

Deposition with Mr. **X**: James O'Connell

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-BEGIN-

JM: My name is James McDonald and I'm a senior attorney for the House Select Committee on Assassinations. The date is Sept. 25th and I'm present in a room at the Central Intelligence Agency at Langley, Virginia. Present in the room with me is a former official of the CIA and committee staff member Patricia Orr. The former official of the CIA has just been administered an oath for the information he is about to give to the committee.

The following will be a sworn statement by this former CIA official . We are not using his name during the course of this sworn statement because of the sensitivity of the subject matter and agency policy that is name will not be revealed at this time.

JM: Sir, what is your present occupation?

X: I'm a retired government employee. I am doing some part time Real Estate work, I'm also a security consultant for a private firm.

JM: Have you been employed by the FBI?

X: Yes.

JM: In what capacity and during what years?

X: I was a special agent employed during the period of 1947-1951.

JM: Have you been employed by the CIA?

X: Yes.

JM: During what years?

X: 1951-1973

JM: And you retired from the CIA in 1973?

X: Yes.

JM: What was the nature of your duties while employed at the CIA? – if you would, please explain to the committee by starting with the first position you held and if you would give us your title and the years of service in that position and briefly describe what your duties entailed.

X: Well, that's gonna be rather difficult for me to do it unless I have something that I can refer to.

[knock heard on door. Someone says "stop tape."]

JM: All right.

X: I was originally employed by CIA as an investigator. I subsequently held various positions in the office of security starting with position of Desk Chief on Operational Support. Eventually that became a branch and I became the Branch Chief. I served as a Assistant Special Agent in Charge of one of the field offices, Domestic Field offices and then became Chief of Operational Support D.V. at headquarters. In 1962 I was transferred to the Far East where I became Chief Regional Security officer for the entire Far East and upon returning to headquarters I assumed the title of dept. director for Physical, Technical, and Overseas Security.

JM: Sir...

X: And I did retire in June of 1973.

JM: Directing your attention to the years 1060-1962. You were chief of the Operational Support Division Office of Security at that time?

X: Yes.

JM: And where were you stationed?

X: At headquarters.

JM: OK. Who was your superior during these years?

X: My supervisor was Victor White.

JM: And what was his position?

X: He was deputy director for Investigations and Operational Support.

JM: During that time did you report to or work for Colonel Sheffield Edwards?

X: Well, Colonel Edwards was the director of Security and through, let me put it this way, my ordinary chain of command was through Mr. White.

JM: And did he report to Colonel Edwards?

X: Right.

JM: Ok. Directing your attention to 1960. Did there come a time when you and in your capacity at the CIA become involved in an operation to assassinate Premier Fidel Castro?

X: Yes.

JM: Did this operation involve the cooperation and participation of individuals not connected with the CIA?

X: Yes.

JM: Who were these individuals?

X: Well, Robert Mahue, who was a private investigator, was approached by the agency to recruit somebody to handle the assignment. He in turn talked to one John Roselli, who he knew to be a person who had connections with people that could probably handle such an assignment.

JM: Did you personally know Robert Mahue?

X: Yes. I know him.

JM: How did you know him?

X: He was originally recruited in 1954 by the Office of Security to perform certain operational support activities.

JM: And what official at the agency brought Mahue and Roselli into the project?

X: Colonel Sheffield Edwards.

JM: Were there other CIA personnel involved in this operation?

X: Robert Bissell, ah Richard Bissell, rather.

JM: And what was his position?

X: At that time, he was deputy director of Plans.

JM: And who else?

X: There was Colonel J.C. King who was chief of the Western Hemisphere Division, I understand was involved.

JM: Ok. When Colonel Edwards first advised you of this how did he put it to you? How did he explain what the Agency was about to get itself into?

X: Well, he suggested -- he felt it was in the National interest, at least, he was advised by some higher official that it was in the National interest that Mr. Castro be -- liquidated.

JM: And when you say liquidated, what do you mean?

X: Well, I assume that was to be put out of the picture.

JM: Which means killing him, assassinating him?

X: I -- I gather that.

