

Rosselli file

# The Miami Herald

Sunday, September 19, 1976

Florida's Complete Newspaper  
Two Latin American Editions Are Published Daily

• • • 314 Pages

## Cloudy

Considerable cloudiness with a 60 per cent chance of thundershowers. Highs in the mid- to upper 80s, lows in the 70s. (Details, Page 2A.)

# Could Rosselli Have Linked Castro Plot to JFK Death?

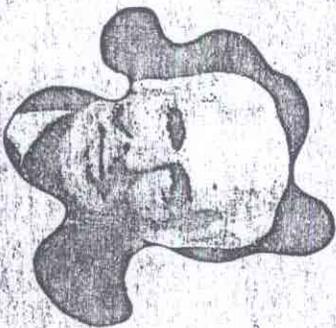
By RON LABRECQUE

Herald Staff Writer

In 1960, when the CIA was trying to set up a delicate attempt on the life of Fidel Castro, it turned to a man once described as "the biggest flag-waving SOB in the country" — West Coast underworld figure Johnny Rosselli.

Rosselli — a seemingly improbable conspirator in a government plot — got the "flag-waving" label from Salvatore (Momo) Giancana, then Chicago's top crime boss and a man Rosselli brought into that same plot.

Now both are dead, murdered in the past year, and investigators are wondering whether their plotting led to their deaths and whether the CIA plots against Castro — only recently made public and even kept from the Warren Commission —



John Rosselli

are vital clues to the John F. Kennedy assassination.

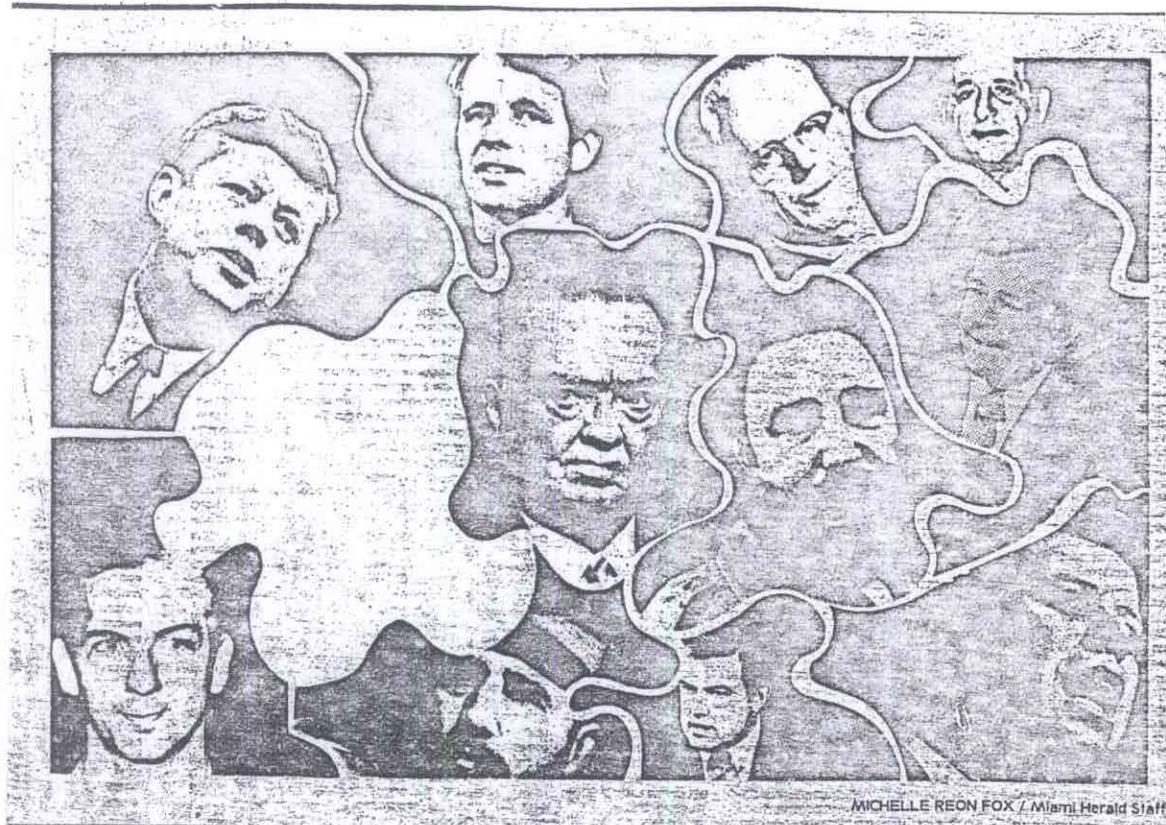
The deaths of Giancana, in June of 1975, and Rosselli, this summer, have aroused a renewed concern in Washington, where on Friday the

