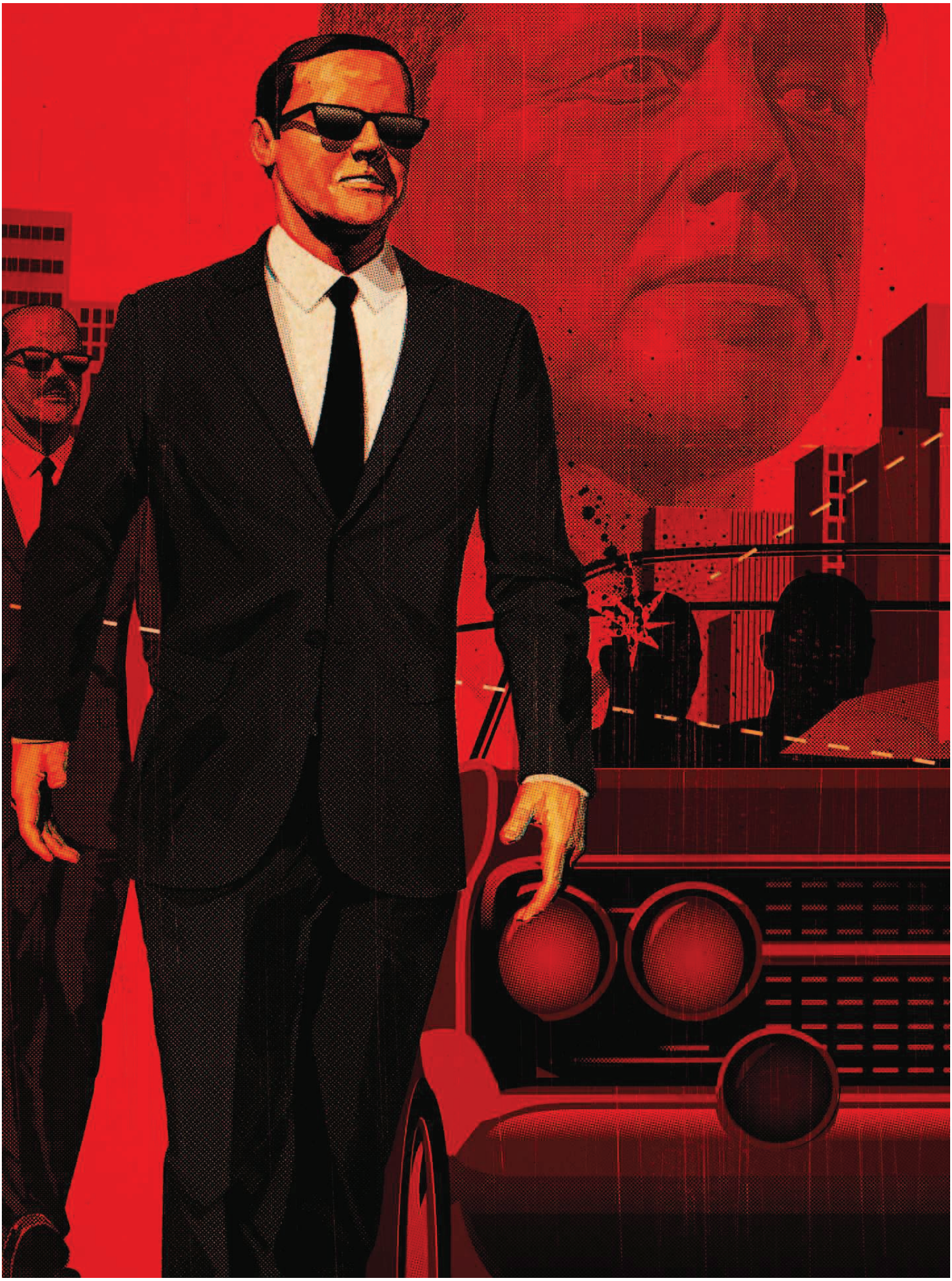

HOW THE OUTFIT KILLED JFK

IT'S BEEN NEARLY 50 YEARS SINCE PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY WAS ASSASSINATED. HERE'S A NEW TAKE ON WHAT HAPPENED THAT DAY IN DALLAS

BY HILLEL LEVIN

ILLUSTRATION BY TAVIS COBURN

Having just retired from the FBI, Zack Shelton traveled in 2002 from his Texas home to reminisce with old Chicago comrades. They met over meals, at places that had once been their hangouts. Most of them were also retired, gray and beefy. They wore open-necked shirts and khakis or jeans. Back in their bureau days they had been a lean and edgy crew—dark suits and ties were standard attire. Together they had put the first cracks in the previously impervious shell of Chicago's Mafia, known as the Outfit.

