

Testimony of Ralph Salerno
HSCA Volume V at 378-470
Summary by Laura Denk, ARRB
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Summary of Testimony (“LCN” = La Cosa Nostra)

Ralph Salerno, the HSCA’s consultant on organized crime, wrote a lengthy report on organized crime and the assassination, reproduced in part in Volume IX. As of 1978, Salerno was a recognized expert on organized crime, having spent 20 years with the NYPD and an additional 12 years working as a consultant and author on organized crime. Salerno testified generally about the history and culture of organized crime in the U.S. He covered the following specific points:

- There is no evidence that the national Commission of LCN directed or approved the JFK assassination. However, in 1963, a single boss or member of LCN might have committed such an act without first consulting the Commission. Moreover, the FBI’s intelligence gathering programs were incomplete with regard to Trafficante, Marcello, and Hoffa, each of whom had substantial motives to kill JFK.
- LCN families are structured to protect bosses from criminal liability. Thus, Ruby may have been working for a LCN boss without Ruby or the boss ever meeting.
- Trafficante attested to the HSCA that he acted as an interpreter between the English-speaking Robert Maheu (CIA contact) and Spanish-speaking anti-Castro Cuban exiles in the CIA/Mafia plots to kill Castro. Salerno testified that a man of Trafficante’s stature in LCN would be unlikely to perform the role of a mere interpreter in such plots. The HSCA would be “naive” to take Trafficante’s testimony at face value.
- Although the facts of the JFK assassination do not fit the pattern of a traditional gangland homicide, the facts are similar to the facts of several LCN-orchestrated homicides that are exceptions to the typical LCN homicide.

Salerno ultimately concludes that, although there is no direct evidence of LCN involvement in the assassination, the HSCA should not dismiss the possibility that a particular LCN boss or member directed the murder.

Testimony Highlights

378-381 Salerno’s Background: Salerno worked on the NYPD in its **Central Investigation Bureau, which is the organized crime investigation unit** and as a consultant and author on organized crime. Salerno has had hundreds of conversations with members of organized crime and has read hundreds of volumes of electronic surveillance (“ELSUR”). (Since 1939, the state of NY had authority to issue *ex parte* orders for ELSUR.)

381

1957 Apalachin Conference: Salerno describes the 11/57 national meeting of organized crime bosses at which he first became familiar with Santos Trafficante, Carlos Marcello (through his son, Joseph), and other major

organized crime figures. Apalachin was important for law enforcement because the FBI and other U.S. law enforcement agencies had to recognize the existence of a national organized crime syndicate.

- 382-386 Trafficante and Marcello: Salerno outlines why he believes, beyond a reasonable doubt, that Trafficante and Marcello are leaders of LCN families.
- 386-387 Historical context of organized crime in U.S.: LCN in the U.S. has its origins in Southern Italy. In Italy, there are different factions of organized crime, but in the U.S., the factions merged into one Italian syndicate. Only full Italians can be “members” of the syndicate to which Marcello and Trafficante belong, but members can engage in ventures with non-Italians.
- 385, 387-414 Organized Crime Definition and Current Status in U.S.: Salerno explains that organized crime can be an enterprise, a venture, and/or a syndicate. He discusses an affidavit which says LCN is still active in the U.S.
- 415-420 FBI Programs: After the Apalachin Conference, law enforcement efforts against organized crime began to improve. Early FBI efforts included the preparation of **two monographs, one on the Mafia in Sicily, the second on the Mafia in the U.S.** and the **“top hoodlum” program**. In 1959, the FBI began ELSUR programs, through which it learned about the “Commission.” At that time, the FBI opened its file, **“The Commission, et al.”, which evolved into the FBI’s “La Cosa Nostra” file**. From 1961 to 1963, RFK escalated the “top hoodlum” program, renaming it the **“criminal intelligence program”** and Hoover directed FBI field offices to develop special squads in order to gain intelligence about LCN. By 1963, the FBI had a very complete and accurate picture of the LCN’s members and activities.
- 420-421 FBI Intelligence Gathering: La Stella: Salerno explains that law enforcement understood LCN so well that they were able to predict the La Stella meeting and intercept a meeting of national bosses, including Marcello and Trafficante, who gathered together in a restaurant to discuss the transfer of leadership of the NY-based Lucchese family.
- 421 FBI Intelligence Methods: FBI conducted nationwide ELSUR, covering California, the Midwest, New England and parts of NY and NJ. FBI also had **“TE” (top echelon) informants**, which included anyone who was actually a “member” of a LCN family. **FBI maintained liaison with other law enforcement agencies that were interested in LCN, including local police departments.**

