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Donald E. Wilkes Jr.

University of Georgia School of Law, wilkes@uga.edu

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DID THE MOB KILL JFK?

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Author: Donald E. Wilkes, Jr., Professor of Law, University of Georgia School of Law.

The 25th anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's murder has now come and gone, marked by a flurry of newspaper and magazine articles and TV and radio specials reminding us of JFK's life and his presidency, and the tragic circumstances of his death. But the passing of the quarter-century mark has not ended the questions that linger concerning the crime of the century.

In 1964 the Warren Commission, appointed by President Lyndon Johnson to investigate the JFK assassination, concluded in its official report that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, murdered President Kennedy. Oswald was hardly in a position to defend himself from this accusation, since he had been murdered while under arrest in a police station by Jack Ruby on Nov. 24, 1963, two days after JFK's assassination.

The deficiencies of the Warren Commission's investigation and the weak, circumstantial nature of its case against Oswald are now well-recognized; nowadays hardly any reputable scholar seriously defends the notion that Oswald by himself carried out the assassination, and a majority of the reputable scholars express doubt that Oswald had anything to do with the assassination, except perhaps serve as the scapegoat for the actual killers. But for 15 years, the verdict of the Warren Commission was the official policy of the United States government.

In 1979 the Select Committee on Assassinations of the House of Representatives, which in 1978-79 reinvestigated JFK's death, issued its final report, concluding that President Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy. The Committee was unable to identify the member of the conspiracy. It did rule out as possible members of the conspiracy Castro's Cuba, anti-Castro groups, the national syndicate of organized crime as a group, and the FBI, CIA, and Secret Service. However, the Committee also acknowledged that the available evidence did not preclude the possibility that individual members of either anti-Castro groups or of organized crime participated in the conspiracy.

The Committee also concluded by implication that it could not rule out the possible involvement of military intelligence agents in the conspiracy—a truly sensational development overlooked by the press.

For nearly a decade, the official view of the government, as embodied in the House Committee report, has been that JFK was slain by a conspiracy, but that the conspirators, including the triggermen who actually shot and killed the president, are unknown.

Although the government for 15 years claimed that JFK was killed by one person acting alone, the polls showed almost from the beginning that a majority of the American public has believed a conspiracy was behind JFK's death. Today, the most popular conspiracy theory is the view, reflected in such new books as David E. Schein, The Mafia Murder of President John F. Kennedy (1988), and John H. Davis, Mafia Kingfish: Carlos Marcello and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy (1989), that organized crime--what used to be called the Mafia--killed JFK.

Carlos Marcello, the aging mob chieftain formerly headquartered in New Orleans and now serving a federal prison sentence for racketeering, is one of the organized crimes leaders alleged to have had Kennedy killed. Santos Trafficante, a now dead mob chieftain from Tampa, is also claimed to have had JFK murdered.

The notion that the Kennedy assassination was an organized crime "hit," a contract killing by professional murderers, has been gaining ground ever since G. Robert Blakey, a law professor, former prosecutor, and a national expert on organized crime, was appointed chief counsel for the House Assassinations Committee in 1978. Blakey focused the Committee's investigation on possible mob involvement, and made sure that one of the volumes published by the Committee was a thick compilation of reports on organized crime. Blakey is co-author, with Richard N. Billings, of a book entitled The Plot to Kill the President (1981).

Blakey was not the first to seriously raise the question of whether mobsters were involved in the Kennedy killing. As far back as 1973 Peter Noyes, a TV newsman and author, wrote a book, Legacy of Doubt, based on painstaking personal investigation, in which he detailed persuasive evidence that organized crime figures might indeed have been involved to some extent.

Honorable mention should also be given to journalist Seth Kantor for his book Who Was Jack Ruby? (1978), which chillingly details Jack Ruby's membership in the mob and his long, close association with members of the mob. The Warren Commission, needless to say, ignored much evidence of Ruby's involvement with organized crime, downplayed evidence it could not ignore, and brazenly denied the existence of Ruby's obvious mob ties. This is one of the reasons why the House Committee in its final report rebuked the Warren Commission for having failed to investigate adequately the possibility of conspiracy to assassinate JFK.

Based on evidence accumulated over the years, there are suspicious connections between certain mob figures and the assassination. Space limitations prevent a detailed recitation of these connections, but the following can be said.