Now Shelton was on a similarly quixotic task. He believed a small-time criminal locked up in an Illinois prison may have committed the greatest crime of their time. His name was James Files, and he had once been a driver for the Outfit's most feared hit man. Files told Shelton both he and the hit man were in Dallas when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Files even claimed that he had fired the fatal shot from behind a fence on the infamous grassy knoll.

Shelton knew it sounded preposterous, but he had reason to take Files seriously. When he repeated the Files confession to his old buddies, Shelton was prepared to be laughed out of the restaurant. Instead, they all

Carlos Marcello (above) before the Senate Rackets Committee in 1959.

JFK PLOT (1) One study of the grassy knoll. (2) The Warren Commission reenacted Lee Harvey Oswald's shooting. (3) Chicago hoodlum Charles Nicoletti was in Dallas the day JFK was killed. (4) The bullet path. (5) The motorcade. (6) Bullet found on stretcher. (7) Bullet fragment found in presidential limousine. (8) Chicago boss Tony Accardo in 1982. (9) Hit man Johnny Roselli was also in Dallas. (10) Photo of James Files supposedly taken by Oswald in a Dallas motel. (11) FBI agent Zack Shelton with President Bush. (12) Files's current mug shot.

listened intently. In fact, like Shelton, some of them also had their own revelations about the assassination or knew other agents who had. They regretted never having had a forum in which to air them.

"There's one thing about FBI agents," says Shelton. "They're damn good investigators. They don't operate on the basis of theories. They deal in facts, and the facts have never supported the Warren Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin."

The evidence, Shelton believes, shows that organized crime orchestrated Kennedy's murder. An increasing number of historians agree, but they still don't know who the shooter—or shooters—may have been. There is also virtually no understanding of the Outfit's role in the conspiracy.

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If Special Agent Shelton learned any lesson during his eight years in Chicago, it was never to underestimate the Outfit or Tony Accardo, the man at its helm for five decades. Unlike the Mafia dons on the East Coast, Accardo had little interest in the public spotlight or absolute power. After he took control of the Outfit, in the mid-1940s, he built what is now acknowledged to be the biggest empire in the history of American organized crime, with rackets extending from Chicago to California.

Accardo was willing to divide the spoils by geography rather than by family. Inside Chicago that meant five groups, each with its own boss. Although most of these mob bosses were Italian, they were not necessarily related to those who worked for them. Their associates and underlings could be Greek, Jewish or German. Depending on where an illegal act took place, unaffiliated criminals—even weekend poker players—had to pay a street tax to the local Outfit boss. Failure to pay could result in a beating or death.

Shelton's fellow agent Jim Wagner transferred to Chicago from New York and immediately recognized how crime in Chicago was organized. "The Outfit had a superior business model because it used geography instead of family," he explains. "You didn't have the blood feuds like in New York, where different families fought over the same territory."

Nothing fueled the Outfit's expansion as much as its influence on unions—the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in particular. The union's pension fund, which was run out of Chicago, financed construction of the Outfit's first casinos on the Las Vegas Strip. As he did in his hometown, Accardo was willing to let other mobsters play—but on his terms.

A key component of the Outfit's success was its infiltration of the Democratic Party in Chicago's First Ward. Mob operatives influenced the election of judges, who then found reasons to throw out charges against the Outfit. The mob's political connections also helped it buy voting cards from residents of Chicago's public housing projects that it could then punch for its favored candidates. When a slender margin in Illinois ensured Kennedy's electoral victory over Richard Nixon in 1960, Shelton says, "the mob really did believe it gave Kennedy the election."

If that was true, the Kennedy administration showed little gratitude. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy made organized crime his signature issue, lighting a fire under J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, which had previously gone easy on the Mafia. In the last year of the Eisenhower administration the Justice Department convicted only 35 low-level mobsters. By the end of 1963 RFK had pushed that number to 288, including high-ranking bosses. More alarming *(continued on page 121)*

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for the Outfit, while it was using the Teamsters pension fund to build casinos, RFK targeted Teamsters president Jimmy Hoffa with a team of investigators known as the Get Hoffa squad. The squad's first indictments against the union leader were for accepting payoffs from trucking companies and for subsequent jury tampering in those trials. In the summer of 1963 it brought new charges involving pension funds.

