Slain Mobster Claimed Cuban Link to JFK Death

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Long before his recent murder, John Rossetti, 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 Rossetti who participated in meetings between Rossetti 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 Rossetti 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 Rossetti 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 Rossetti's disappearance.

See ROSSELLI, A8, Col. 1

John Rossetti... 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 assassination 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 Pearson, 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 confidents 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 MaiTh 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 Washington 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 intervene in the prosecution.

It was against this background that Morgan went, first to Drew Pearson, and then the FBI, with Rosselli’s sensational allegations of CIA plotting against Castro and the Cuban counterespionage directed against President Kennedy.

Last April Rosselli told the Senate
rance he had no re-
collection of either receiving informa-
tion that Castro retaliated against
President Kennedy or of having dis-
cussed it with Morgan. This meant ei-
ther that Rosselli suffered a dramatic
memory loss or that Morgan’s state-
ment 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 govern-
ment 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 for-
warded the Washington field office
memo to the White House, the attor-
ney general and the Secret Service. It
did not recommend any further in-
vestigation of Morgan’s allegations.

On the evening of the following
day, President Johnson called CIA Di-
rector Richard M. Helms to the White
House. The next morning, March 23,
Helms ordered the CIA inspector gen-
eral 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, how-
ever, no evidence that Helms believed
the President on the Novem,
plot—one of eight major schemes on
Castro’s life from 1960 to 1965—to as-
sassinate 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 assassi-
nation 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 mercenary and
talkative Cubela was either a double
agent or being monitored by Cuban
intelligence.

During the later days of his presi-
dency, Mr. Johnson spoke cryptically
of a “Caribbean Murder Incorpo-
rated” targeted against Fidel Castro.
The inspiration for that statement un-
doubtedly was the CIA inspector gen-
eral’s report he ordered Helms to have
pre pared.

Within the past year, Rosselli and
two of his co-conspirators in the Cas-
 tro assassination schemes have died,
Giancana at the hands of a profes-
sional hit man and Harvey as the re-
sult 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 hus-
band’s death. She did, however, tell
The Washington Post that she re-
ceived a call after Rosselli’s disap-
pearance in late July warning her that Cu-