

Mob Figure Testifies On Anti-Castro Plots

By Jeremiah O'Leary
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Gangland figure Santo Trafficante today told the House Assassinations Committee he decided to go along with a CIA plot to try to kill Fidel Castro because he thought it was "the same thing as a war and because the U.S. government wanted it done."

He said he knew nothing about any attempt by Castro to retaliate.

The 63-year-old Florida mob figure testified only after Rep. Richardson Preyer, D-N.C., informed him that U.S. District Judge Oliver Gasch had issued an immunity order, meaning Trafficante cannot be prosecuted for his testimony before the panel.

Trafficante told the committee the first time the CIA contacted him was in Miami late in 1960 or early 1961 after he had been in detention several times in Castro's Cuba.

The witness said his first contact with the CIA came from the late John Roselli, who was later "executed" in a gangland killing and whose body was found in a barrel in the waters around Miami.

"HE TOLD ME the CIA was involved in the elimination of Castro," Trafficante said, "and (asked) if I would help him. He introduced me to Mr. Maheu (former aide to Howard Hughes), and Mr. Giancana (another mob figure subsequently slain) then came into the picture. Roselli wanted me to be the interpreter because I can speak Spanish.

"The second meeting with Maheu and Giancana was a few days later where they were all staying at the Fountainbleu Hotel.

"I thought it was a good thing to kill Castro because he had established a Communist base in Cuba. Being the U.S. government wanted it done, I said I'd go along with it. It was the same thing as a war."

Trafficante said they had several meetings with an anti-Castro activist named Rafael Gener and that he took them to meet some other Cubans who were active in trying to overthrow Castro by revolution.

"I assisted them a couple times," the frail and balding 63-year-old Trafficante testified. "Then they found out they didn't need my services any more and I just backed off."

Trafficante said he was involved for a month or two in the discussions about killing Castro. He said he knew Giancana was aware of the plot and his memory is that Roselli brought Giancana into the matter.

"What did Giancana say about the CIA?" Rep. Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, the committee chairman, asked.

"He said he and Maheu were working for the CIA and the U.S. government wanted this thing done," Trafficante said. "He made me understand that he was an agent in the CIA. But my total involvement was to be interpreter between Maheu and Giancana and the Cuban people Gener told us to see."

TRAFFICANTE said he was taken into custody in Havana several times after Castro took control of the government in January 1959 and was confined in a sort of immigration center called Triscornia along with several other casino operators.

He said it was Fidel's brother, Raul Castro, who helped obtain his release from Triscornia. "But I knew sooner or later I'd have to get out of Cuba because I could see there was nothing there for me," Trafficante testified.

He said he left Cuba for Miami as if to make a short trip late in 1960 and never went back.

Trafficante, in response to questions from Stokes, said he never did manage to get any of his money back to the United States. Most of what he had was in Cuban pesos which were worth only 10 to the dollar.

Trafficante denied emphatically that he ever told a Cuban exile named Jose Aleman, an earlier witness before the panel, that the late President John F. Kennedy was going to be "hit".

He acknowledged that he met two or three times with Aleman in Miami, in the first instance to discuss a loan Aleman needed because he was in a financial bind.

"But as far as the Kennedy situation, I want to tell you I'm as sure as I'm sitting here I never made a statement Kennedy was going to get hit," Trafficante testified. "I deny that I made that statement. I spoke to him in Spanish and there's no way in Spanish you can say somebody's gonna get hit."

TRAFFICANTE, however, acknowledged that he might have said that Kennedy wasn't going to get re-elected.

"How did you know he wouldn't be re-elected?" Stokes asked.

"I thought he wouldn't," Trafficante responded. "They had the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban question, a lot

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of people were criticizing Kennedy. I might have said there'd be no re-election, but I didn't say he's gonna get hit.

Stokes asked Trafficante if he knew that a 1962 magazine article about organized crime listed him as being in 10th place of the top 10 and asked if he knew he had been under Justice Department surveillance.

"They lived with me for 15 years, night and day," Trafficante said. "All kinds of surveillance. From the hill-tops, the trees. Everything you could think of."

He also denied ever knowing or having heard of either Jack Ruby or Lee Harvey Oswald before Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963.