Five months later, JFK was assassinated. G. Robert Blakey, then a member of RFK's Justice Department, was well aware of what organized crime had at stake in snuffing out the Kennedy administration's onslaught. "It seemed obvious that if there was a conspiracy, it would be from the mob," says Blakey. In *Brothers,* a recent book on RFK, author David Talbot quotes Bobby telling a confidant after JFK's assassination: "If anyone was involved, it was organized crime." According to Blakey, neither Hoover nor JFK's successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson, wanted to open that can of worms. "The risks of where that investigation would lead were too high," says Blakey. "It was much more convenient for Oswald to be the lone assassin."

In the late 1970s Blakey served as chief counsel for the U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations, which took a second look at the Warren Commission's findings. On the basis of acoustical evidence, Blakey's investigators determined there was a "high probability" that more than one gunman fired at the president and that "individual members" of "organized crime" may have been involved. The committee also found that Hoover had kept the FBI's organized crime task force out of the investigation and didn't pursue leads tying Oswald and his killer, Jack Ruby, to the Mafia.

But back in 1963, if the Warren Commission had called in the FBI agents monitoring the Outfit, it probably wouldn't have learned much. Although it was the dawn of electronic surveillance and mob leaders were supposedly unaware of the bugs planted in their meeting places, the FBI never had enough information to bring a major case against the Outfit in the 1960s. "Unfortunately," Blakey says, "we learned later that the surveillance was incomplete."

In Chicago, for example, agents never fully understood the executive nature of the Outfit's hierarchy. They thought Sam "Momo" Giancana ruled the Outfit. Giancana was the Chicago mob's most flamboyant boss after Al Capone, but he remained in power only until 1965. It's now clear Giancana always answered to Accardo. According to Blakey, no bug or wiretap ever caught Accardo talking to Giancana. Because of Accardo's understated ways, the media, law enforcement and even some local criminals never completely knew the extent of his control.

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When Zack Shelton transferred to the FBI's Chicago office in 1978, his first case involved the murders of several burglars who had broken into Accardo's home. It was natural to assume the mob boss had ordered their executions. For a few weeks it appeared the 28-year-old agent and his partner would put Accardo behind bars for the first time in his long criminal career. "During the investigation we pulled the phone records of everyone we could think of," Shelton remembers. The agents could see a call alerting Accardo to a break-in at his house and then the crime boss's call to his right-hand man, Joey Aiuppa, down the chain of command to Aiuppa's driver, Gerry Carusiello, another longtime burglar, who did the dirty work.

The agents learned enough to impanel a grand jury. The first time he saw Accardo, Shelton understood why people underestimated his brutality. At 73, Accardo dressed in conservatively tailored suits and looked more like a retired corporate executive than a crime lord.

Accardo covered his tracks with ruthless efficiency. Carusiello was killed before he could testify. Accardo's longtime Italian houseman, who testified to a grand jury in broken English, may have said too much, because he soon disappeared. Shelton got a warrant to search Accardo's home for signs of the witness's whereabouts but could find nothing other than a pair of prescription glasses at the bottom of an incinerator.

When the agents searched Accardo's enormous basement—which was as big as the upper floor of the opulent house—they found a hidden walk-in safe. Inside were stacks of new bills that totaled $275,000. Shelton and his partner traced the money to Las Vegas. However, the FBI had just begun to investigate how the Outfit had skimmed cash from casino counting rooms. Rather than blow that operation, they returned the funds to Accardo and never brought charges against him for the deaths.

The investigation could not have had a more unsatisfying outcome for Shelton. "About all we managed to do was keep that money from him for about 18 months," he says. "But God, it sure was an interesting case."

If nothing else, this case taught Shelton two important lessons about Accardo: The mob leader knew no mercy when it came to

"I think we can beat this recession if you girls are willing to cooperate."

insulating himself from a serious crime, and Shelton had seen for himself the sort of cash that gushed from Las Vegas. Only years later did he realize these lessons could shed light on the assassination of JFK.

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Around the time of the burglary investigation, Shelton had a much more run-of-the-mill case against a ring of hijackers. The group's members would overpower truckers at rest stops and abscond with the entire tractor trailer.

The crew was led by James Files, who was the sort of white man with no overt ethnicity that mobsters called a hillbilly. In fact, Files was born into a broken home in Alabama but raised by a single mother in the tough Italian neighborhood of a Chicago suburb. Shelton had no idea how Files fit into the crazy-quilt pattern of the Outfit. "All I knew was that he had to have the blessings of the mob to be operating on that scale."