JM: Ok. And did Colonel Edwards speak to you regarding Mahue bringing in individuals with contacts in the gambling world?

X: No, he didn't specify the gambling world. He knew Mr. Mahue was actively engaged in some activity -- ah -- some businesses in Las Vegas and assumed that he knew people who might be the type that could handle this assignment.

JM: Who did Mahue bring into this project? What individuals?

X: Only one. At the time it was a John Roselli.

JM: Did you know who John Roselli was at that time?

X: Mr. Mahue identified him as an individual who had the ice concessions in Las Vegas and who was rather knowledgeable person with the groups that were in gambling interests. International, I suppose.

JM: Did you personally meet with Roselli?

X: Yes. I met Mr. Roselli through Mr. Mahue.

JM: Where did you meet him? For the first time?

X: As best I can recall at the Plaza Hotel in New York City in about September of 1960.

JM: Were there any specifics discussed as to how plan was to be carried out?

X: Yes.

JM: What was said?

X: Well, Mr. Mahue indicated to Roselli that he represented an international group of clients who had heavy vested interests in Cuba. And they were quite upset about the confiscation of their interests by Castro and they were very much interested in doing something that they felt would be of interest of the United States as well as themselves in terms of liquidating Mr. Castro.

JM: And who was present during this conversation? This is the one at the Plaza Hotel in New York?

X: Mahue, Roselli, and myself.

JM: Did there come a time when other individuals were brought into the project?

X: At this point in time, no.

JM: When, if fact, did other individuals become involved in the operation?

X: Well, after Mr. Roselli rather reluctantly agreed to participate in this type of operation, he brought in other individuals who I knew only by pseudonyms a "Sam Gold" and a "Joe." One "Joe."

JM: When these individuals were identified using these names had you met them personally?

X: No.

JM: When did you first learn their true identities? The identities of Sam Gold and Joe?

X: It was, and this I just have to just play by ear because the time-frame is a little vague but it probably was several months after the operation got underway and I was staying at one hotel at Miami Beach and Mr. Mahue was staying at another hotel. And one Sunday morning he called me and asked if I had read the paper. Now, I think there were two newspapers in Miami at that time and I can't tell you which one it was but in any event he said there was and if I hadn't gotten a paper would I go down and purchase one and

call. Which I did.

In the Sunday supplemental, which as I recall, is something like the "Parade" like we have in the local papers here, there was an article identifying the leaders of the Mafia. In that article there were pictures of Sam Gold, who was identified as Momo Giancana and Joe was identified as Santos Trafficante. And Mr. Mahue claimed this was the first time he was aware of just who we were dealing with.

JM: In what year was this? What year are we referring to?

X: Ah, this was – it's very difficult to say whether it spilled into 1961 or whether it was 1960. But I have a faint recollection, and I'm not sure of this, that the article was something about Bobby Kennedy's "Ten Most Wanted" individuals. Now on that point I can't say for sure that he would have been the Attorney General. It seems to me before he became Attorney General he had some dealings with a committee on -- looking into organized crime. Now the time I'm very vague on. I really don't know.

JM: When did this operation begin? In other words, when did you first meet with Roselli?

X: Oh well, that would have been September of 1960.

JM: Ok. And how much after that meeting with Roselli in New York did you learn the true identities of Sam Gold and Joe?

X: Well, that's the thing that I can't pinpoint. I'm sorry. I just don't know. It could have been two months after this – the operation or it could have been several months. I just don't know. I've thought about it but I just can't pinpoint it.

JM: Is it possible that it could have been as much as six months later?

X: It could have been. I don't know.

JM: Alright. What did you do upon learning that the individuals involved in this operation were in fact organized crime leaders?

X: I contacted Colonel Edwards and told him what we had discovered or, at least, as far as I was concerned it was the first indication I had who we were dealing with, and appraised them of his identities.

JM: And what did he say to you? What instructions did he give you – if any?

X: Well, he just said, well this is probably what we could have expected, I suppose. And I don't want to be quoting him because I don't recall really what he said but apparently he did not feel we should alter our approach to the assignment.

