

Slain Mobster Claimed Cuban Link to JFK Death

8/22/76
By Ronald Kessler and Laurence Stern
Washington Post Staff Writers

Long before his recent murder, John Rosselli, the CIA's underworld recruit in attempts to kill Fidel Castro, had been privately claiming that agents of the Cuban premier, in retaliation, were involved in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Rosselli's belief in a Cuban connection to the Kennedy assassination was expressed through his attorney, Edward P. Morgan, to the FBI as long ago as March, 1967, and also in private conversations with a longtime associate of Rosselli who participated in meetings between Rosselli and the CIA.

An FBI "blind memorandum" on an interview with Morgan dated March 21, 1967, was included, without

identification of the interviewee, in last June's Senate Intelligence Committee's report on the role of the intelligence community in the Kennedy assassination investigation.

Morgan told the FBI that Rosselli and another Morgan client had informed him that Castro became aware of CIA assassination conspiracies against him and "thereafter employed teams of individuals who were dispatched to the United States for the purpose of assassinating Mr. Kennedy."

Because neither Morgan nor Rosselli were identified in the Senate report, the significance of that portion of the 106-page document was discounted at the time it was published in June, before Rosselli's disappearance.

See **ROSSELLI**, A8, Col. 1



JOHN ROSSELLI
... found in drum off Florida

ROSSELLI, From A1

ance and the subsequent discovery of his body in an oil drum in Florida waters. The Washington Post, however, has confirmed that Morgan and Rosselli were the sources of the testimony that suggested a Cuban role in the Kennedy murder.

Morgan's account, according to a summary of the FBI interview, was that Rosselli had reached his conclusion about a Cuban connection to the Kennedy assassination from "feedback" furnished by sources close to Castro who were involved in the CIA plots to assassinate the Cuban leader.

"His (Morgan's) clients were aware of the identity of some of the individuals who came to the United States for this purpose and he understood that two such individuals were now in the state of New Jersey," the FBI interview summary stated.

A long-time associate of Rosselli who was interviewed separately by The Washington Post, said there was no question in the slain mobster's mind that President Kennedy was killed on Castro's behalf in reprisal for the CIA schemes against the Cuban leader.

"He was positive; he was sure," said the associate, who knew Rosselli well and was in contact with him before Rosselli disappeared from his Florida home on July 28. The associate, who does not want to be identified publicly, is scheduled to be interviewed this week by Dade County, Fla., homicide detectives. He was a party to Rosselli's contacts in the early 1960's with CIA case officers overseeing the attempts to assassinate Castro.

Despite occasional speculation, the collective conclusion of all official U.S. government investigations into the Kennedy assassination—including the Warren Commission, the FBI and the CIA—has been that there was no evidence that implicated the Castro government or any of its agents.

However, the CIA's involvement in the schemes to assassinate Castro were not divulged to the Warren Commission, and knowledge of them was confined until 1967 to a small, elite circle of the U.S. intelligence community. President Johnson apparently first learned about the schemes only after a March 7, 1967, column by the late Drew Person, which prompted Johnson to order a CIA investigation of the highly sensitive episode.

Full details of the CIA-underworld collusion in the plots to kill Castro did not surface publicly until the publication last year of the Senate Intelligence Committee's assassination report and the ensuing report last June on the possible role of the intelligence agencies in the Kennedy assassination and investigation.

The body of Rosselli, who lived flamboyantly in a world of mobsters,

politicians and playgirls, was found two weeks ago in an inverted oil drum weighted with chains but buoyed by gases from decomposition on the ocean's surface off the coast of Miami. The specific cause of death was determined by an autopsy to be asphyxiation.

Last year, an underworld colleague of Rosselli, Sam (Momo) Giancana, who also had been recruited by the CIA in the effort to kill Castro, was found shot to death in his Chicago home in what police described as a highly professional job by assailants who penetrated the mobster's personal security screen. Giancana was due to testify before the Senate Intelligence Committee shortly after his demise.

Neither murder has been solved. The possibility that Rosselli's murder might have been related to his Senate testimony on the CIA schemes to kill Castro has brought the FBI

into the investigation at the request of Attorney General Edward H. Levi.

The involvement of Rosselli, Giancana and other underworld figures—principally Santos Trafficante of Tampa, Fla., whose one-time Havana gambling enterprises fell hostage in 1959 to the Cuban revolution—in plots against Castro had been a closely held secret within the top echelons of the CIA and FBI until recently.

The tangled chronology of suppression and eventual disclosure, although detailed in the June report, has received little public attention. Rosselli's murder adds significance to those events.

Here, is the sequence, pieced together from the testimony given to Senate intelligence investigators:

Columnist Drew Pearson went to the late Chief Justice of the United States Earl Warren late in January, 1967, and told him that a Washington lawyer had confided to him that one of his clients said the United States "had attempted to assassinate Fidel Castro in the early 1960s and Castro had decided to retaliate."

