

Gangland Figure Said JFK Would Be 'Hit,' Panel Told

By Jeremiah O'Leary
Washington Star Staff Writer

A prominent Cuban exile today told the House Assassinations Committee that gangland figure Santos Trafficante told him in the summer of 1963 that President John F. Kennedy was not going to be re-elected — "because he was going to be hit."

The witness, Jose Aleman, insisted under examination by committee counsel Gary Cornwell that he was not familiar with the expression "hit."

"I thought when he said the president was going to be 'hit' that he meant he would be hit with a lot of votes for the Republicans. I never heard that expression. I never thought anything about it," he said.

Aleman, whose father was Cuba's education minister and who was in the underground trying to overthrow both Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista and later Fidel Castro, said the meeting took place in June or July 1963 in a room at the Scott Ryan Hotel in Miami.

Trafficante was scheduled to testify later today before the assassinations committee.

ACCORDING TO Aleman, he met Trafficante three times in that period, once in Junior's Restaurant and the other two times in the hotel that he owned. He testified that he had gotten a message from a publicity man for the city of Miami that Trafficante wanted to see him because the reputed Mafia leader wished to start operations in the Dominican Republic.

Aleman explained that he had good connections with then-President Juan Bosch in the Dominican Republic through his father.

Asked what his motive was for attending the meeting with Trafficante and two other men, Sam Manarino and Norman Rothman, he cited his continuing interest in trying to overthrow the Castro regime. But he also said he hoped he could get a loan from the Teamsters Union through Trafficante in order to build a condominium.

"Trafficante did most of the talking about President Kennedy," Aleman said, sitting at the witness table with two U.S. marshals behind him facing the audience.

"He was very upset. He said Teamsters Union President Jimmy Hoffa could not secure the loan for me because he had been having troubles with the Kennedy brothers. He said the president was getting to Hoffa, a man of the workers," Aleman said.

"Then Trafficante said, 'You see, this man isn't going to be re-elected? There's no doubt about it. He's been giving people a lot of trouble.' And then he said again, 'Jose, he's gonna be hit.'"

CORNWELL TRIED a number of ways to get Aleman to say what he understood as the meaning of the word "hit," which in Mafia slang indicates a person is going to be killed.

Aleman insisted that he never thought anything about it in those terms and had never heard the expression.

"When Trafficante said Kennedy wouldn't be re-elected and was going to be 'hit,' did you ask what he meant?" Cornwell asked.

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"I thought he was making an alibi about the loan. I didn't interrupt. I took it as if he was talking a lot of nonsense," Aleman said.

Earlier, the committee heard testimony from professional gambler Louis McWillie, of Las Vegas, an acquaintance of the late Jack Ruby, who insisted that there be no photographs taken of him and that all tape recorders be turned off during his testimony. The committee complied.

The stocky, balding "pit boss" from the Las Vegas casinos said he was casino manager for the Tropicana night club in Havana from 1958 to 1961. Castro seized power in Cuba on Jan. 1, 1959, and subsequently closed up the six Mafia-controlled casinos in Cuba.

HE RECALLED meeting Ruby in 1951 and said he had helped him with some labor problems at his nightclub by putting him in touch with individuals with influence over the entertainment union.

"Ruby was kind of a leech," McWillie testified. "He was hard to get rid of but we were friends because of the favors I'd done for him."

McWillie testified he sent Ruby plane tickets for a trip to Cuba in August 1959.

At that time McWillie said he went to visit some of his gambling associates who had been detained by the Castro government at Tricornia and remembers seeing Trafficante there. Trafficante, before his arrest, allegedly was the Mafia boss for Cuban operations. McWillie testified that Ruby might have gone with him to visit the prison, but that he barely new Trafficante and doesn't believe Ruby went with him.

ALEMAN'S SWORN testimony today appeared to be at variance with previous statements he gave committee investigators about what he understood Trafficante meant in referring to a "hit" on Kennedy.

Cornwell read from a committee investigator's interview with Aleman in 1977, which said, "Aleman confirms that Santos Trafficante told him President Kennedy was going to be hit. He emphasizes he knew he was being told the President was going to be killed. Trafficante made it clear to him (Aleman) he was not guessing."

Aleman excitedly interrupted in heavily accented English to loudly declare, "If in any way I thought in the context of that time that something was going to happen I would have advised the authorities. I talked in some way to the FBI and all this time I was informing the FBI and said something was going on with Hoffa about Kennedy."