House of Representatives voted to reopen the investigation of the Kennedy murder.

REP. THOMAS N. Downing, (D., Va.), who will be chairman of the panel, said he is "convinced" a conspiracy was involved in Kennedy's death.

Now, in the aftermath of the violent deaths of Giancana and Rosselli, the question arises of what role, if any, the Kennedy White House played in the early 1960s "deal" the CIA made with the two underworld figures to have Castro murdered.

Whether the Kennedy White House knew about about the CIA's plotting (Robert F. Kennedy found out after the contacts were ended), the CIA's use of the underworld turn to Page 26A, Col. 1.



MICHELLE REON FOX / Miami Herald Staff

▶ FROM PAGE 1A

seems ironic in retrospect.

Robert Kennedy's passionate efforts to disable organized crime are well documented.

IN 1960 when Robert Kennedy wrote about what he had learned of organized crime in America from his years as chief counsel to the Senate Rackets Committee, he too quoted Giancana to make a point.

He told about Giancana's interview at his local draft board at the outbreak of World War II, when he was asked what he did for a living.

"I steal," Giancana is said to have replied.

So Sam Giancana didn't go to war and years later would boast to Chicago reporter Sandy Smith that he stayed out of the Army — labeled unfit — by telling the truth.

"What's wrong with the syndicate?" Kennedy quoted Giancana. "Two or three of us get together on a business deal and everybody says it's a bad thing. Businessmen do it all the time and nobody squawks."

A Senate committee began studying the Kennedy questions more than a year ago as it looked at covert CIA activities.

IN AN addendum to the Senate Intelligence Committee's interim report last November, Sen. Howard Baker (R., Tenn.) said, "It is my personal view that on balance the likelihood that presidents (the report dealt with Dwight Eisenhower

and Kennedy) knew of the (Castro) assassination plots is greater than the likelihood that they did not."

Just to trace Rosselli's history with the CIA is mind-boggling for the investigators. Yet, it is just one aspect of the search for his killer.

Johnny Rosselli — born on the fourth of July in Esperia, Italy, and 71 when he died — was not first and foremost a CIA operative.

His greater role as evidenced by two convictions, his associations and to some extent his own comments, was as an influential, if publicly lesser known, organized crime figure.

**HIS ASSOCIATION** with other identified underworld members was monitored by law enforcement agencies as recently as several weeks before his July 28 disappearance.

By all accounts, Rosselli was a charming man, dressing in expensive clothes, married for only two years in the early 1940s and known most of his life as one who easily attracted women.

He was an immigrant who told in a short autobiography written about 1967 that his "life of crime" began as a teenager in Boston, attempting arson for his stepfather and stealing \$50 on his own. As he traveled west, finally to settle in California, his attention turned to bootlegging, gambling and dabbling in the movie business.

IT IS said that Rosselli guarded the West Coast gambling interests for Giancana's Chicago syndicate.

Why Rosselli was chosen by the

CIA for a Castro plot in 1960 is unclear, although CIA officials have since testified that they wanted the kind of contacts in Cuba which organized crime had made during the pre-Castro days when Havana was a gamblers' haven.

Giancana was enlisted by Rosselli because he had influence with Florida's Santo Trafficante, considered the key underworld gambling figure in Havana.