Shelton used another hillbilly to infiltrate Files's crew. It was only a matter of time before the agent built a case for the interstate transport of stolen goods. Then one day Shelton debriefed his informant about a trip he had taken to Dallas with Files. As usual, they were hauling stolen vehicles, but when they passed through Dealey Plaza, the snitch told Shelton, "Files went weird on me. He said, 'If the American people really knew what happened there, they wouldn't know how to handle it.'"

The comment seemed so bizarre that neither the informant nor the FBI agent knew what to make of it. "There was no reason for this guy to make up that story about Files," Shelton says. "And Files was the last person I'd expect to comment about JFK's assassination or any topic of that kind, but it sounded as though he really knew what happened. Maybe because it was so unexpected, it stuck with me."

Over the next decade Shelton and the other agents in the organized crime unit turned the tide against Accardo. With Operation Strawman, Shelton's team caught the Outfit selling casinos to the Kansas City mob. The investigation won the 1986 conviction of 78-year-old Aiuppa, who spent the next 10 years in prison. During the same period Shelton's squad also tapped the lines of the Teamsters pension fund offices to bring charges against union leaders. "I loved being in Chicago," says Shelton. "Every day was different and exciting, and we did a hell of a lot of good."

Shelton didn't think about Files again until 1992, after he had been transferred to the FBI office in Beaumont, Texas. He read in a local newspaper about Joe Hugh West, a private investigator and former Baptist preacher from Houston who claimed to have revelations regarding JFK's murder. As Shelton skimmed the article, two Outfit names jumped off the page: Charles Nicoletti, a notorious hit man, and Johnny Roselli, the Outfit's first enforcer in Las Vegas. West claimed he had a source who could place both men in Dallas on November 22, 1963.

Although Shelton was vaguely familiar with the conclusions of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, he had yet to hear anyone claim that Outfit heavyweights had been involved—especially Nicoletti or Roselli, who could not have acted without Accardo's approval.

Shelton gave the private investigator a call. Although West had a reputation as a huckster (he held his press conferences in front of a banner emblazoned with TRUTH, INC.), he seemed sincere about finding the culprits behind JFK's assassination. He revealed the ex-con who had been his source for the information about Nicoletti and Roselli. "I even went to court and got immunity for the guy so he couldn't be convicted for any crime he told us about," Shelton says. "But I pretty quickly caught him in a couple of lies. I told Joe, 'Don't take anything this guy says to the bank.' When Joe heard that, it was as if the life went out of him. I felt sorry for the man, so I said, 'If you can track down a guy named James Files, he might have some good information.'"

Shelton returned to Beaumont and was warned by his supervisor never again to mention JFK. Shelton expected the matter to be closed in early 1993 when he read that West had died following heart surgery. Soon after, West's lawyer, Don Irvin, called to announce that "the crusade lives on." Irvin told Shelton that West had succeeded in tracking Files to a state prison in Illinois, where he was doing the equivalent of a life sentence for the attempted murder of a cop. Files had initially rebuffed West, but the former preacher persevered through phone calls, a visit and extensive correspondence. The prisoner was devastated to learn of West's sudden death.

As a tribute to West, Files agreed to talk extensively to Irvin, who then relayed what he heard to Shelton. He had much more to say than anyone anticipated. Files told of being remanded for a court-martial from the Army after he was charged with shooting other soldiers in Laos in 1960, but he then claimed to have been plucked out of a veterans' hospital during a psychiatric evaluation and recruited to train anti-Castro Cubans in Florida. After the 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco, Files said, he returned home with a chip on his shoulder against his nation and the president. Nicoletti saw him racing stock cars and tapped him to be his driver.

For most Chicago mobsters, muscular Charles Nicoletti—nearly six feet tall and with a lantern jaw—could be a frightening sight. Nevertheless, he defied the stereotypes of a mob killer. On most days he wore a suit and tie. His hangouts included insurance agencies, car dealerships and a company that made burial vaults.

Despite the businessman trappings, Nicoletti was the son of an abusive father, whom he killed at the age of 12 after the man beat his mother. The Outfit became his family, and Nicoletti worked his way up the ranks by dealing dope and making book, for which he was repeatedly arrested and jailed. Inside the mob, Nicoletti's intelligence and heartlessness made him effective as an enforcer. Charles Crimaldi, another hit man who had turned informant, called Nicoletti "the most respected and the most dangerous" man in the Outfit, adding, "He don't want to impress anybody. He just wants to go about his business."

