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Gambling Syndicate

The first seriously-pursued CIA plan to assassinate Castro had its inception in August 1960. It involved the use of members of the criminal underworld with contacts inside Cuba. The operation had two phases: the first ran from August 1960 until late April or early May 1961, when it was called off following the Bay of Pigs; the second ran from April 1962 until February 1963 and was merely a revival of the first phase which had been inactive since about May 1961.

Gambling Syndicate - Phase I

August 1960

Richard Bissell, Deputy Director for Plans, asked Sheffield Edwards, Director of Security, if Edwards could establish contact with the U.S. gambling syndicate that was active in Cuba. The objective clearly was the assassination of Castro although Edwards claims that there was a studied avoidance of the term in his conversation with Bissell. Bissell recalls that the idea originated with J. C. King, then Chief of WH Division, although King now recalls having had only limited knowledge of such a plan and at a much later date--about mid-1962.

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Edwards consulted Robert A. Maheu, a private investigator who had done sensitive work for the Agency, to see if Maheu had any underworld contacts. Maheu was once a special agent of the FBI. He opened a private office in Washington in 1956. The late Robert Cunningham, of the Office of Security (and also a former Special Agent with the FBI), knew Maheu and knew that his business was having a shaky start financially. Cunningham arranged to subsidize Maheu to the extent of \$500 per month. Within six months Maheu was doing so well financially that he suggested that the retainer be discontinued. Over the years he has been intimately involved in providing support for some of the Agency's more sensitive operations. He has since moved his personal headquarters to Los Angeles but retains a Washington office. A more detailed account of Maheu's background appears in a separate section of this report.

(Comment: Although we see nothing sinister in it, we are struck by the fact that so many of the persons whose names appear in this account once worked for the FBI. We have already named Cunningham and Maheu. Later to appear are William Harvey, James O'Connell, and Edward Morgan.)

Maheu acknowledged that he had a contact who might furnish access to the criminal underworld, but Maheu was most reluctant to allow himself to be involved in such an assignment. He agreed to

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participate only after being pressed by Edwards to do so. Maheu identified his contact as one Johnny Roselli, who lived in Los Angeles and had the concession for the ice-making machines on "the strip" in Las Vegas and whom Maheu understood to be a member of the syndicate. Maheu was known to Roselli as a man who had a number of large business organizations as clients. Edwards and Maheu agreed that Maheu would approach Roselli as the representative of businessmen with interests in Cuba who saw the elimination of Castro as the essential first step to the recovery of their investments. Maheu was authorized to tell Roselli that his "clients" were willing to pay \$150,000 for Castro's removal.

September 1960

Shef Edwards named as his case officer for the operation James P. O'Connell (a former Special Agent of the FBI), then Chief, Operational Support Division, Office of Security. O'Connell and Maheu met Roselli in New York City on 14 September 1960 where Maheu made the pitch. Roselli initially was also reluctant to become involved, but finally agreed to introduce Maheu to "Sam Gold" who either had or could arrange contacts with syndicate elements in Cuba who might handle the job. Roselli said he had no interest in being paid for his participation and believed that "Gold" would feel the

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same way. A memorandum for the record prepared by Sheffield Edwards on 14 May 1962 states: "No monies were ever paid to Roselli and Giancana. Maheu was paid part of his expense money during the periods that he was in Miami." (Giancana is "Gold.")

O'Connell was introduced (in true name) to Roselli as an employee of Maheu, the explanation being that O'Connell would handle the case for Maheu, because Maheu was too busy to work on it full time himself. No one else in the Office of Security was made witting of the operation at this time. Edwards himself did not meet Roselli until the summer of 1962.

At this point, about the second half of September, Shef Edwards told Bissell that he had a friend, a private investigator, who had a contact who in turn had other contacts through whom syndicate elements in Cuba could be reached. These syndicate elements in Cuba would be willing to take on such an operation. As of the latter part of September 1960, Edwards, O'Connell, and Bissell were the only ones in the Agency who knew of a plan against Castro involving U.S. gangster elements. Edwards states that Richard Helms was not informed of the plan, because Cuba was being handled by Bissell at that time.