First, evidence is plain that Jack Ruby was a gangster-type with organized crime connections, to say the least. Second, an individual named Jim Braden with a lengthy criminal record and mob ties was in or near Dealey Plaza (where the assassination occurred) at the time of the assassination; a few minutes later Braden was arrested in a building across the street from the Schoolbook Depository, later being released without charges or serious investigation. Third, some of the shady characters with whom the gregarious Oswald associated, such as the mysterious David Ferrie (who was Carlos Marcello's personal airplane pilot) did have links to organized crime.

And this is not all. Undoubtedly, some organized crime leaders did at one time or another, probably in exasperation, utter threats against JFK or his brother Robert. Undoubtedly the mob was mad at both Kennedy brothers for their initiation of the war on organized crime in the early 1960's. Undoubtedly, the mob would have had the resources to carry out a presidential assassination, if it really wanted to commit such a murder.

Nonetheless, the House Committee was almost certainly correct when it found that, although individual organized crimes members could have been involved in the conspiracy to kill the president, organized crime as a syndicate probably did not plot the assassination. In other words, most likely the mob did not kill the president.

Organized crime does not have a history of assassinating high public officials in the United States, as a staff report for the House Committee acknowledged in these words: "The evidence shows that organized crime has judiciously avoided using force against law enforcement officers, [and] other government officials... There is no precedent in the United States [for organized crime] violence directed at a high-level public official." The mob has from time to time murdered certain low level public officers--state legislators, crusading prosecutors, corrupt policemen--but it would be wholly out of character for the mob to kill a President of the United States.

The truth is that organized crime had far more to lose than to gain by killing the president; for if, as the mob would certainly realize, mob involvement in murdering a president were ever exposed, the outrage that would follow such an exposure would result in a governmental hounding of the mob far exceeding anything Robert Kennedy's Justice Department had ever done to fight organized crime.

Furthermore, the murder of a president is a very unpatriotic act and yet--whatever is said about organized crime--the mob is not unpatriotic. It may be a criminal

organization, but there is not evidence that it is an unpatriotic organization, or that individual mobsters are unpatriotic. If the mob is unpatriotic, why did Naval Intelligence approach mob leader Lucky Luciano and ask him and other gangsters to help protect American ports and shipping from Axis spies and saboteurs during World War II? And why did the CIA approach the mob in the early 1960's with the request that the mob try to kill Castro? (Both requests were granted.)

Moreover, as the House Committee had to acknowledge, "the method of the President's assassination did not resemble the standard syndicate killing." This is a weighty consideration, even though admittedly the killing of a president is not a routine mob rub-out and different methods of operation might be necessary. Vincent Bugliosi, the noted prosecutor of the Manson case, has been quoted on TV saying that the murder of JFK does not bear the earmarks of a gangland slaying. (The murder of Oswald, on the other hand, was typical of gangster killings.)

Finally, there are weaknesses in much of the so-called evidence of mob involvement. Take the case of Jack Ruby. Evidence of Ruby's ties to organized crime are undeniable, but Ruby did not kill JFK; and if Ruby himself was a member of a conspiracy to kill Oswald, as he likely was, it was not necessarily the same as or even connected to the conspiracy that assassinated the president. Also, evidence in the form of breathless revelations from informers or undercover agents that they heard mob leaders threaten to kill Kennedy or claim credit for the assassination, as well as other evidence resting on the word of such persons, must be viewed skeptically.

Much of the rest of the evidence of alleged mob involvement appears to be unreliable or suspect because it is based on rumor or innuendo, or speculation.

If, as the House Committee thought possible, certain individual members of the mob, acting on their own, did join a conspiracy to kill JFK, they were probably joining with anti-Castro Cubans, renegade intelligence agents, ultra-rightists, racists, and other reactionary elements who hated Kennedy and wanted him dead. But to say that certain individuals involved in organized crime might have been or were part of the conspiracy is not the same thing as saying the Mafia killed Kennedy.

There is still another twist. Even if it could be proved that organized crime as a syndicate was involved in the Kennedy killing, a new question would crop up: was the mob acting on its own or was it (as when it plotted to murder Castro for the CIA) acting at the request of someone else? And if it was acting in behalf of someone else, who?