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A Grim Rumor On JFK's Death

WASHINGTON — President Johnson is sitting on a political H-bomb — an unconfirmed report that Sen. Robert Kennedy, D-N.Y., may have approved an assassination plot which then possibly backfired against his late brother.

Top officials, queried by this column, agreed that a plot to assassinate Cuban Dictator Fidel Castro was "considered" at the highest levels of the Central Intelligence Agency at the time Bobby was riding herd on the agency. The officials disagreed, however, over whether the plan was approved and implemented.

One version claims that underworld figures actually were recruited to carry out the plot. Another rumor has it that three hired assassins were caught in Havana where a lone survivor is still supposed to be languishing in prison. These stories have been investigated and discounted by the FBI.

Yet the rumor persists, whispered by people in a position to know, that Castro did become aware of an American plot upon his life and decided to retaliate against President Kennedy.

This report may have started New Orleans' flamboyant district attorney, Jim Garrison, on his investigation of the Kennedy assassination, but insiders believe he is following the wrong trails.

THIS MUCH can be verified:

1. President Kennedy was so disillusioned with the CIA after the Bay of Pigs fiasco that he swore to friends he would like "to splinter the CIA in a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds." He ordered a thorough investigation by a group headed by Gen. Maxwell Taylor. But the President's real watchdog was his brother Bobby, who ended up calling the shots at the CIA.

2. During this period, the CIA hatched a plot to knock off Castro. It would have been impossible for this to reach the high levels it did, say insiders, without being taken up with the younger Kennedy. Indeed, one source insists that Bobby, eager to avenge the Bay of Pigs fiasco, played a key role in the planning. Whether the assassination plot was ever actually put into effect is disputed.

3. Some insiders are convinced that Castro learned enough at least to believe the CIA was seeking to kill him. With characteristic fury, he is reported to have cooked up a counterplot against President Kennedy.

4. Shortly after Kennedy was gunned down, the FBI handed President Johnson a memo reporting that Cuban leaders had hoped for Kennedy's death. The President showed it to Kennedy's top aide, Ted Sorensen, who thought the details were so ambiguous that he called the memo "meaningless."

5. It is also known, of course, that Lee Oswald, the accused assassin, was active in the pro - Castro movement and traveled to Mexico seeking a Cuban visa a few weeks before the dreadful day in Dallas.

Some sources consider Robert Kennedy's behavior after the assassination to be significant. He seemed to be tormented, they say, by more than the natural grief over the murder of his brother.

Author William Manchester, who got his information chiefly from Kennedy - controlled sources, portrays Bobby as a character of granite during those tragic days. But others had a different impression.

McGeorge Bundy, then a top White House aide, told a colleague that he was "worried about Bobby," that "Bobby was reluctant to face the new reality," that he had "virtually to drag Bobby" into President Johnson's first cabinet meeting.

For weeks after the tragedy, this column was told, Bobby was morose and refused to see people. Could he have been plagued by the terrible thought that he had helped put into motion forces that indirectly may have brought about his brother's martyrdom? Some insiders think so.

NOTE: Those who may be shocked that the CIA would consider stooping to a political assassination should be reminded of the ugly nature of what Secretary of State Dean Rusk has called "the back-alley struggle."

He has described it as "a tough struggle going on in the back alleys all over the world ... a never-ending war ... no quarter asked and none given ... It's unpleasant, and no one likes it, but that is not a field which can be left entirely to the other side."

The blunt truth is that the subterranean world of espionage is harsh almost beyond belief. There have been times that the CIA has been forced to resort to the most extreme measures to protect the national security.

Some of the CIA's best operatives also have suddenly and mysteriously disappeared. No word will be heard of them for months, then a few grim details will leak out.

"We will learn that these people have been subjected to the most skillful, most fiendish tortures that man can possibly devise and that they have been reduced to animals or vegetables," Clark Clifford, head of the President's Foreign Intelligence Committee, told this column. "When they no longer can really be called men and when all possible information has been extracted from them, then they are disposed of. It is not a pretty picture, but that is the way the game is played."

WE ALSO play rough.

The New York Times, in an exhaustive report on the CIA, quoted "one of the best - informed men in Washington on this subject" as saying: "When we catch one of them (a Soviet or other agent), it becomes necessary to get everything out of them, and we do it with no holds barred."