The unraveling of CIA and underworld conspiracies, an awesome web spanning decades, is left to a team of nine in the Metro Homicide Division. It is a team now clearly consumed by the task which has been a full-time operation since Rosselli's body was pulled from Dumfoundling Bay on Aug. 7.

**THAT THE** Metro team is even involved in happenstance. Rosselli lived in Plantation, Broward County, with his sister and brother-in-law. It's just that his killers chose to dump his body in Dade.

While several detectives say their instincts lead them to conclude that the Rosselli murder was an internal underworld affair, all on the team are aware of the pressure on them to search each clue that leads back to the CIA-Castro affair.

With Rosselli's death this summer, the newly appointed Senate committee saw its list of knowledgeable witnesses further trimmed. Some of those witnesses have died violently and some from natural causes.

When Giancana was murdered in

June of 1975, before he could even be questioned by the committee staff, authorities attributed it to an internal gangland struggle — even though the murderer is still unknown.

The death of Rosselli, who had appeared before the committee three times in the past year without immunity, caused greater con-

cern on Capitol Hill.

**THE SAME** night Rosselli's body was identified — the legs hacked off and stuffed along with the body into an oil drum — Baker, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, called for the FBI to get involved in the case. (Several days later, Attorney General Edward Levi ordered FBI involvement.)

It wasn't until several weeks later, however, that what was known to Baker became public knowledge.

A section of the former committee's April report told of a Washington attorney who in 1967 went to Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren (chairman of the then-disbanded Warren Commission) to say that two of his clients believed they knew about Cuban agents in the United States who conspired in the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

**THE INFORMATION** eventually reached the FBI, but as the Senate committee concluded this year, the 1967 FBI probe was slipshod and incomplete.

One of the clients referred to in the report has since been identified as Rosselli. And it has since been learned that Rosselli was convinced he held a vital clue to the JFK murder.

"There was never the slightest doubt in John's mind that Castro was responsible for the assassination of Kennedy," said Edward P. Morgan, the attorney referred to in the report.

Morgan is an attorney of no mean stature in Washington. He served as chief counsel to the joint congressional committee which studied the Pearl Harbor attack, counsel to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and for seven years was chief inspector of the FBI.

**ROSSELLI** told Morgan about the CIA plot in 1967, when the Department of Justice was vigorously attempting to deport Rosselli for being an illegal alien.

Rosselli, Morgan said, "was certain that the people he (Rosselli) put around Castro in the CIA plot turned right around and killed Kennedy. The people he still knew (in

1967) did it."

Rosselli, according to Morgan, decided to talk about his CIA activity in hopes of decreasing the pressure from the FBI and Department of Naturalization and Immigration, both Justice Department agencies.

Several friends of Rosselli, including Morgan, say they are convinced the FBI tried to get Rosselli to become an organized crime informant by threatening to have him deported if he didn't cooperate.

**IN 1961**, through a bungled wiretap effort, the FBI became aware of Rosselli's CIA activities.

While Giancana and Rosselli were in Florida planning the operation, Giancana wanted to return to Las Vegas to check on his girl friend, Phyllis McGuire, whom he suspected of dating comedian Dan Rowan. To keep Giancana in Florida, it was agreed that a bug would be placed in her hotel room and her conversations monitored.

But the private detective they hired, with CIA money it has since been learned, was discovered and arrested. Eventually the police investigation led back to the Castro plotters.

Prosecution was avoided when the CIA intervened and said the "national interest" would be damaged if the plot information became public.

**WHEN THE** wiretap case was again to be investigated in 1966, this time by a Senate committee headed by the late Sen. Edward Long (D., Mo.), the CIA again stepped in to stop it.

