

Reputed Godfather Tells About Plot To Murder Castro

By George Lardner Jr.
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Casually tossing his dark blue hat on the floor beside him, reputed Mafia don Santo Trafficante told the House Assassinations Committee yes-Cuban President Fidel Castro, but insisted that his role had been greatly exaggerated.

"I thought I was helping the United States government," Trafficante said. He swore that his "total involvement was to be an interpreter," and said he never took a penny for his efforts.

Testifying under a court-ordered grant of immunity that kept him from invoking the Fifth Amendment, Trafficante strenuously denied ever predicting that President Kennedy would one day be "hit," and disclaimed any advance knowledge of that assassination.

"Absolutely not," he said. "No way".

Plainly skeptical as its public hearings on the Kennedy assassination drew to an inconclusive finale, the committee poured into the public record a sheaf of FBI electronic surveillance records showing that underworld leaders often voiced hopes that Kennedy and his brother, Robert, would be killed. But committee members and lawyers acknowledged that there were still too many loose ends for any firm findings.

Chairman Louis Stokes (D-Ohio) said he hoped to tie down most of those loose ends in the committee's final report at the end of the year, but he conceded that this may not be possible.

"Frankly, life itself contains loose ends," Stokes said. "... Not every question that can be asked can be answered."

A prominent Cuban exile, Jose Aleman, told the committee Wednesday that Trafficante had once predicted to him that Kennedy would never be reelected because he was going to be "hit." Aleman charged that the underworld had by then actually entered into a secret alliance with the Castro regime, and implied that this may have led to the president's death.

Trafficante replied, in effect, that he never had much to do with Castro beyond joining in the abortive CIA-sponsored scheme to kill him.

"There is no affiliation whatsoever between the Castro government and myself," the grandfatherly looking underworld figure said. "Never has been."

He also denied ever entertaining any real hopes of reestablishing his operations in Cuba, where he had once been the alleged overlord of syndicate gambling. Trafficante fled from Cuba on a pretext in 1960, after Castro had closed down the casinos in Havana, but he shrugged off the episode as one of life's little setbacks.

"Most of the money I had there was

Cuban money," he said. "I was young. I had a good time. I checked it off to experience."

Now 63 and suffering from chronic hypertensive vascular disease, among other ailments, Trafficante said he was first contacted about the CIA assassination plot in late 1960 or early 1961 by John Roselli, a close associate of Chicago underworld boss Sam (Momo) Giancana, at the Fontainebleu Hotel in Miami Beach.

"Seeing the United States government wanted it done," he said he reasoned, "I go along with it... I figured it was like a war." He said Giancana entered the scheme shortly thereafter.

According to a CIA inspector general's report in 1967, it was Trafficante who procured the services of a Cuban exile leader and a Castro government official "as two persons who could serve as 'potential assassins,'" and it was Trafficante who received poison pellets to be used in the attempt and then passed them on to the Cuban contacts.

Trafficante denied such vigorous participation, and maintained that the Cubans, identified at the hearing only as Mr. X and Mr. Y, had actually been enlisted by Raphael (Macho) Gener, an antiCastro activist whom Roselli had asked about.

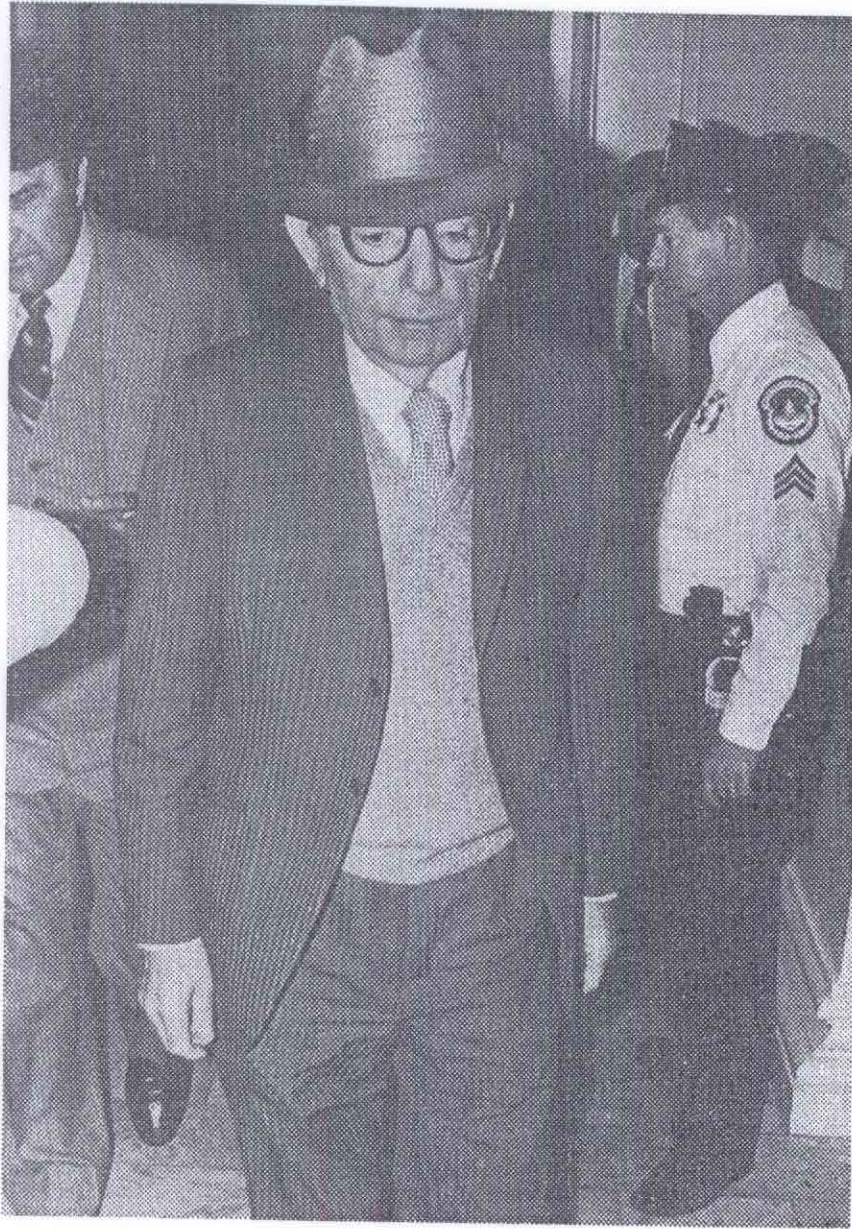
"He asked me what kind of man he [Gener] was," Trafficante testified. "I said he was a good man, at least he was antiCastro."

"The pills were supposed to be administered by Mr. X," Trafficante said, but he said, "I did not give any pills to X. I did not give any money to X. I did not receive no pills from Roselli." Instead, he said that "after a couple of meetings, they told me they didn't need my services anymore. When they told me that, I just backed off."

Trafficante said he would like to have gone back to Havana in the event of Castro's downfall and the return of legalized gambling, but he said that talk of his wanting "gambling monopolies and all that trash about dope and prostitution, that's not correct."

The reputed underworld leader, who gave his occupation as "retired," without saying from what, told the committee he did have discussions with exile Aleman about a Teamsters union loan that Aleman hoped to get. Trafficante said he may also have told Aleman on one occasion that "Kennedy was not going to get reelected, [but] not that he was going to get hit."

"I was speaking to him in Spanish," Trafficante protested. "In Spanish, there was no way I could have told him Kennedy was going to get 'hit'... That's not right. That's not true. That's all I can say."



By James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post

Santo Trafficante: "I thought I was helping the United States government."