With Bissell present, Edwards briefed the Director (Allen Dulles) and the DDCI (General Cabell) on the existence of a plan involving members of the syndicate. The discussion was circumspect; Edwards

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deliberately avoided the use of any "bad words." The descriptive term used was "an intelligence operation." Edwards is quite sure that the DCI and the DDCI clearly understood the nature of the operation he was discussing. He recalls describing the channel as being "from A to B to C." As he then envisioned it, "A" was Maheu, "B" was Roselli, and "C" was the principal in Cuba. Edwards recalls that Mr. Dulles merely nodded, presumably in understanding and approval. Certainly, there was no opposition. Edwards states that, while there was no formal approval as such, he felt that he clearly had tacit approval to use his own judgment. Bissell committed \$150,000 for the support of the operation.

(Comment: In the light of this description of the briefing, it is appropriate to conjecture as to just what the Director did approve. It is safe to conclude, given the men participating and the general subject of the meeting, that there was little likelihood of misunderstanding--even though the details were deliberately blurred and the specific intended result was never stated in unmistakable language. It is also reasonable to conclude that the pointed avoidance of "bad words" emphasized to the participants the extreme sensitivity of the operation.)

During the week of 25 September 1960, O'Connell and Maheu went to Miami where Roselli introduced only Maheu to "Sam Gold" at a meeting

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in the Fontainebleau Hotel. "Gold" said he had a man, whom he identified only as "Joe," who would serve as courier to Cuba and make arrangements there. Maheu pointed out "Gold" to O'Connell from a distance, but O'Connell never met either "Gold" or "Joe." He did, however, learn their true identities. An Office of Security memorandum to the DDCI of 24 June 1966 places the time as "several weeks later." O'Connell is now uncertain as to whether it was on this first visit to Miami or on a subsequent one that he and Maheu learned the true identities of the two men. Maheu and O'Connell were staying at separate hotels. Maheu phoned O'Connell one Sunday morning and called his attention to the Parade supplement in one of that morning's Miami newspapers. It carried an article on the Cosa Nostra, with pictures of prominent members. The man Maheu and O'Connell knew as "Sam Gold" appeared as Mom Salvatore (Sam) Giancana, a Chicago-based gangster. "Joe, the courier" (who was never identified to either Maheu or O'Connell in any other way) turned out to be Santos Trafficante, the Cosa Nostra chieftain in Cuba.

At that time the gambling casinos were still operating in Cuba, and Trafficante was making regular trips between Miami and Havana on syndicate business. (The casinos were closed and gambling was banned effective 7 January 1959. On 13 January 1959, Castro announced that the casinos would be permitted to reopen for tourists and foreigners

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but that Cubans would be barred. The cabinet on 17 February 1959 authorized reopening the casinos for the tourist trade. Time magazine for 2 March 1959 announced that the casinos had been reopened the previous week. The New York Times issue of 30 September 1961 announced that the last of the casinos still running had been closed.) Trafficante was to make the arrangements with one of his contacts inside Cuba on one of his trips to Havana.

Fall and Early Winter 1960

Very early in the operation, well before the first contact with Roselli, the machinery for readying the means of assassination was set in motion. The sequence of events is not clear, but it is apparent that a number of methods were considered. Preparation of some materials went ahead without express approval.

(Comment: It should be noted that TSD maintains a stock of equipment and materials for operational use. When queries are made of TSD technicians about materials or devices that are not stock items, it is not unusual for the technicians to go ahead with the preparation of the materials or devices against the event that there is a formal request for them. Because of this, undue significance should not be attached to advance preparations for this operation. It should also be noted that

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tying it to a recollection that Castro frequently drank tea, coffee, or bouillon, for which a liquid poison would be particularly well suited.

