

Senate Panel Accelerates CIA Probe

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The Senate Committee on Intelligence Operations yesterday stepped up its investigation of CIA complicity in assassination plots and voted to grant immunity to one reluctant witness.

Chairman Frank Church (D-Idaho) told reporters that the committee voted unanimously to immunize Robert A. Maheu, once a top aide to billionaire Howard R. Hughes, in return for his testimony.

A former FBI agent reportedly involved in backstage dealings between the Mafia and the CIA in a murder scheme directed against Cuban Premier Fidel Castro, Maheu invoked his Fifth Amendment rights in an appearance before the Senate committee Monday, but he was understood to be willing to testify if granted immunity. A federal court order must be obtained to formalize the arrangement.

The Senate committee spent the rest of the day in closed-door questioning of Richard Bissell, former CIA director of clandestine operations.

Bissell held the CIA post in the closing months of the Eisenhower administration and the early days of the Kennedy administration, when the anti-Castro scheming took place.

Church declined to discuss Bissell's testimony, but said that it still left the committee with a great deal of work ahead in its efforts to determine the chain of command for the various CIA assassination plots and attempts under investigation.

"That still is a murky area," Church said. "We'll have to try to piece it together by careful comparison of testimony and by very thorough, searching examination of documents."

Former CIA Director John A. McCone said last week that Castro's assassination was authorized in both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations, but McCone said he did not become CIA director until later and was never informed of the details. He said he only recently learned of some of them by inspecting CIA files.

Despite the murkiness of the chain of command, Church reiterated that "We have hard evidence of the complicity of the CIA in certain murder plots and murder attempts. The evidence is not murky on that score."

The committee is to meet again Friday to question former CIA Director Richard

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Helms, now ambassador to Iran, on the assassination issue.

Once an assistant to Bissell in the CIA's so-called "dirty tricks" department, Helms became head of the agency in 1966. The Rockefeller commission's report on CIA domestic operations this week said that Helms was aware of various activities, such as secret mail intercepts, which the commission called "plainly unlawful."

Church said the committee would get to these controversies later. "We have our hands full now," he said of the assassination issue.

In pursuing it, the committee has also scheduled an executive session Monday to question Mafia figure John Roselli, whom Maheu is said to have recruited to work for the CIA. Roselli's lawyer told

a federal court judge in 1971 that Maheu had enlisted Roselli in a CIA effort to kill Castro that included six attempts on the Cuban leader's life in the early 1960s.

The Rockefeller commission has not made public the evidence it compiled on CIA assassination plots, but Church said the Senate committee has been promised the materials along with the still-secret testimony and documents underlying the commission's public report on CIA domestic activities.

However, only Bissell's testimony before the commission has been sent to the committee so far. Church said he understood that some more of the commission's evidence on assassination plots will be sent to the committee by Monday, but he said that "when we'll receive the rest of it is unclear."

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