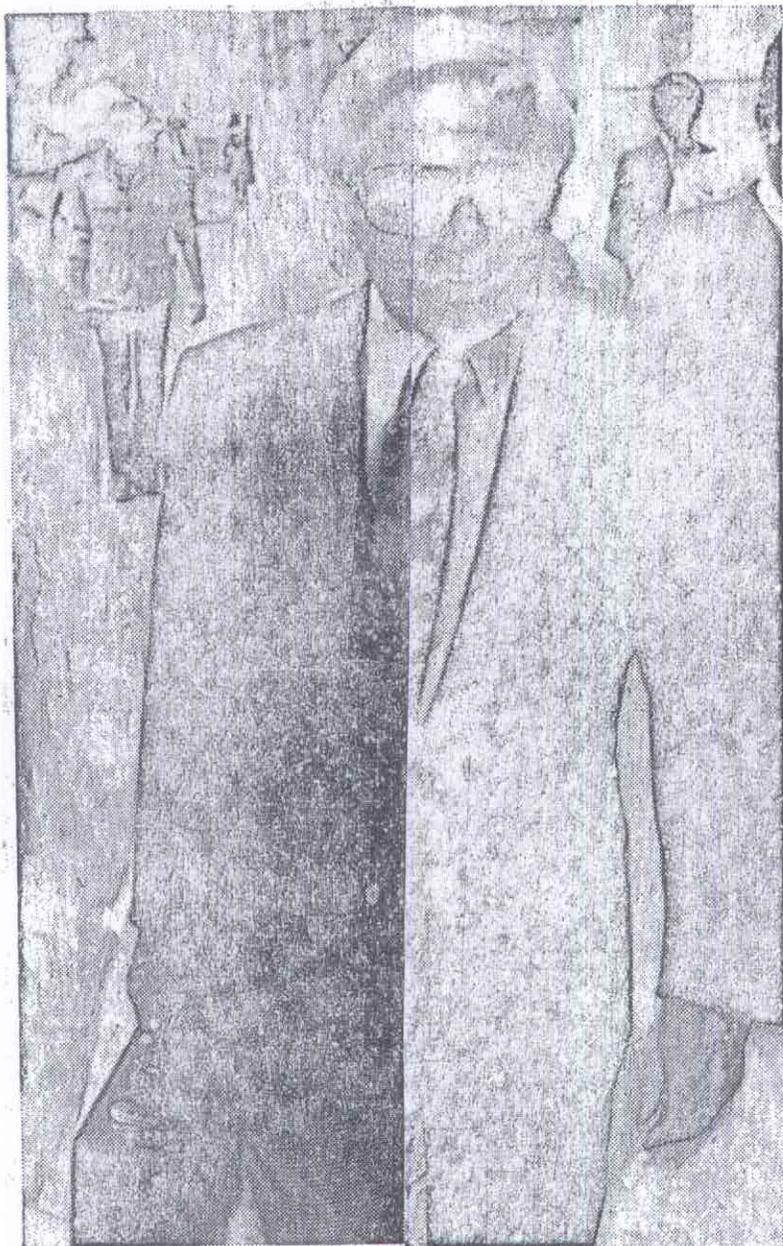
Morgan was told about the pending investigation by Rosselli and Robert Mahue, a former FBI agent-turned Howard Hughes aide who was the CIA's initial link to Rosselli.

Mahue told Morgan that both he and Rosselli had been subpoenaed to appear before the committee. Morgan said he called Lawrence Houston, the CIA general counsel. Houston went to Long and the investigation was dropped.

**MORGAN SAID** he knew, as the Senate committee recently emphasized as well, that all information about the CIA plots — which could have been the incentive for pro-Castro forces to kill Kennedy — had been kept from the Warren Commission.

"I was an admirer of Earl Warren," Morgan said. "(His) report said that Oswald alone killed Kennedy. It kept bugging me after so gruesome a detail from Rosselli that the Chief Justice could put his name on a report which didn't assess the most significant piece of evidence bearing on the killing of Kennedy."

The information Morgan had was passed to Warren via colum-



— Associated Press

## John Rosselli Leaves Senate Office Building ... testified on alleged CIA plot against Castro

nist Drew Pearson, a mutual friend. Eventually, it reached the FBI, but, remarkably, even after direct orders from President Lyndon Johnson in the spring of 1967, investigation was not vigorously pursued.