January - February 1961

Despite the decision that a poison in liquid form would be most desirable, what was actually prepared and delivered was a solid in the form of small pills about the size of saccharine tablets. [] remembers meeting with Edwards and O'Connell in Edwards' office to discuss the requirement. The specifications were that the poison be stable, soluble, safe to handle, undetectable, not immediately acting, and with a firmly predictable end result. Botulin comes nearest to meeting all of those requirements, and it may be put up in either liquid or solid form. [] states that the pill form was chosen because of ease and safety of handling.

(Comment: The gangsters may have had some influence on the choice of a means of assassination. O'Connell says that in his very early discussions with the gangsters (or, more precisely, Maheu's discussions with them) consideration was given to possible ways of accomplishing the mission. Apparently the Agency had first thought in terms of a typical, gangland-style killing in which Castro would be gunned down. Giancana was flatly opposed to the

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use of firearms. He said that no one could be recruited to do the job, because the chance of survival and escape would be negligible. Giancana stated a preference for a lethal pill that could be put into Castro's food or drink. Trafficante ("Joe, the courier") was in touch with a disaffected Cuban official with access to Castro and presumably of a sort that would enable him to surreptitiously poison Castro. The gangsters named their man inside as Juan Orta who was then Office Chief and Director General of the Office of the Prime Minister (Castro). The gangsters said that Orta had once been in a position to receive kickbacks from the gambling interests, had since lost that source of income, and needed the money.)

When Edwards received the pills he dropped one into a glass of water to test it for solubility and found that it did not even disintegrate, let alone dissolve. [] took them back and made up a new batch that met the requirement for solubility. Edwards at that point wanted assurance that the pills were truly lethal. He called on Dr. Gunn to make an independent test of them. Edwards gave Gunn money to buy guinea pigs as test animals. Gunn has a record of a conversation with [] on 6 February 1961. It may have related to the tests, but we cannot be sure. What appears to have happened is that Gunn tested the pills on the guinea pigs and found them ineffective.

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In any event, O'Connell did receive the pills, and he believes there were six of them. He recalls giving three to Roselli. Presumably the other three were used in testing for solubility and effectiveness. The dates on which O'Connell received the pills and subsequently passed them to Roselli cannot be established. It would have been sometime after Gunn's notation of 10 February 1961.

Gunn also has a record of being approached about the undertaking by William K. Harvey (former special agent of the FBI) in February in connection with a sensitive project Harvey was working on for Bissell. According to Gunn's notes, he briefed Harvey on the operation, and Harvey instructed him to discuss techniques, but not targets, with Gottlieb. Gunn's notation on this point is not in accord with the recollections of any of the others involved. We are unable to clarify it; the note may have been in another context. O'Connell states that J. C. King was also briefed at this time, although King denies learning of the operation until much later.

Late February - March 1961

Roselli passed the pills to Trafficante. Roselli reported to O'Connell that the pills had been delivered to Orta in Cuba. Orta is understood to have kept the pills for a couple of weeks before returning them. According to the gangsters, Orta got cold feet.

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(Comment: Orta lost his position in the Prime Minister's Office on 26 January 1961, while planning for the operation was still going on in Miami and in Washington. He took refuge in the Venezuelan Embassy on 11 April 1961 and became the responsibility of the Mexican Embassy when Venezuela broke relations with Cuba in November 1961. Castro refused to give him a safe conduct pass until October 1964 when he was allowed to leave for Mexico City. He arrived in Miami in early February 1965.

(It appears that Edwards and O'Connell did not know at the time of Orta's fall from favor. They have made no reference to it--ascribing Orta's failure to cold feet. It would seem, though, that the gangsters did know that Orta had already lost his access to Castro. They described him as a man who had once had a position that allowed him a rake-off on gambling profits, a position that he had since lost. The only job with which we can associate Orta that might have allowed him a rake-off was the one he held in the Prime Minister's Office, which he lost on 26 January 1961. It seems likely that, while the Agency thought the gangsters had a man in Cuba with easy access to Castro, what they actually had was a man disgruntled at having lost access.)