By the early 1960s police believed Nicoletti was the Outfit's third-ranked leader and right-hand man to Giancana. At this stage Nicoletti's skills were reserved for only the most sensitive contracts, and when he went out with another hit man, Files claimed to be the third man behind the wheel.

Despite Nicoletti's fearsome reputation, Files called him "Mr. Nicoletti" and said he was the closest thing to a father figure he ever had.

During his discussions with Irvin, Files gave vivid accounts of the weeks leading up to the assassination. Then 21, he was playing pinball at his favorite hangout when Nicoletti first told him that Giancana had put out a contract on "your friend"—the president. Nicoletti instructed Files to acquire the weapons and bring them to Texas in the hidden trunk compartment

of a 1963 Chevrolet, a "work" car that couldn't be traced.

Files told Irvin the following story about his journey to Dallas: He stayed in a courtyard motel on the western outskirts of Dallas and met Lee Harvey Oswald, who took him downtown to point out the best escape routes from the city. Oswald also took him to an abandoned field, where Files test-fired guns hidden in the trunk. (Oswald, he said, didn't want to shoot.) Upon their return to the motel Oswald took a picture of him standing shirtless next to his portable record player—a photo Files kept but one that would have been more telling had it included the photographer.

Files claimed he made contact with another Outfit leader on November 21. Early that morning he drove to the swanky Cabana Motor Hotel in Dallas, where he picked up Johnny Roselli. Then 58, Roselli had carefully cut silver hair and wore tinted glasses and silk suits. He was every bit the flashy mob kingpin Nicoletti was not, but back in his younger Chicago days Roselli was equally feared as a hit man. By 1963 he was hanging out at the Friars Club in Los Angeles with his pal Frank Sinatra and was caught a few years later in an elaborate card-cheating scheme. It brought him a brief prison sentence and a permanent ban from Las Vegas casinos. In Dallas, Files said, he took Roselli to a pancake house, where he met Jack Ruby.

According to Files, Nicoletti did not join him until the morning of November 22. The two went to Dealey Plaza, using as a guide a map of the motorcade route that Roselli had gotten from Ruby. He and Nicoletti picked a spot in the Dal-Tex tower (next to the Texas School Book Depository, where Oswald worked) for Nicoletti to shoot from. Only then, Files says, did the hit man ask him to be a backup. Nicoletti feared Roselli was too rusty to hit a target from a long distance, and he knew Files had been trained as a sniper in the Army. Files said he set up behind the stockade fence on the grassy knoll to get a shot from the front of the procession. The weapon he chose was a Remington Fireball, a cross between a rifle and a pistol that could fit inside an attaché case. Nicoletti's one instruction was not to hit Jackie. Files followed the motorcade through the scope of his Remington and shot a .222 caliber bullet that hit the president in the right temple. He then casually took off his jacket, turned it inside out and put his gun back in its case.

During his brief encounter with Oswald, Files said, the two did not discuss each other's mission. He believed Oswald never fired a shot and was unwittingly there as a patsy—as Oswald himself said after his arrest. Other hit men were in town to kill Oswald, but he slipped away before they got to him—the major glitch in the day's operation.

For Irvin, James Files was the missing link to the real conspiracy behind the JFK assassination. Irvin wanted Shelton to interview Files to make sure he didn't turn out to be as flaky as West's previous sources.

"I thought some of what Files said was a little too good to be true," Shelton admits. "That was my first impression. But I thought there was a ring of truth to it, too. Nicoletti was the perfect person for the Outfit to send. I could understand why it wanted Roselli in Dallas too, because they trusted him to operate things. But at that stage of his life Roselli couldn't have been a shooter. It made sense that Nicoletti would have wanted someone else to back him up."

But nothing about the Files story was more compelling for Shelton than the fates of the three central Outfit characters: All of them had been killed in the mid-1970s after being summoned by congressional committees: Giancana and Roselli around the time of a Senate investigation and Nicoletti just a day after one of Blakey's investigators called looking for him. All had ranked high enough in the mob's hierarchy to have directly implicated Accardo and Aiuppa in a conspiracy to kill the president. Was Accardo covering his tracks?

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Shelton's efforts to interview Files in 1993 were leaked to the press by one of Irvin's associates, and the FBI wouldn't allow it. The bureau instead sent two other agents to interview the Illinois prisoner, and they deemed his information unworthy of further investigation. Shelton watched from the sidelines as TV impresario Dick Clark produced a show for NBC based on Files's confession. At the last minute the network brought in consultants who declared Files a fraud, and the program was scrubbed.