**THE SENATE** Intelligence Committee compared that apparent inaction with a statement former FBI director J. Edgar Hoover made to the Warren Commission on May 5, 1964. Hoover said, "well, I can assure you so far as the FBI is concerned the case will be continued in an open classification for all time. That is, any information coming to us or any report coming to us from any source will be thoroughly investigated, so that we will be able to prove or disprove

the allegation."

A Senate Committee staff member commented recently, "what is really happening is that the investigation which the FBI should have done in 1967 — and no one can come close to explaining why it wasn't — is actually being done now."

**HART, AS** have local investigators, has established three possible scenarios for Rosselli's death: his recent organized crime activity, retaliation for his Castro assassination efforts or the information he held concerning the JFK assassination.

"Maybe Rosselli's information was the vital nerve of the Kennedy assassination," a Senate source told *The Herald*.

High officials in the Cuban government also reportedly feel there was a "Cuban factor" in the JFK death, but they see it as a result of exile politics, according to a recent article by Alton Frye, a senior fellow of the Council Foreign Relations in Washington.

Frye wrote that he visited Ha-

vana recently and met with Cuban officials including Deputy Prime Minister Carlos Rafael Rodriguez. "... they volunteer the suspicion that the recent murders of Sam Giancana and Johnny Rosselli ... surely have some connection with Cuban exile politics and the Kennedy murder," Frye wrote.

**THERE HAVE** been theories recently propounded to show why both pro and anti-Castro forces could have wanted to get JFK out of power in 1963.

On the one hand, there is the report of French journalist Jean Daniel, who was the bearer to Castro of an offer from JFK for calmer relations. Castro was reportedly agreeable. The report stated that Daniel later was lunching with Castro when word came that Kennedy had been shot. Daniel described the Cuban leader as genuinely shocked by the news.

It has since been learned that probably in the very hour JFK was shot, a one-time Castro supporter was receiving a poison pen device from a CIA agent in what was a long-running anti-Castro effort. That Cuban agent was code-named AM/LASH, and he has since been identified as Rolando Cuebala, now imprisoned in Cuba for his assassination plotting.

**WHETHER JFK** had knowledge of, or perhaps even approved, any of the assassination plots will probably never be known.

His closest advisers, who testified before the Senate Committee, all said he had no knowledge of such plots and would never have approved of them.

The same month Rosselli was passing poison pills to his Cuban contact at a meeting at the Fontainebleau, March of 1961, former Florida Sen. George Smathers, a friend of Kennedy, said he and

Kennedy discussed the ramifications of a Castro assassination.

Smathers has since said Kennedy rejected the idea and that the discussion was more of a "brain-picking" session.

AT LEAST one high-level CIA official did testify he believed the White House was being briefed on the plots but according to Richard Bissell, one of the officials who originally decided to use Rosselli, it was through the method of "plausible deniability."

That, according to the recent Senate report, "can also lead to the use of euphemism and circumlocution, which are designed to allow the President and other senior officials to deny knowledge of an operation should it be disclosed."

Another alleged link between the White House and the underworld plotters, first made public by the Senate Committee, has also been denied by virtually everyone involved. Judith Campbell Exner, the woman who claims to have been friend and lover to both Giancana and JFK, introduced to both by Frank Sinatra, was not a link in the Castro plotting, those close to both Giancana and Kennedy have said.

A MAN with access to Kennedy's closest advisers told The Herald recently, "The Giancana-Rosselli thing is unrelated to the Exner thing. I was there. Sure JFK knew her, but he was naive about those kinds of things."

There is documentation to show that on March 22, 1962, Hoover lunched privately with Kennedy and presumably gave him his first information linking Exner with the gangsters. The final recorded phone call between the White House and Exner was made only a few hours later.

Another possible link discussed in the Senate report shows that the same unidentified Cuban to whom Rosselli passed the poison pills prior to the Bay of Pigs operation in April of 1961, was among a group of Cuban exile leaders who met with JFK following the invasion fiasco.

