

Did the Mob Kill JFK?

It's Time to Find the Answer Before It's Too Late

12/10/95
By Ronald Goldfarb

THERE IS a national fascination with organized crime and politics. With movies like "Nixon" and "Casino" in the theaters, it is clear that the covert power struggles of the '60s and '70s have lost none of their appeal to Hollywood mythmakers and to the movie-going public. But while these films dramatize how power was exercised in America, cinema is no substitute for history. The classic case study of the relationship between organized crime and American politics is the role of the mob in events leading up to the murder of President John F. Kennedy.

Thirty years later, the riddle of the Kennedy assassination remains in dispute. Attempts either to "close the case" by ratifying the Warren Commission's findings or to prove a conspiratorial alternative have not resulted in any consensus about Kennedy's murder. Instead, doubt and division predominate, encouraging sensationalism and undermining confidence in the political process.

Congress has already taken a first sensible step to clarify the historical understanding of Kennedy's death and thus to heal an open wound in the American imagination. The creation of the Assassination Records Review Board, an independent federal agency, has slowly begun the overdue task of collecting and making public the government's records relating to the Kennedy assassination. The board's statutory purpose is to assemble "the fullest historical record on this tragic event in American history and on the investigations that were undertaken in the assassination's aftermath." Since last summer, the review board has begun to fulfill that mission, ordering the release of hundreds of once-sensitive CIA and FBI documents related to accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald.

But the review board has the power to do much more. Congress gave it the power to hold hearings, administer oaths, and subpoena and immunize witnesses. The board could provide a complete, non-political and non-ideological record of all information about the assassination by exploring new and credible facts, information, records and testimony.

For many of us who worked with Robert Ken-

Ronald Goldfarb is a Washington attorney and author. His biography-memoir, "Perfect Villains, Imperfect Heroes: Robert F. Kennedy's War Against Organized Crime," was published last week by Random House.

edy on the Justice Department's rackets prosecution staff, the most compelling evidence concerns conversations among leading organized crime figures in 1962 and 1963 who were outraged by Kennedy's crusade against them. There was a conspiracy to kill the attorney general; there is ominous evidence that they switched their wrath to the president.

While Kennedy himself publicly supported the official conclusion that Oswald acted alone, he privately speculated about the possibility of conspiracy. He told at least two of his close aides that he thought the mob was behind the assassination. He told Richard Goodwin, a former Kennedy administration official, "If anyone was involved, it was organized crime. But there's nothing I can do about it now. Not now." Kennedy said the same thing to Ed Guthman, his press secretary at the Justice Department.

That was in the late '60s. In the interest of knowing our history, it's time the public had all the best evidence on the record, now. The review board, scheduled to go out of existence in 1997, provides a last chance to examine the credible, relevant disclosures that have emerged since 1979 when the House assassinations committee issued its report. At that time, the committee's chief counsel, G. Robert Blakey, my colleague in the organized crime and racketeering section, concluded, "The mob did it. It's a historical fact." In 1992, he and co-author Richard Billings reviewed subsequent disclosures and theorized: "Oswald was acting on behalf of members of the mob, who wanted relief from the pressure of the Kennedy administration's war on organized crime led by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy; Ruby killed Oswald on mob orders. He stalked his prey for 48 hours to silence him."

The House committee examined extensive FBI electronic surveillance of the mob for a period of eight months before and six months after the assassination seeking clues to the mob's involvement in the assassination. They found extensive references to what Robert Kennedy's organized crime and racketeering program was doing, expressions of outrage and betrayal and comments about "wacking out Kennedy." As Blakey told me, "There's just this unremitting and unmitigating hatred being expressed for President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy" on the wiretaps.

We know that Teamster leader Jimmy Hoffa, feeling besieged by Kennedy's Ahab-like pursuit of him, planned to kill him. In August 1962, Hoffa recruited an aide to kill RFK. In February 1963, John Kennedy told Newsweek's Ben Bradlee that

Hoffa had recruited an assassin to kill the attorney general. Jack Miller, then the chief of the criminal division of the Justice Department, has confirmed that this reported Hoffa plot was known and taken seriously inside the Justice Department at the time.