Shelton still wouldn't let go of the Files story. Although he realized it had many holes, he says, "There was just too much detail for him to have made everything up." After he retired from the FBI in 1998 and opened his own private investigation firm, he approached Clark about getting the Files story back on the air. "Dick Clark had me out to his office," Shelton recalls, "and I think he believed there was something to pursue, but he had just been burned too badly to try again." Meanwhile, Joe West's organization had splintered. Some of the pieces had been picked up by a Dutch investor, Wim Dankbaar, who offered to cover Shelton's expenses if he could corroborate Files's claims. (Dankbaar used some of Shelton's research in his book and video, *Files on JFK*.)

For Shelton that collaboration came with the discovery of two men who claimed independently that they had helped bring the hit men to Dallas. Chauncey Marvin Holt said he drove Nicoletti from a ranch in Arizona, and William Robert Plumlee said he flew Roselli into town the day before the assassination. Each man had spent a significant part of his life on the Gulf Coast, and each had connections to the mob, the CIA and Cuba.

According to an extensive FBI file, Plumlee claimed he made his first clandestine flights to Cuba in support of Castro, supplying guns mobsters had stolen from a National Guard armory. He served time for passing a bad check but was still used as a contract pilot by the CIA, helping to equip such right-wing guerrilla groups as Oliver North's Contras. Plumlee claimed his CIA contacts had ordered him to fly Roselli to Dallas the day before the assassination.

The CIA connection with Roselli was not farfetched. It is now known that in 1960 the CIA approached Roselli through a Las Vegas hotel executive (and former FBI agent) to assist in a plan to assassinate Castro. Roselli introduced the go-between to Giancana and Tampa mob boss Santo Trafficante Jr., who had casinos expropriated by Castro and was briefly jailed in Cuba after the revolution. The CIA supplied poison that a Trafficante confederate was supposed to slip into Castro's food, but nothing came of the effort.

Roselli testified about the escapade when it was revealed in 1975 during the hearings into Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders led by Idaho senator Frank Church. But Roselli may have talked too freely. He disappeared within weeks of his third appearance before the committee, in 1976. His body was found sawed in half and stuffed inside an oil drum floating off Biscayne Bay. His death so rattled Plumlee that he contacted local FBI agents to inform them of his role in bringing Roselli to Dallas, but he claimed the effort was to "abort" the assassination, not assist it.

Chauncey Holt, who said he brought Nicoletti to Dallas, had a background even more problematic than Plumlee's. He admitted to having worked as an accountant for businesses owned by gangster Meyer Lansky. Holt also worked for Peter Licavoli, a leader of Detroit's Mafia and a supporter of Jimmy Hoffa. Holt said he met Nicoletti and Ohio hit man Leo Moceri (who disappeared in 1976, shortly after Hoffa) at Licavoli's ranch in Tucson and drove the two to Dallas. They intended to arrive on November 21 but did not get into town until the morning of the assassination because of car trouble. Holt claimed he was the oldest-looking member of the three "tramps"—the apparent vagrants found in a boxcar after the assassination and photographed as they were marched into Dallas police headquarters. They were held briefly, and their true identities have been a source of speculation among conspiracy theorists ever since.

Holt also claimed to have been in another iconic shot—of Lee Harvey Oswald in New Orleans, a few months before the assassination, during an anti-Castro demonstration. Holt was photographed standing to the side ready to lend moral support as Oswald faced down demonstrators.

Holt said that in addition to working for mobsters he provided contract services for the CIA. A trained artist, he forged documents, including the alias ID card Oswald used to purchase the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, the supposed assassination weapon. He said he had also created counterfeit Secret Service credentials for others to use in Dallas. Holt first "came out" as a conspirator in a 1991 *Newsweek* article and sat for several interviews, some videotaped, before his death from cancer, in 1997. Although he never admitted knowing who had orchestrated the assassination, he did speculate that the presence in Dallas of people like him, with such murky backgrounds in both crime and espionage, may have been part of the plan to "muddy the waters."

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In 2002 Shelton traveled to San Diego to meet with Holt's daughter, who had her father's videotapes. Later, Shelton had dinner with a retired FBI agent, who asked why he was in town. When Shelton told him about Files, the agent replied with his own story from when he worked on the Teamsters pension fund case. He had monitored a wiretapped conversation between a pension executive and a Hoffa bodyguard. "He heard [the bodyguard] say that Ruby made all these calls to Chicago before the assassination. That always bothered him because the Warren Commission concluded that Ruby had no significant tie to the underworld. All these years he knew that was bullshit, but there was no one he could talk to about it."