The previously-mentioned 24 June 1966 summary of the operation prepared by the Office of Security states that when Orta asked out

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of the assignment he suggested another candidate who made several attempts without success. Neither Edwards nor O'Connell know the identity of Orta's replacement nor any additional details of the reported further attempts.

March - April 1961

Following the collapse of the Orta channel, Roselli told O'Connell that Trafficante knew of a man high up in the Cuban exile movement who might do the job. He identified him as Tony Varona (Dr. Manuel Antonio de VARONA y Loreda). Varona was the head of the Democratic Revolutionary Front, a group supported by the Agency as part of the larger Cuban operation. O'Connell understood that Varona was dissatisfied with the nature and the extent of this support and that JMWAVE suspected that Varona was not keeping his bargain with the Agency.

(Comment: Reports from the FBI suggest how Trafficante may have known of Varona. On 21 December 1960 the Bureau forwarded to the Agency a memorandum reporting that efforts were being made by U.S. racketeers to finance anti-Castro activities in hopes of securing the gambling, prostitution, and dope monopolies in Cuba in the event Castro was overthrown. A later report of 18 January 1961 associates Varona with those schemes. Varona

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approval became invalid if Moss were not used within six months of the date of the approval.)

Trafficante approached Varona and told him that he had clients who wanted to do away with Castro and that they would pay big money for the job. Varona is reported to have been very receptive, since it would mean that he would be able to buy his own ships, arms, and communications equipment.

(Comment: By this time Roselli had become certain that O'Connell was an Agency employee, not a subordinate of Maheu. He told O'Connell that he was sure that O'Connell was "a government man - CIA" but that O'Connell should not confirm this to him. Roselli said that as a loyal American he would do whatever he could and would never divulge the operation.)

Roselli was to deliver money to Varona for expenses. O'Connell now recalls the amount as \$50,000. Edwards, who was away at the time, recalls it as \$25,000. Since Edwards was absent, O'Connell had to get approval from Edwards' deputy, Robert Bannerman, who until then had been unwitting of the operation. O'Connell told Bannerman that the operation was known to and approved by Edwards. Bannerman authorized passing the money and now recalls the amount as being on the order of \$20,000 to \$25,000. An Office of Security memorandum to the DDCI,

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of just how it was planned to get the poison into Castro's food by employing someone with access to a restaurant frequented by Castro. The mechanics were identical with those described by Edwards and as reported in our earlier account of phase one of the operation.

c. O'Connell's account of his own role in the operation in the early weeks following Harvey's supposed takeover makes it evident that there was not a clean break between the Office of Security's responsibility and that of Harvey. Further, O'Connell now believes that there must have been "something going on" between April 1961 (after the Bay of Pigs) and April 1962, but he claims to be unable to remember any of the particulars.

There are other disagreements among the three on facts. They are reviewed here, not because they alter the essential fact of the turnover or of Harvey's sole responsibility for the operation after a certain point in time, but because they suggest that persons who were supposedly unwitting of events after the turnover were in fact witting, because they were not effectively cut off at the instant of turnover.

Harvey's notes show that he and O'Connell went to New York City to meet Roselli on the 8th and 9th of April 1962. O'Connell recalls it as being early in April and that the introduction was made on a

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in the original cast of hoodlum players. Harvey specified that Giancana was not to be brought in on the reactivation of the operation, and he believes that Roselli honored the request. Roselli once reported to Harvey that Giancana had asked if anything was going on, and when Roselli said that nothing was happening, Giancana said, "Too bad." Additionally, Santos Trafficante ("Joe, the courier" from the earlier phase) was no longer involved. With the closing of the last casino in Havana in September 1961, Trafficante presumably no longer had access. Roselli now had a man known to Harvey as Maceo, who also used the names Garcia-Gomez and Godoy.

