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Jack Ruby shooting Oswald: Was there more to his motive than Oswald's smirk?

Hints of the Mob

Did the Mafia have a hand in the murder of John F. Kennedy? The very question sounds farfetched, but assassination buffs have bandied it about for years. Mob leaders, after all, were known to dislike Kennedy because of his Administration's pursuit of organized crime and prosecution of Teamsters boss Jimmy Hoffa. And the Mafia played an active role in a CIA plot to murder another Head of State: Cuba's Fidel Castro. Last week, the issue came up again, in tantalizing detail, before the House assassination committee. Though there was no conclusive evidence, several new leads provoked committee counsel G. Robert Blakey to say that organized crime "had the motive, opportunity and means to kill Kennedy. From the testimony thus far, the possibility cannot be dismissed, although it can hardly be said to have been established."

On the Fringes: No witnesses produced any evidence linking Lee Harvey Oswald to the Mafia. But the committee did hear a lot of talk about mobsters, the Cuban exile community and a strange cast of characters on the fringes of both groups. José Alemán, a prominent Cuban exile, spent a morning recalling one of several conversations he had with Santos Trafficante, who controlled much of the gambling in Havana before Castro's rise to power—and a man with links to Castro and the CIA. Alemán said that in June or July of 1963, Trafficante complained to him about Kennedy's pursuit of Hoffa. "This man, he's not going to be re-elected, no doubt about it," Alemán remembered Trafficante saying. Alemán countered that Kennedy appeared to have a lot of support, and he said Trafficante replied, "You don't understand. He's going to be hit."

In interviews with committee staffers last year, Alemán said it was clear that Trafficante meant Kennedy would be

killed. Last week, however, expressing fears for his life, Alemán backed off his interpretation, and suggested that maybe Trafficante meant Kennedy was going to be hit with Republican votes.

Patriotism: Trafficante took the stand the next day. Now retired and living in Florida, he testified under a grant of immunity and said he "never made the statement that 'Kennedy's gonna get hit.'" But he did admit to some anti-Castro activities, which began in 1960 or 1961, after his release from a Cuban detention camp. Trafficante said he had met fellow mobster Johnny Rosselli at the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami. "He told me the CIA and U.S. Government was involved in eliminating Castro and asked if I would help him," Trafficante recalled. Rosselli introduced Trafficante to his boss, Sam Giancana, and Trafficante said he joined the plot out of patriotism. Rosselli and Giancana both turned out to be friends of Judith Exner,



Trafficante wit Earl Ruby (at of Cuba ar

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a woman who has been linked romantically to Kennedy.*

The committee also delved into Jack Ruby's possible connections to the mob, and disclosed a computer analysis of his phone calls in the fall of 1963—an investigation not made by the Warren Commission, despite the recommendations of staff lawyers. Investigators discovered calls to associates of New Orleans crime boss Carlos Marcello; to Irwin Weiner, a Chicago bondsman who, according to Blakey, knew Hoffa, Trafficante and Giancana, and to other organized crime leaders as well. Ruby was having union problems at his striptease clubs, and may have been seeking help from the bosses. But Blakey said "the ultimate meaning of these facts . . . remains as yet indeterminate."

Another curious point came up during the testimony of Lewis McWillie, a friend of Ruby's who managed the Tropicana Club in Havana. Ruby visited McWillie in 1959, about the time Trafficante had been detained by Castro. Trafficante insisted Ruby never stopped to see him, and McWillie said last week that Ruby only stayed with him six days. But Ruby's tourist cards show that he entered Cuba Aug. 8, flew to Miami Sept. 11, back to Havana Sept. 12, then left the next day for New Orleans. All this prompted conjecture that Ruby was acting as a courier for someone, though McWillie, himself a courier for the Tropicana Club's owners, discounted the theory. He described Ruby as a "leech . . . a hard fellow to get rid of," and said he was simply a strange character. Ruby's brother, Earl, who also testified last week, agreed. He said Jack had told him he shot Oswald only because "when I saw him . . . with that smirk on his face as though he were happy he killed the President, I just lost control of myself."

The Cuba tie appeared again—this time with an Oswald twist—in the story of Antonio Veciana Blanch, the founder

*Giancana was murdered in June 1975. Rosselli was murdered a year later, shortly after he had testified to the Senate intelligence committee about plots against Castro.

of a militant anti-Castro group called Alpha 66. Veciana told committee investigators that an American named Maurice Bishop directed all of his activities, including two plots to kill Castro. He recalled one meeting with Bishop and another man in the lobby of a Dallas office building in August 1963. After the assassination, Veciana identified the other man as Oswald. Bishop has yet to be located. But the committee says it has independent evidence that someone was using that name, and Blakey says Veciana's allegations "remain undiscredited."

Blackout: Oswald has also been associated with a second anti-Castro exile in Dallas, Sylvia Odio. She told the Warren Commission that in late September 1963, three men—one introduced as Leon Oswald—asked her to finance some anti-Castro activities. Odio's sister, Annie, recognized Oswald in the post-assassination pictures as one of the men who had come to their apartment. But Sylvia Odio has a history of blackouts under stress, and partly because her story conflicted with the Warren Commission's own reports that Oswald was on his way to Mexico when the Odio visit was supposed to have occurred, the commission played it down—even though the staff argued that it was credible. Blakey said his committee is going "much beyond" the Warren Commission in its own probe of Odio.

The missing link in last week's conspiracy tales is the lack of any contact—direct or indirect—between Oswald and organized crime. The overwhelming amount of evidence amassed by the House assassination committee in its month-long public probe supports the Warren Commission's basic finding that Oswald alone shot Kennedy. Still, the best testimony gives new life to old doubts. Before it goes public with its

conclusions in December, the committee is considering one or two more days of hearings next month. Even then, loose ends seem certain to keep the controversy thriving. "Frankly, life itself contains loose ends," says committee chairman Louis Stokes. "Not every question that can be asked can be answered."

—SUSAN FRAKER with ELAINE SHANNON in Washington

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