The dinner was an epiphany for Shelton. "I realized there had to be other agents who think they know something about the assassination. I just had to reach out to them."

When Shelton returned to Chicago later that year to excavate the memories of his bureau colleagues, he was most interested in the response of Jim Wagner, who had led the organized crime unit. Wagner became the FBI's foremost Outfit expert and was a tower of integrity. "Jim listened to me talk a little about the Outfit and the assassination, and then he said, 'Zack, I think you're right on.'"

Like Shelton, Wagner had his own unexpected brush with JFK history. In his case, it happened in 1989 when the feds revealed that a mob attorney had put a wire on one of the Outfit's most important political operatives in the First Ward. A few Outfit soldiers came forward to wear wires so they wouldn't go to prison. One of them was Lenny Patrick. In his prime, Patrick controlled the Outfit's bookmaking and juice operations on Chicago's West Side. By the time Wagner worked with him, he was 76, "a crotchety old man," Wagner remembers, "sickly but still dangerous."

Before Patrick would meet his mob boss, he would first go to a safe house, where Wagner would fit him with a concealed recorder. The agent also gave him cash to feed his loan sharks so the FBI could build extortion cases against them, too. It wasn't long before Wagner suspected Patrick of stealing some of that money.

One day when Patrick showed up at the safe house Wagner was waiting for him with a lie detector. "I told Lenny an examiner was on his way to strap him into the polygraph so I could find out what he was doing with the cash." Patrick confessed to stealing it. In the spirit of the moment, the agent decided to ask about a few other subjects as well. Wagner had once been a history teacher and was always fascinated by the assassination.

"…And it's even better with cranberry sauce."

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He remembered Patrick was supposedly a friend of Jack Ruby's.

Patrick had always downplayed their relationship, but he admitted to Wagner that he had been "Rubenstein's" mentor in the Outfit, having plucked him out of a boxing club. Patrick said he taught him how to be a bookie, and when Ruby's best friend was killed for taking bets without paying his street tax, Patrick was the one who banished Ruby to Dallas. Patrick admitted he was one of the last to speak with Ruby before he killed Oswald.

After hearing that, Wagner said, "I backed up, and I asked, 'Then who hit Kennedy?'"

"He said, 'We did it.'"

"'But who did it?'"

"'You know. Momo [Giancana] had the main guys there.'"

"When I pressed him to tell me exactly who, he clammed up. He said he had told me enough and didn't want to talk about it anymore. But then he said, 'It was us, and we'll have to pay for it.'"

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If the Outfit had supplied the firepower for the assassination and the cleanup with Ruby, as Lenny Patrick told Wagner, then who groomed Lee Harvey Oswald as the patsy? For Shelton there is one indisputable candidate—a longtime Accardo ally from Oswald's hometown with both the motivation and the energy to choreograph JFK's assassination.

His name was Carlos Marcello. Short in stature and bullnecked, he was known as the Little Man or the Godfather of the Gulf Coast. When Shelton asked Chicago agents about the assassination, one referred him to his brother, Michael Wacks, also an agent, who had spent a year working undercover on a sting involving Marcello.

Like Accardo, Marcello came to power in the 1940s. Like Accardo, he enjoyed unusual longevity for a mob boss, with domination of his home turf and an expansive reach that extended throughout the Gulf Coast. Unlike Accardo, however, he maintained a high profile as a civic leader, real estate tycoon and owner of a popular restaurant and hotel in New Orleans. But if an associate had his confidence, he'd identify certain out-of-town partners by saying, in his gangster patois, "Dey Maf, like me."

Marcello was a partner with Tampa boss Trafficante and the Outfit in several different rackets. Most often the Southern bosses were junior partners to Chicago because the Outfit controlled the union leaders who gave access to pension funds. But in 1963 Marcello and Trafficante wanted their own piece of the Las Vegas bonanza, and like prospectors at a gold rush they were eager to stake their claim on the Strip before it was too late.

Their plans hinged on a loan from the Teamsters pension fund. They courted Hoffa to do the deal, but Hoffa was distracted by indictments from RFK's Justice Department. Marcello was no more a fan of Bobby than the union leader was. As attorney general, Kennedy deported Marcello to Guatemala, where he was stranded for a few days in a jungle before he could return to the U.S. It was a story the affable Marcello could not retell without sputtering in rage.