(Comment: Harvey is unable further to identify Maceo; he describes him as "a Cuban who spoke Italian." One of Varona's associates in the Cuban exile community was named Antonio MACEO Mackle, but it seems unlikely that he was the Maceo of this operation. He was prominent enough in the exile community to have been known to Harvey. Further, it seems clear that Maceo was "Roselli's man." This second phase appears to lack the overwhelming, high-level gangster flavor that characterized the first phase. Roselli remained as a prominent figure in the operation, but working directly with the Cuban exile community and directly on behalf of CIA. Roselli was essential to the second phase as a contact with Varona, who presumably still

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11 February 1965

[] cabled: "From Cubela on 10 February: On 10 or 11 February Cubela is to receive one pistol with silencer and one Belgian FAL rifle with silencer from Artime's secretary. Both weapons come from U.S. and now in Madrid." (This is in conflict with the earlier report that Artime would cache a rifle and silencer if that were all he could find. We are unable to resolve the conflict.)

12 February 1965

The [] cabled: "Artime reported on final meeting with Cubela: Artime had three packages of special items made up by his technical people and delivered to Cubela in Madrid. Cubela seemed satisfied."

4 March 1965

[] reported receiving a telephone call from a friend in Havana who had seen Cubela back in Havana the previous day.

15 March 1965

The [] cabled that one Rafael GARCIA-BANGO Dirube had arrived in Madrid from Cuba on 15 March and had been introduced to a station officer. Garcia-Bango claimed to be in contact with a

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group of Cuban military leaders who were planning to eliminate Castro and take over the government. It quickly became clear that he was referring to Cubela. Garcia-Bango said that he had always been publicly identified as a close friend of Cubela, whom he last saw in Havana on 9 March. Garcia-Bango said that he had been the lawyer for the Capri Hotel in Havana. He was jailed for 75 days in July 1962 for defending Santos Trafficante, a U.S. citizen and ex-manager of the Capri gambling casino who was kicked out of Cuba.

(Comment: This is another name-link between Cubela and the gambling syndicate plots reported upon earlier in this report. Trafficante was one of the principals in Shef Edwards' Phase One of the operation. He presumably was not involved in Phase Two under Harvey, but we cannot be sure of that. After all, Trafficante was the man who brought Varona into the operation late in Phase One, and Varona was one of the main players during Phase Two. The three-man team that was sent in ^{by} Varona was reported on 21 June 1962 to be in place in Cuba.)

June 1965

Headquarters decided to terminate all contacts with key members of the Cubela group. It had become increasingly apparent that the circle of Cubans who knew of Cubela's plans and of CIA's association

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underworld for some of the Cuban exiles. The other report, on 18 January 1961, suggests that [redacted] was one of those receiving that support, although this was not confirmed. As a matter of interest, as late as 10 June 1964 there was a report that gangster elements in the Miami area were offering \$150,000 for anyone who would kill Castro (an amount mentioned to the syndicate representatives by CIA case officers at an earlier date). These bits of information, fitted together, could provide the basis for an explanation of why [redacted] was so readily available when approached by Roselli. It also may throw light on a question noted in the 1967 IG Report. The operation with the syndicate had been called off following the Bay of Pigs in April 1961; yet, when it was reactivated in April 1962 the case officer felt there was something already ongoing in spite of the fact that the operation had been terminated a year earlier. It is possible that CIA simply found itself involved in providing additional resources for independent operations that the syndicate already had under way. The criminal syndicate had important interests in Cuba, and to recover them may well have sought on its own to eliminate Castro. In a sense CIA may have been piggy-backing on the syndicate and in addition to its material contributions was also supplying an aura of official sanction.

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have been a source of information on the subject whereby Castro could have learned of CIA's earlier plan against his life.

Newspaper stories are not necessarily reliable sources of information. However, because the statement by Sturgis indicated a familiarity with

, additional attention was given the statement in the press to see how it might fit in with other things that are known. What follows is subject to reservations that must attach to the reliability of newspaper stories.

Press stories

refer to possible relationships between Sturgis and Trafficante.

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