Warren declined Pearson's suggestion that he see the lawyer, who was Edward Morgan. Warren referred the matter to then Secret Service Director James J. Rowley, who on Feb. 13, 1967, wrote FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, informing him of the allegations.

Hoover sent the Rowley letter to six senior bureau officials on an "eyes-only" basis. There is no record of FBI meetings or discussions of those allegations. At that point the sensitive letter bounced back and forth in the higher reaches of the FBI bureaucracy.

The job of responding to Rowley's letter was assigned to the supervisor of the FBI's General Investigative Division who was given responsibility for the overall assassination investigation in March 1964.

This official's job was complicated by the fact that he had never been informed of what Hoover and his closest

circle of confidants in the FBI learned early in 1962—that the CIA was deeply involved in assassination attempts against Castro, and prominent American underworld figures, including Rosselli and Giancana, had been recruited for the attempts.

So on Feb. 15, 1967, the FBI official prepared a draft reply to the Rowley letter for his superiors saying "our investigation uncovered no evidence indicating Fidel Castro officials of the Cuban Government were involved with Lee Harvey Oswald in the assassination of President Kennedy. This bureau is not conducting any investigation regarding this matter." The FBI official added in later testimony that "everyone in the higher echelons read this . . ."

Drew Pearson went ahead and published a column on March 7, 1967, referring to reports that CIA schemes against Castro's life in 1963 "may have resulted in a counterplot by Castro to assassinate President Kennedy."

Ten days later, Marvin Watson, one of Lyndon Johnson's chief deputies, called FBI assistant director Cartha DeLoach with the message that "the President had instructed that the FBI interview (Morgan) concerning any knowledge he might have regarding the assassination of President Kennedy."

DeLoach told Watson that it appeared Morgan "did not want to be interviewed, and even if he was interviewed he would probably not divulge the identity of his sources . . ." Watson persisted, however.

"Under the circumstances," DeLoach concluded in a memo for the files, "it appears that we have no alternative but to interview (Morgan) and then furnish the results to Watson in blind memorandum form."

The interview was assigned to two agents from the FBI's General Investigative Division, which the Senate committee concluded was "puzzling" because it was the Domestic Intelligence Division which had been assigned responsibility for investigating possible foreign involvement in the assassination.

Neither agent was privy to the knowledge, confined to Hoover and his top aides, of the CIA's assassination plots against Castro. Both agents testified eight years later that they were "surprised" when Morgan alluded during the interview to U.S. attempts to assassinate Castro.

"These agents stated that they could not evaluate the lawyer's (Morgan's) allegations or question him in detail on them, since they had not been briefed on the CIA assassination efforts," the Senate committee observed.

On March 21, 1967, the FBI's Wash-

ington Field Office sent headquarters ten copies of a blind memorandum summarizing the interview with Morgan.

In a Senate Intelligence Committee summary of the FBI interview, Morgan was reported to have acknowledged that his clients were "on the fringe of the underworld" and that they faced "possible prosecution in a crime not related to the assassination . . ."

Morgan said his clients "were called upon by a governmental agency to assist in a project which was said to have the highest governmental approval. The project had as its purpose the assassination of Fidel Castro. Elaborate plans were made, including the infiltration of the Cuban Government and the placing of informants within key posts in Cuba."

Morgan also told the FBI, according to the summary, that Castro had employed "teams of individuals who were dispatched to the United States for the purpose of assassinating President Kennedy."

It was not clear then—nor is it today—why Morgan came forward at that time to bring Rosselli's story to the ears of the nation's highest law enforcement authorities.

It may be relevant that Rosselli had serious legal problems at the time.

In May, 1966, the FBI threatened to deport him for living in the United States under an assumed name unless he cooperated in an investigation of the Mafia (his true name was Filippo Saco). At the time, he reached a CIA contact from the anti-Castro conspiracy days, CIA security director Col. Sheffield Edwards, who informed the FBI that Rosselli wanted to "keep square with the bureau" but was afraid that the mob might kill him for talking.

In 1967, after he was arrested for gambling fraud at the Friars Club in Beverly Hills, Rosselli approached his former CIA case officer, William Harvey, who sought unsuccessfully to intercede in the prosecution.

It was against this background that Morgan went, first to Dew Pearson, and then the FBI, with Rosselli's sensational allegations of CIA plotting against Castro and the Cuban counter-espionage directed against President Kennedy.

Last April Rosselli told the Senate

Intelligence Committee he had no recollection of either receiving information that Castro retaliated against President Kennedy or of having discussed it with Morgan. This meant either that Rosselli suffered a dramatic memory loss or that Morgan's statement to FBI agents nine years earlier was a pure invention, a serious risk for an established Washington lawyer.