Frank Ragano, a long-time lawyer for Santos Trafficante Jr., a mobster from Tampa, and for Jimmy Hoffa, published a memoir in which he told of conversations with his two clients and with New Orleans mob figure Carlos Marcello. Among the conversations Ragano disclosed were separate meetings with Trafficante and Marcello and Hoffa discussing their murderous intentions toward the Kennedy brothers. Ragano and his co-author, New York Times reporter Selwyn Raab, recounted other conversations that Ragano was privy to among these three.

Trafficante: "Somebody is going to kill those sons of bitches. It's just a matter of time."

Hoffa: "Something has to be done. The time has come for your friend and Carlos to get rid of him, kill that son of a bitch John Kennedy. This has got to be done. Be sure to tell them what I said. No more [expletive] around. We're running out of time—something has to be done."

And after the assassination, Ragano says that Marcello told him, "When you see Jimmy, you tell him he owes me, and he owes me big."

And Trafficante: "We shouldn't have killed John. We should've killed Bobby."

Questions about the truth of Ragano's reports need to be answered to assure their credibility. Trafficante's family denied that Ragano could have talked to Santos Trafficante on the dates that he said he did. Ragano replied that if challenged in court, he could prove the conversation did take place.

Other witnesses have corroborated Ragano's story that Trafficante had a deadly animus toward Kennedy. One witness, Jose Aleman Jr., told House assassinations committee investigators that in 1962 Trafficante told him that John Kennedy was "not going to make it to the election. He is going to be hit. Mark my words, this man Kennedy is in trouble, and he will get what is coming to him." Aleman later recanted, saying that he merely meant that Kennedy was going to be hit by a lot of votes in the 1964 election. Chief counsel Blakey told Louis Stokes, the chairman of the House assassinations committee, "You have just gotten a demonstration of the power of organized crime in this case."

In a recent memoir, the brother of Chicago mobster Sam Giancana quoted his notorious sibling as boasting, "We took care of Kennedy . . .



The hit in Dallas was just like any other operation we'd worked on in the past." Sam Giancana himself was murdered in 1975 just days before he was supposed to talk to the Senate intelligence committee about plots to kill Castro.

An FBI report told of a meeting at Carlos Marcello's farm outside of New Orleans in the late summer of 1962. Two biographies of leading mobsters report that Marcello exclaimed "Don't worry about that Bobby son of a bitch. He's going to be taken care of." According to one participant, Marcello told his listeners he would recruit some nut to kill Kennedy so it couldn't be traced to him, "like they do in Sicily." The witness recalled Marcello saying that "the dog [President Kennedy] will keep biting you if you only cut off its tail [the attorney general]," but the biting would end if the dog's head was cut off.

Marcello, who died in 1994, denied saying this.

The board should continue its efforts to obtain and make public the so-called Brilab tapes, a half dozen FBI wiretaps of Carlos Marcello. These tapes were not introduced as evidence at Marcello's 1981 racketeering trial in New Orleans, and were sealed by the judge. The FBI has refused to release them. Blakey says that a high-ranking FBI official told him that the tapes include incriminating statements by Marcello pertaining to the assassination.

The review board can clarify this body of evidence by calling the aging and vulnerable Frank Ragano, who has critical evidence never submitted under oath; surviving witnesses who have information about Hoffa's original 1962 plot to kill RFK; the FBI agents who have the Brilab tapes; Trafficante's relatives; Sam Giancana's relatives; associates of Carlos Marcello, and others.

I think there are three possible outcomes of such an inquiry, all of them beneficial.

The Warren Commission's key finding that Oswald acted alone will be confirmed on the basis of all available evidence.

Or, the House assassination committee's finding of conspiracy and speculative assessment that the mob was involved will be established to reasonable public satisfaction.

Or, it may be shown that the mob conspired and took steps to kill the president which were either a part of a conspiracy involving Oswald, or which never materialized because of Oswald's independent and unpredictable act.

The mysteries of the JFK assassination should be resolved before the surviving witnesses soon are gone and we are left with contentious theories and perplexing uncertainties. Otherwise, we will be left to ask, as Cassius did after the assassination of Julius Caesar, "How many ages hence shall this our lofty scene be acted over? In states yet unborn and accents yet unknown."