JM: Did he give you any further instructions -- any additional instructions -- upon learning the identities of these persons?

X: No. As I recall we just proceeded.

JM: Now, Mr. [pause, almost said Mr. X's name] Sir, we've been speaking of the effort to assassinate Premier Castro. Did this project involve two phases?

X: If you call it two phases -- there was ah, after the Bay of Pigs I guess the decision was to just forget about the whole thing. And there was a law. And then it was reactivated when later on when they decided to turn Mr. Roselli over to another individual.

JM: Were you involved in what we can term phase two, after the Bay of Pigs?

X: Very generally, as I recall it. And again, I'm recalling upon my memory here. I'm not sure. I remember we, ah, meeting one of a member of the Cuban Hunter, an individual by the name of Tony Verona. Now whether that was before Bay of Pigs or after the Bay of Pigs, I'm at a total loss to tell you. That I think was part of the second phase.

JM: Directing your attention to what we will call phase one, you were most actively involved in that phase. Is that correct?

X: Yes.

JM: What was your role?

X: I was sort of -- if you want to call it for lack of anything else -- a babysitter for Johnny Roselli because at that time Mr. Mahue was actively engaged in almost full time activity with the Howard Hughes organization and it was taking more and more of his time. And because of the lull between any activity on the project, he was not able to spend any excessive time in Miami. Most of his time had to be spent out on the west coast or Las Vegas.

So I was enlisted by Colonel Edwards to stay with Roselli while there were lulls in-between. While he was in Miami. So I was just a babysitter.

JM: Could you describe your role as a liaison between the agency --The CIA--and the individuals involved in the operation?

X: Only with Roselli.

JM: In your capacity as liaison would all reports or information given to the CIA come through you?

X: Yes.

JM: Would you please tell us what method of assassination was decided upon during the phase of the project, phase one, as we have described it? When you were actively involved?

X: Well, I think several things were considered but it ended up where they thought perhaps the best method would be some sort of a lethal pill.

JM: And how was this assassination going to be carried out?

X: Well, the plan was that the courier was to -- first of all, I think, backing up -- they were to recruit someone who would be in a position to administer the pill to the principal. And initially they were thinking of a cook or somebody who would have access to Castro's meals. I guess the plan was to have him place these pills in his food.

JM: Did you ever meet Santos Trancicante during the period of this operation?

X: I am told I did.

JM: Would you please elaborate?

X: Yes. One time, one afternoon, Roselli and I were just whiling away the time. We were staying at a motel in Miami Beach and he suggested we go downtown to, not downtown Miami Beach, to just look around the sights. He suggested we go to a Haberdashery store. For one reason or another he took a dislike to my shirt that I was wearing and suggested he buy me a real fancy shirt. I wasn't particularly keen on his choice of it but to humor him I went along and he bought a very fancy silk shirt for me. While we were in there it became obvious he knew quite a few of the employees. It ended up by our going to the back of the store where instead of being a stockroom as I envisioned it would be, it was rather a lavish layout which looked like a club of some sort. There were several individuals there and he introduced me to these people. They were a sea of faces as far as I was concerned. Their names were just thrown out first names, which I didn't get or meant nothing to me.

Then after we left the store when we were walking away he said, "Remember the fellow who was sitting at such and such a location in the backroom?" He said, "That's Joe. He's our courier." Now I wasn't really focusing on this individual there were just a lot of faces but there I guess I did meet Trafficante because I found out later he was Joe. And that was the extent of my ever meeting "Joe."

JM: When you met him in the store was this prior to you reading the article in the Sunday supplement?

X: Yes.

JM: What was Trafficante's role in the operation?

X: Well, as I understood it he was a courier that was running back and forth from Miami to Havana and he was representing the Casino interest in Cuba.

JM: And what do you mean by courier?

X: Well, he apparently Castro had closed down the casinos and I guess the people that owned them back here in the states running back and forth trying to determine what their status was and whether they were going to be reopened or whether they were going to be taken over by the government. But he did have access to several people in the Cuban government. At least that was the understanding I got.