No committee source could explain the discrepancy, and Morgan declined to confirm that Rosselli was the client in question or to discuss either his allegations against the Cuban government or his recent testimony.

The internal FBI memo on the 1967 interview with Morgan was sent to headquarters with a transmittal slip saying: "No further investigation is being conducted by the Washington field office unless it is advised to the contrary by the Bureau."

The Senate intelligence committee, in commenting on this position, said that "had the interviewing agents known of the CIA-underworld plots against Castro, they would have been aware that the lawyer had clients who had been active in the assassination plots."

On March 21, FBI headquarters forwarded the Washington field office memo to the White House, the attorney general and the Secret Service. It did not recommend any further investigation of Morgan's allegations.

On the evening of the following day, President Johnson called CIA Director Richard M. Helms to the White House. The next morning, March 23, Helms ordered the CIA inspector general to prepare a report on the CIA involvement in the assassination plots—Operation Mongoose—of which Helms had full knowledge at the time they were executed.

By May 22, Helms briefed President Johnson on the results. There is, however, no evidence that Helms briefed the President on the November, 1963, plot—one of eight major schemes on Castro's life from 1960 to 1965—to assassinate the Cuban leader through the employment of an agent with the cryptonym AMLASH. His identity was revealed as Rolando Cubela, a 1961 CIA "recruit" with close access to Castro.

CIA operatives turned over assassin equipment to Cubela during a Paris meeting on November 22, 1963—the day President Kennedy was killed in Dallas. There has been subsequent speculation that the mercurial and talkative Cubela was either a double agent or being monitored by Cuban intelligence.

During the later days of his presidency, Mr. Johnson spoke cryptically of a "Caribbean Murder Incorporated" targeted against Fidel Castro. The inspiration for that statement undoubtedly was the CIA inspector gen-

eral's report he ordered Helms to have prepared.

Within the past year, Rosselli and two of his co-conspirators in the Castro assassination schemes have died, Giancana at the hands of a professional hit man and Harvey as the result of a "massive heart attack" last June.

Mrs. William Harvey, the widow of the deceased CIA official, said she suspected no foul play in her husband's death. She did, however, tell The Washington Post that she received a call after Rosselli's disappearance in late July warning her that Cu-

bans appeared to be attempting to wipe out all those who participated in the anti-Castro plots.

The call, she said, came from an old friend who was acquainted with Rosselli's sister, whose name is Edith Daigle. Mrs. Harvey said that Mrs. Daigle told the mutual acquaintance that the Rosselli family had received a telephone threat from unidentified Cubans prior to Rosselli's disappearance. She also said that Rosselli had gone to meet the Cubans in an effort to protect his family.

Mrs. Daigle could not be reached by The Washington Post. But another sister of Rosselli said she had heard of no such threats or warnings.

Harvey, who died at age 60 and whose exploits as a clandestine operator are both legendary and controversial within the agency, testified to the Senate Intelligence Committee. He had become Rosselli's case officer in Operation Mongoose and supplied the mobster with poison pills, explosives, detonators, rifles, handguns, radios and boat radar for transmission to anti-Castro Cuban agents. Harvey and Rosselli, a CIA superior testified to the Senate committee, "developed a close friendship."

Another CIA official who worked with Rosselli, James P. O'Connell, was asked if he knew whether the agency transmitted information to the mobster on possible Cuban involvement in the Kennedy assassination. He replied that he was out of the country at the time Kennedy was killed, and had no further comment.

Two months before the Kennedy assassination, Lee Harvey Oswald, who was identified by the Warren Commission as Kennedy's murderer, had traveled to Mexico City in an attempt to

gain entry to Cuba. According to the Warren Commission, Oswald represented himself as the head of the New Orleans branch of the Fair Play for Cuba organization and a friend of the Cuban Revolution.

Some three months before Kennedy was killed, Castro told Associated Press reporter Daniel Harker that U.S. leaders aiding terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders would themselves not be safe.

A U.S. government committee coordinating policy toward Cuba at the time agreed there is a strong likelihood that Castro would retaliate in some fashion. However, it concluded Castro would not risk a major confrontation with the U.S. by attacking U.S. leaders.

On the same day Kennedy was assassinated, a CIA officer met with a high-ranking Cuban official, who had said he would kill Castro, to tell him the U.S. would provide him with explosives and a poison pen device.

While the Senate Intelligence Committee said it found no evidence sufficient to justify a conclusion that the Kennedy assassination was part of a conspiracy, it also said U.S. agencies did not properly investigate the assassination or tell the Warren Commission about the CIA plots on Castro's life.

"There is no indication that the FBI or the CIA directed the interviewing of Cuban sources or sources within the Cuban exile community," the Senate committee said.

According to a former FBI official in charge of key aspects of the FBI's probe of the Kennedy murder, the FBI never satisfactorily determined what Oswald planned to do in Cuba or what he had done in Russia.