

Role of Organized Crime 'Open,' Slayings Panel Told by Counsel

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As the House Assassinations Committee wound up public hearings on the John F. Kennedy phase of its investigation, it was told by its committee counsel that the question of organized crime's involvement in the murder of a president was still an open one.

Nothing that has been uncovered excludes it, counsel G. Robert Blakey said yesterday, and much that is new points to it. Blakey said organized crime had the motive, the opportunity and the means to involve itself in the plot to assassinate Kennedy and that the possibility can be neither dismissed nor established.

But in a closing soliloquy, Committee Chairman Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, cautioned the public on what it makes of conspiracy theories, noting that conspiracy is founded on association, but more than association is required to establish a conspiracy. Stokes said the committee may find, as the Warren Commission did but for different reasons, that Kennedy died by the hand of a lone assassin.

The remarks of the committee counsel and its chairman came after the panel heard Mafia leader Santo Trafficante claim he only acted as an interpreter in a meeting with a Cuban exile in which Kennedy's future was mentioned. It then heard an organized crime expert testify he found it incredible that a leading Cosa Nostra figure such as Trafficante would be acting in such a minor role in the contact.

ORGANIZED CRIME expert Ralph Salerno yesterday told the committee it would be naive to accept Trafficante's testimony at face value.

Trafficante testified both about a meeting with exile Jose Aleman and meetings with gangland figures John Roselli and Sam Giancana in the CIA-Cosa Nostra plot to kill Communist Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

Testifying on the 17th and final day of this series of public hearings on the murder of Kennedy in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, Salerno told the panel, "I believe John Roselli got the first approach and would not have worked with the CIA on the Castro plot without the permission of his superior, Sam Giancana. I believe Giancana approved it and then approached his peer, Mr. Trafficante, and asked for his cooperation."

He said Trafficante ranked so high in the Cosa Nostra hierarchy that he never would have served as a mere interpreter between the American and Cuban plotters.

Stokes told the committee that, although the Kennedy public hearings have concluded, except for perhaps one or two yet unscheduled days of additional hearings, all of the evidence is not yet in.

"I RECOGNIZE there have been loose ends in our hearings," Stokes said. "Most of them we hope to be able to tie down in our final report. But life itself contains loose ends."

He said 59 witnesses appeared before the committee on the Kennedy case and well over 500 exhibits were put in the record. Investigators made 385 trips to 564 places and witness interviews totaled more than 1,548.

Stokes said 75 witnesses were questioned in executive session, 41 of whom were immunized. More than 500 files from government agencies were reviewed, including the FBI file on Lee Harvey Oswald which alone consists of 238 volumes.

Salerno, a veteran investigator of organized crime with the New York Police Department and an expert on La Cosa Nostra, said Trafficante earlier in the day did not accurately explain his role in organized crime. There is no way Trafficante would have acted as an interpreter, considering his high rank as Mafia boss for southern Florida, for the Cuban conspirators or his fellow mobsters, Roselli and Giancana.

Salerno explained in great detail the mob's national organization and rank structure, and brought one of the few laughs that came from the otherwise somber proceedings with an illustration of how the Mob functions.

HE SAID GANGLAND leader Carlo Gambino has the cover of being a labor consultant. "Gambino doesn't know the difference between Samuel Gompers and Ringo Starr," Salerno testified. But that is one of the ways the Mafia operates its business on a scale like that of U.S. Steel in narcotics, labor racketeering, prostitution and gambling, he said.

He said that it was possible but unlikely that the late Jack Ruby, who shot Lee Harvey Oswald to death, would have been used by La Cosa Nostra to do anything important for

them, although sometimes underworld "families" do use un dependable people.

"Jack Ruby would not have made a pimple on the back of an organized crime figure's neck," Salerno testified. "But my professional opinion is that there is no evidence that the national commission of the Cosa Nostra directed or approved the assassination of President Kennedy."

It is always possible, he conceded, that some leaders might have ordered Kennedy's death, and presented numerous transcripts of wiretapped Mob conversations indicating that Cosa Nostra figures wanted Kennedy dead because of the trouble the Kennedy brothers were making for the organization in 1963.

TO THIS DAY, he said, authorities do not know why Roselli and Giancana were murdered, but it may have been because of their contact with the CIA or some internal matter.

The frail, 63-year-old Trafficante, with immunity from prosecution furnished on an order from federal Judge Oliver Gasch, would most likely never have dealt personally with any decision to violently eliminate Castro or anybody else.