IT IS known that several of the Cubans with whom Rosselli worked have been identified, but investigators say that not all are known.

As a condition to his appearances before the Senate Committee in the past year, it was agreed that Rosselli "would not state the names or confirm the existence of those agents whom he knew about," Rosselli's attorney Leslie Scheer said.

The friends and acquaintances of Rosselli who could be contacted by The Herald all said they never

heard the names of the Cuban agents.

But a committee source cautioned, "they (Cuban agents) read the committee's report, they know who's being referred to."

ANOTHER Rosselli attorney, Tom Wadden, a partner of Edward Bennett Williams, said, "Yes, I think he had more knowledge" than he testified to.

Searching Rosselli's more recent past for enemies also presents problems, investigators say.

The decline of John Rosselli appears to begin in the late 1960s. In 1967, he was convicted in a card-cheating scandal at the posh, celebrity-filled Friar's Club in Los Angeles where the influence of Sinatra had made him a member according to investigators.

Deportation pressures were also mounting at this time.

ROSSELLI entered prison on the conviction in 1970 where he would serve three years of a five-year sentence.

In 1971, he was brought to a federal grand jury in Los Angeles which was probing whether some unidentified Detroit organized crime

leaders conspired with the Emprise Corp. — a giant firm with nationwide race track and sporting event concessions — to hide financial interests in the Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas.

Rosselli, too, had an interest in the Frontier, which opened in 1967. He owned the gift shop concession along with a partner named Joe Breen. How Rosselli obtained the concession is unclear, but Breen said it gave Rosselli an income of about \$60,000.

ROSSELLI at one time had been a major influence in Las Vegas. Several sources said that when the owners of the Desert Inn wanted Howard Hughes to move out of the penthouse — because his special needs were costly and putting some "high rollers" in would be more profitable — it was Rosselli who patched things up.

Hughes eventually bought the Desert Inn, as well as the Frontier.

What Rosselli told the federal grand jury about the Frontier in 1971 is unknown. Rosselli didn't testify later at the trial at which

Anthony J. Zerilli and Michael Polizzi and the Emprise Corp., among others, were convicted.

ZERILLI and Polizzi are still in jail. In 1973, the House of Representatives Select Committee on Crime, probed the influence of organized crime in sports — and one area they looked at was Emprise and the Frontier Hotel case.

At the time of the conviction, the federal prosecutor asked that Polizzi and Terilli be jailed immediately because monitored, wiretapped conversations showed that the two had talked about "murder, the killing of certain individuals."

An intimate associate of Rosselli, however, discounts the possibility that Rosselli's grand jury appearance could have led to his death. "They know Johnny didn't talk to the grand jury," the associate said.

JOE BREEN said Rosselli hadn't been to Las Vegas for nine years, that "he's never even seen the gift shop."

Since his prison release and move to Plantation, Rosselli wasn't trying to regain power, according to his friends. "He had no muscle," said an associate. "I can't believe Rosselli was getting back into mob stuff."

But at the same time, many of the associates were surprised to learn about Rosselli's recent visits with alleged organized crime figures on the West Coast.

Several associates speculate that Rosselli wanted to get involved in casino gambling, preferably in the Middle East, and was looking for someone with money to back him.

"MY IMPRESSION was that he was broke," Morgan said. "He told me last year, 'I'm in bad financial straits.'"

Scheer said Rosselli's income included about \$60,000 from the gift shop and about \$3,500 in social security, most of which went for back fees to attorneys and for government fines.

One friend said that just before Giancana's death, Rosselli had accepted Giancana's offer of money. The friend was to act as the intermediary. "Let me figure out what my next (attorney's) tab will be," the friend quoted Rosselli as saying.

Rosselli is described as a man with a sense of humor who did little offending.

A California woman who had known Rosselli for about 40 years told The Herald, "If you were around him for 30 minutes you'd like him because he would regard you as a human being."

"If you had a headache he would either get you an aspirin or send someone to get one. I said something significant there — he would get it or he would send someone — he wasn't a pansy, but he wasn't a tough guy either."