- 421-424 FBI Intelligence: Conflict with LCN: FBI sent agents to a Gambino family funeral to gather information. There, several men assaulted the FBI agents. Salerno explains that this was unusual because the FBI and the LCN previously had a tacit understanding that they were all “professionals.” After the assault, LCN members were concerned about the FBI intruding into their “personal” lives.
- 424-426 FBI Intelligence Successes: By 1963, the FBI often knew more about LCN activities than the majority of the members of LCN. LCN members were not pleased about the extent of the FBI’s infiltration.
- 426, 468 The Commission: The Commission is a group of bosses from major LCN “families,” that meets to address issues of national significance. Not all of the bosses of the major families sit on the Commission, but each family usually has a representative on the Commission to protect its interests. Regional bosses must get permission to act from the Commission only when their proposed activities conflict with another family’s vested interest.
- 426-427 Materials Salerno Reviewed in Creating His Report: Salerno reviewed wiretaps for the period from 1/1/63 until 6/30/64. He searched FBI’s “La Cosa Nostra” file for a similar period surrounding the King assassination to determine whether there were similarities and reviewed some FBI files on individual LCN bosses and members. He also covered 300+ volumes of FBI ELSUR, 36+ volumes of FBI’s LCN file from 1962-1964 and 15+ volumes of FBI’s LCN file regarding the King assassination.
- 425-427 Hierarchy of LCN: LCN is a national conspiratorial criminal organization.
429-430 The members themselves actually refer to it as “La Cosa Nostra.” It is
also 387-414 made up of groups known as families. The leader is the boss or “capo.” The second in command, or executive officer to the leader, is the underboss or “sottocapo.” Each family has an counselor, who acts as advisor/historian and is known as the “consigliere.” Each family has subunits, originally known as “decina,” but now commonly called “regimes.” A “caporegime” rules a number of “soldiers” in each regime. LCN operates under a number of unwritten, but strictly enforced, rules. For instance, “friends” (members of LCN) may not lie to other friends and each inferior must absolutely follow the orders of his superior.
- 431-434 LCN and Violence: Salerno explains that although LCN is willing to use violence to achieve any business or personal objective, the bosses restrict the use of violence. They prefer to use warnings, threats or lesser violence, if possible. Homicide is an ultimate weapon. Moreover, as crime gets more organized, violence diminishes. Conversely, if the families are under pressure, as they were during the early 1960s

when RFK shook up the settled nature of the syndicate, violence increases. Salerno describes a typical gangland homicide.

434-455
& 461 DOJ Under RFK and After the Assassination: With RFK as AG, the FBI focused on LCN. ELSUR reveals that LCN crime members truly hated the Kennedys, particularly because business operations (and therefore money-making) were interrupted. In 1963, members of LCN discovered bugs in their Las Vegas casinos, heard Joseph Valachi testify before Congress, and heard RFK request Congress to pass an ELSUR law and an immunity law. ELSUR reveals that most LCN members believed that if the Kennedys were gone, business would resume as it had before the Kennedy administration. Salerno notes that they were right. After the assassination, federal resources still focused on LCN, but statistics show that the pressure certainly diminished.