JM: And was it to be his role to transmit the poison pill to Cuba?

X: Yes.

JM: Sir, in 1967, the Inspector General's office of the CIA prepared a report dealing with CIA-Mafia plots to assassinate Castro. In this report, the agency states that Trafficante was the person who contacted and procured Juan Orta, a Cuban official, and Antonio de Verona, a Cuban exile leader, as two persons who could serve as potential assassins or accomplices in the Cuban plot. Is this consistent with your perception of Trafficante?

X: I recall both these individuals and I met one: I met Tony Varona. But it was my understanding that they were possible—they were people that probably could take care of the assignment. But I don't know whether that was Trafficante's recommendation or was a recommendation made by "Sam." That was not clear to me at all.

JM: Well. If the Inspector General's Report – and as I say I'm quoting from it, or reading, paraphrasing from it – you would have been the first person in position to transmit information to the agency at that time -- such information that is now contained in that report? Isn't that correct?

X: I was the only conduit from Roselli, through Mahue, to the agency.

JM: Okay. So if the report, 1967 Inspector General's Report states that it was Trafficante who was the person who was supposed to contact Orta and Verona, then would that fact be true?

X: Well, if I understand the way it was running that would be true. Trafficante was the individual in touch with the Cubans in Havana.

JM: Sir, if the 1967 Inspector General's report also states that Trafficante after receiving the poison pills to be used in the assassination passed these on to Cuban contacts in an attempt to kill Castro. Is this also consistent with Trafficante's role in the assassination plots?

X: Yes.

JM: Thank you very much.

-END-

Notes On James O'Connell's Identity And Meeting With Roselli:

1. John Davis, *Fatal Hour*, New York, Times Books, 1981
p. 58 – In August 1960 the CIA took its initial steps to enlist the underworld in a Castro assassination plot. Bissell told the Senate committee the idea originated with [J.C.] King and Colonel Sheffield Edwards, the director of the Office of Security. The chief of the Operational Support Division under Edwards (the Committee agreed not to identify him, referring to him only as the “support chief”) asked Robert Mahue, a former FBI agent, as a private detective, had developed Mafia connections, to contact John Roselli, a Las Vegas underworld figure, and determine if Roselli would participate in a Castro-assassination plot.
2. Warren Hinckle and William W. Turner, *Deadly Secrets*, New York, Thunder Mouth Press 1992, (Revised Edition of *The Fish Is Red*. 1st ed. Harper and Row, 1981).
p. 25 – A week later Maheu introduced Roselli to “Jim Olds,” in reality CIA Operations Support Chief James “Big Jim” O’Connell. O’Connell, a lugubrious man with a basset-hound face, had served with Maheu in the FBI during WWII and thereafter had become Maheu’s case officer. The meeting was held in the Plaza Hotel in New York, where O’Connell was staying on important business. [Fidel Castro] was in town to attend the annual General Assembly of the United Nations. While Castro was bear-hugging Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and pumping the hand of Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser at the UN, Jim O’Connell was plotting his death at the Plaza.
3. William B. Breuer, *Vendetta! Castro and the Kennedy Brothers*, John Wiley & Sons, 1997
Pg. 95 -- Now, in September 1960, Mahue and Johnny Roselli flew to New York, registered at the posh Plaza Hotel, and were joined by CIA case officer Jim O’Connell. Then the three conspirators winged to Miami and checked in at the elegant Fontainebleau , where they were joined by Moo Moo Giancana and Sam Trafficante. Three of the conferees used aliases: Giancana was Sam Gold, O’Connell was Jim Olds, and Trafficante was Joe.
4. Gus Russo, *Live By the Sword*, Baltimore, Bancroft Press, 1998
pg. 52 -- The initial planning meeting was held in Miami Beach’s Fontainebleau Hotel, where the assassins-to-be were offered \$150,000 by the U.S. government to kill Fidel Castro. O’Connell told the mobsters he wanted Castro gunned down in a gangland-style killing, à la “The Untouchables.”

Other Sources:

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Blakey & Billings, Fatal Hour, 58, 59
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