

The President's Friend

By William Safire

WASHINGTON — Senators Frank Church and Gary Hart, acting like a couple of frightened men, have been forcing intelligence committee staff members to sign affidavits swearing the staffers were not the source of leaks of the committee's most closely guarded secret.

The secret was hinted at on Page 129 of the committee report on C.I.A. assassination attempts. While straining to show that President Kennedy did not know that the C.I.A. had hired Mafia chiefs John Roselli and Sam Giancana to arrange the assassination of Fidel Castro, the committee report reluctantly and guardedly revealed a Kennedy-Mafia connection.

"Evidence before the committee," the report reads, "indicates that a close friend of President Kennedy had frequent contact with the President from the end of 1960 through mid-1962. F.B.I. reports and testimony indicate the President's friend was also a close friend of John Roselli and Sam Giancana and saw them often during this same period."

The report footnotes that "White House telephone logs show seventy instances of phone contact between the White House and the President's friend whose testimony confirms frequent phone contact with the President himself. Both the President's friend and Roselli testified that the friend did not know about either the assassination operation or the wire tap case. Giancana was killed before he was available for questioning."

There the Church committee hoped the matter would rest. But the reason for the plumbers' operation—complete with threats of perjury and warnings of lie detector tests—was the investigative reporting of Dan Thomasson and Tim Wyngaard of the Scripps-Howard Washington bureau.

According to their sources, which they say include F.B.I. documents, "the President's friend" was a beautiful girl who divided her time between the Chicago underworld leadership and the President of the United States. The President's secretary, Mrs. Evelyn Lincoln, is reported to have testified that the purpose of the almost twice-weekly calls over a year's time was to set up meetings between the President and his friend.

The private life of any public figure is nobody's business but his own, and salacious gossip of White House kennelkeepers and self-described intimates can be dismissed as offensive. But when the nation's Chief Executive receives even a few calls from the home telephone of the leader of the Mafia in Chicago, that crosses the line into the public's business.

That is particularly the case when —of all Mafia leaders around—the one with whom the President shared a close friend turns out to be the one whom the C.I.A. selects to handle the arrangements for the assassination of Fidel Castro, and the one who is murdered just before testifying.

F.B.I. documents show that J. Edgar Hoover, whose agents were watching "Momo" Giancana and John Roselli as part of Attorney General Robert Kennedy's war on organized crime, discovered the link between the President and the Mafia leaders. On Feb. 27, 1962, Mr. Hoover alerted Robert Kennedy and aide Kenneth O'Donnell to the associations of the President's friend, and on March 22, the F.B.I. director took another memo on this subject to a luncheon meeting with President Kennedy. After that, the relationship was abruptly broken off. That must have been some lunch.

But substantive questions remain: (1) Since gangland figures are concerned about the liaisons of their girl friends, did the Mafia figures encourage the girl's White House relationship, and if so, to what end? (2) Did Director Hoover's obvious concern with Mr. Giancana's White House connection suddenly cut off just short of knowledge of the Giancana-C.I.A. plot to get Castro? (3) Why did Mr. Hoover check in with the C.I.A. and then tell a Las Vegas sheriff to stop prosecuting Giancana for wiretapping an unfaithful girl friend—right after his luncheon showdown with President Kennedy?

Too many coincidences here. When Mafia leaders and a President share the same girl's attentions; when those two Mafiosi are chosen to make the hit on a foreign leader by our C.I.A.; when the delivery of poison pellets is made to one of them on the weekend the President is with the girl in Florida; when the F.B.I. is listening in, and cautioning the President—and when the President winds up murdered by a supporter of Castro, target of the aborted C.I.A. assassination plot, the matter is worth a thorough public examination.

The Church committee has attempted a cover-up from the Government's end; the Mafia, by silencing Giancana forever, has clamped down the lid from its end.

Thanks to the Thomasson-Wyngaard reporting, however, the story of the President's friend gives us a useful clue to a related mystery: why the Kennedy men were so ready to acquiesce in the wiretapping and bugging of Dr. Martin Luther King.

The clue: After that luncheon in March 1962, when the F.B.I. director laid out the evidence of the Mafia connections of the President's friend, the Kennedys must have been prepared to do anything and everything J. Edgar Hoover wanted.