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& 460 No Evidence that the Commission was Involved in Assassination: **Salerno testified that there is no evidence that the Commission directed, approved, or was concerned in any way with the assassination of President Kennedy.** However, a boss or member may have directed the assassination without the Commission's approval, in part because the Commission experienced a decline in power in the early 1960s. The FBI may not have known if Trafficante, Marcello, or Hoffa was involved because **Trafficante was never the direct target of ELSUR for an extended period and there was no ELSUR on Marcello or Hoffa.** Salerno notes that ELSUR is sometimes impossible to install.

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& 460-461 CIA/Mafia Plot to Kill Castro: According to Salerno, **Trafficante**, because of his position within LCN, **would not have been merely an English-Spanish interpreter between the CIA and anti-Castro Cubans in the CIA/Mafia plots against Castro.** Salerno believes CIA must have first contacted Roselli, who then had to check with his boss, Giancana. Then, Giancana approached Trafficante, in part because the some of the operation would take place in Southern Florida, which was Trafficante's "jurisdiction." Salerno said that the HSCA would be naive to accept Trafficante's testimony at face value.

462 Intelligence Coordination: Federal agencies do share information with each other and with state and local authorities. However, the agencies are cautious, because they know that information may ultimately find its way to some corrupt local police office. The FBI in particular evaluates where its information is going and then cooperates to the extent it believes to be appropriate.

463-464 Discussion of Whether JFK Assassination Fits Within One of the Exceptions to a

Typical LCN Homicide: In Salerno's report (Vol. IX), he describes a typical LCN homicide and explains that the facts of the JFK assassination clearly do not fit this pattern. Then, he examines in detail three exceptions to the typical LCN homicide and explains that the facts of the JFK assassination do fit within the exception. The examples include: (1) the acid blinding of Victor Riesel in NYC, in which LCN paid a heroin addict and career burglar to do the job and later killed him; (2) the shooting of Joseph Columbo before 85,000 people in NYC in which LCN paid a hit man to do the shooting and then had a bodyguard kill the hit man; and (3) the murder of a federal witness in Kansas City in which a low level gangster hired four young men to murder the witness.

464 Oswald-LCN Connection: Although Oswald presumably had connections with LCN through his uncle, Charles "Dutz" Murret, and David Ferrie, Salerno asserts that neither connection is a sufficient basis on which to base a theory that Oswald was connected to LCN. These connections are one factor, which, together with other factors, might lead to a "responsible" conclusion that LCN knew of Oswald.

463-464 Ruby-LCN Connection: Salerno asserts that it is unlikely that Trafficante and Ruby knew each other, as Ruby would not have made a "pimple on the back of the neck of a real organized crime figure." However, it is possible that Ruby may have turned to LCN for help in a labor matter, as it is common practice and some LCN bosses engage in this type of "consulting" as a legitimate business.

465, 468 Castro-LCN Agreement: Because money is all-important to the LCN, Salerno believes that LCN bosses could have worked violently against Castro in 1961 and then switched sides to work with Castro against Kennedy in 1963. Salerno asserts it is common in gang wars for members to reverse loyalties. However, there is no direct evidence that LCN worked with Castro or the Cuban government in supplying drugs to U.S. or in any other venture.

465, 468-469 Aleman-Trafficante conversation: Believes that Trafficante would not have told Aleman that JFK was "going to get hit" if Trafficante's relationship with Aleman was as limited as Trafficante testified. Trafficante would have been more likely to confide in Aleman if Trafficante believed that he and Aleman were going to make a lot of money together.

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465-467 Size of LCN Syndicate: In May of 1962, Meyer Lansky (Jewish "financial wizard" and mastermind of Cuban casinos; associated with Charles "Lucky" Luciano and Ben "Bugsy" Siegel), told his wife that LCN was bigger than United States Steel. Salerno explains that data is not conclusive, but that LCN is clearly a multibillion dollar industry.

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