, a friend of the blue collars? He doesn't know that this kind of encounter is very delicate. Mark my words, this man Kennedy is in trouble, and he will get what is coming to him." Aleman says that he argued that Kennedy would get reelected, and Trafficante re-

plied, "No, Jose, he is going to be hit."

Aleman says that he reported this conversation to his FBI contacts, who expressed interest only in Trafficante's business proposals. Aleman assumed that they dismissed the Kennedy warnings as gangland braggadocio.

For the next year, Trafficante used the Scott Bryan as his business headquarters, renting an apartment whenever he came to town. Aleman met with him frequently to discuss the Teamsters loan and Trafficante soon began to lead Aleman into other kinds of conversations and to introduce him to other Mafia figures like Angelo Bruno of Philadelphia. Aleman, like his FBI contacts, could not quite figure out what Trafficante was doing. But he played along, hoping the loan would come through. Also the FBI considered his information valuable and he was pleased to be of service.

Starting in late 1962 and continuing through the summer of 1963, Aleman says that three Cubans he had known in Havana and at the Tradewinds, who had gone to work for Castro after the revolution, appeared in Miami and then left for Texas. He suspected them of being Cuban agents and he told this to the FBI. "I advised the

FBI in long conversations that I thought something was going to happen. . . I was telling them to be careful." By this time Aleman says he was meeting quite frequently with his FBI contacts. They listened to what he said but rarely seemed interested in his speculations.

About the end of October, 1963, the same exile who had introduced Aleman to Trafficante asked Aleman to sign a petition bitterly critical of President Kennedy. Aleman was no great admirer of the Kennedys. He signed the petition but immediately had second thoughts, especially when it was reproduced in several Cuban newspapers in Miami.

On the day of the Kennedy assassination, Aleman arrived home to find that the FBI had telephoned. "I was worried that, because of the petition, they might suspect me." But what they were interested in was Trafficante's previous statement that Kennedy was going to be "hit."

"Two agents [Aleman is quite certain one of them was Paul Scranton] came out to see me. They wanted to know more and more. I finally had to tell them he didn't say he was going to do it. He just said Kennedy was going to get hit." The agents stayed until they had explored every possible angle and then told Aleman to keep the conversation confidential.

The only source for all of this is Aleman, who claims that he personally repeated everything to various officials of the FBI, especially George Davis and Paul Scranton in 1962 and 1963. Both agents acknowledge their frequent contacts with Aleman but both declined to comment on Aleman's conversations with Trafficante. Scranton explained he would have to have clearance: "I wouldn't want to do anything to embarrass the Bureau."

The Enemy of My Enemy

IN SEEKING to destroy both the Castro regime and the Mafia empire, the Kennedys had aroused two desperate enemies, each with a tradition of violence and

covert action. No proof that either was connected with the assassination of President Kennedy has ever been produced. But their traditions and their predicament at the moment when Kennedy was cut down make either eligible suspects. And when the two-front war that the Kennedys were waging is viewed through the experience of Santo Trafficante, it becomes at least interesting to speculate on the possibility of these two powers operating in concert.

The possibility becomes even more intriguing if one chooses to take seriously a memorandum to the director of the CIA recently declassified from the Warren Commission files. It reports the conversation of a British journalist, John Wilson (also known as Wilson-Hudson) at the American Embassy in London just four days after Kennedy was killed. Wilson said that in jail in Cuba after the revolution in 1959 he had met an American "gangster-gambler named Santos who could not return to the U.S.A. because there were several indictments outstanding against him. Santos opted therefore to remain in prison for a period of time paying Castro in dollars for his rather luxurious and definitely non-prisonlike accommodations... While Santos was in prison," Wilson says, "Santos was visited by an American gangster type named Ruby."

It is tempting to make much of such a document but more needs to be known about the English journalist, about the memo and about Jack Ruby's travels before any conclusions can be made. Probably the only witness who could help answer the questions raised here are the CIA's old Mafia associates. The Church committee only managed to interview one of them, John Roselli. Sam Giancana, due to give his testimony, was executed the day before. Santo Trafficante was never called as a witness. The committee staff claimed he could not be found.

None of the extraordinary possibilities that have sur-

facted here offer a documentable refutation of the sole assassin theory. As in all such explorations touching on the Kennedy assassination, the trail goes cold as it approaches Dallas. But that does not mean that there was not a conspiracy. There is simply no assurance that conspiracies, when they exist, must inevitably come to light. Many secrets prove not all that hard to keep.

Just consider the numbers of people who knew about the CIA's secret war against Cuba in the early 1960s — about the Agency's mammoth station in Miami with its 400 case officers, its 2,000 Cuban agents, its navy and small air force, its arsenals, safe houses, and its paramilitary operations against Cuba. Certainly thousands of people had a rather general knowledge of that massive campaign. And yet it was not until last year that the American public even learned that President Kennedy had gone on to wage a covert Cuban war after the Bay of Pigs. Similarly, nine years ago, Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson reported the CIA's assassination plotting with the Mafia. But no one paid any attention.

It is a well known psychological phenomenon that you

can't see what your imagination is not prepared to accept. In a recent interview, Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.) reflected on his experience over the past few years in exploring Watergate and the world of U.S. intelligence: "The great fear that I have is that I'll wake up 10 years from now, and it will all suddenly fall into place, and I'll realize what a damn fool I was."

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Chicago Daily News

The late Sam Giancana, in 1966.