The mob bosses' go-between with the Teamsters was Trafficante's trusted trial lawyer Frank Ragano, who was also defending Hoffa against the government's charges. According to Ragano, in August 1963, when the mob bosses had the lawyer approach Hoffa yet again about the loan, the union leader responded, "The time has come for your friend [Trafficante] and Carlos to get rid of him. Kill that son of a bitch John Kennedy."

At breakfast the next morning in a corner of Marcello's restaurant, Ragano passed along Hoffa's request. He expected the mob bosses to laugh it off, but they responded instead with stony silence. Looking back on the incident in his 1994 memoir, Ragano wondered whether the assassination conspiracy was already under way.

Marcello discussed the Kennedys with a former Las Vegas promoter. Explaining that he needed to chop off the head of the dog (JFK) so the tail (RFK) would die, he told the promoter that he would find a "nut" his people could manipulate into taking the blame.

Marcello's "nut" could have been Oswald, who grew up in Marcello's fiefdom. According to Blakey's investigators, Oswald's uncle, a bookie, and his mother had connections to Marcello. Another mutual acquaintance was David Ferrie, who was Oswald's childhood friend and an anti-Castro activist. Ferrie worked as a private investigator for Marcello's lawyer and was in court with him on the day of the assassination. Ferrie died of a cerebral aneurysm soon after New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison fingered him as a co-conspirator in JFK's assassination.

Conspiracy theorists who believe Oswald was manipulated by others typically blame agents associated with the CIA or Cuba—not the mob. Of all Oswald's activities before the assassination, none have led to more speculation about espionage than his trip to Mexico City from September 27 to October 2, 1963. As he did in New Orleans, Oswald made another public display of his affections for Cuba by visiting the nation's embassy and requesting a visa to travel there. CIA headquarters later destroyed photos of Oswald entering the embassy and tapes of him calling there.

But according to Jim Wagner, there could have been a mercenary purpose for Oswald's trip. Looking through FBI archives, Wagner discovered that Accardo sent a courier with $100,000 in cash to Mexico City the same weekend Oswald was there. It may have been a coincidence, since the Outfit did have extensive interests in Mexico City. Or the Outfit may have been in a better position than Marcello to pay off Oswald.

In the days after the assassination Oswald's various pro-Castro activities seemed "too pat—too obvious" to Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, who had taken control of the Justice Department when RFK could no longer function. If the CIA or anti-Castro interests had planned to use the assassination as an excuse to invade Cuba, they quickly backed off.

And if the mob had used the assassination to muzzle the Justice Department, it could not have been more successful. Over the next three years the workload of federal organized crime prosecutors would be cut in half; their time in front of grand juries was reduced by 72 percent. President Johnson

was not the threat to organized crime JFK had been—which was probably no surprise for Marcello, whose domain extended to Texas. Shelton uncovered reports that the Little Man regularly paid off LBJ. According to one of his sources, a wealthy San Antonio investor named Morris Jaffe "used to take bags of cash" from Marcello to LBJ—even when Johnson was in the White House. By the time Shelton heard this story, Jaffe had died, so he called Jaffe's son. "When I asked him if that was true," Shelton says, "he answered, 'My dad knew a lot of people. He was close to J. Edgar Hoover, too.'"

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In 1981 Trafficante and Accardo were both indicted for a kickback scheme involving a Tampa union. Although they beat that rap, Trafficante was indicted on another charge in 1986. The next year, shortly before his death, he told lawyer Ragano, "Carlos fucked up. We shouldn't have killed Giovanni. We should have killed Bobby."

Carlos Marcello had his own troubles with the feds. In the early 1980s he was convicted in a sting known as Operation Brilab. Agent Mike Wacks pretended to be a crooked insurance executive. In return for kickbacks, the Little Man opened doors to politicians and union executives across the country.

After a long career in the FBI, Wacks thought he had seen it all, but this sting opened his eyes even wider. "Mob guys like Accardo and Marcello felt like they ran a separate government," he says. "Marcello knew right off the top of his head who was amenable to kickbacks, whether it was a politician or a union figure, across his whole region. Not just in Texas and Louisiana, but Mississippi, Arkansas and Oklahoma." Wacks was ready to rope in the Outfit when a leak to the press brought the sting to an abrupt end.

During his year undercover, Wacks became close with Marcello. "He was pushing 70, but I only wished I worked so hard. He could have hundreds of deals going at the same time and bounce around until 3:30 A.M. with a girlfriend half his age. Then at seven the next morning he'd call to see why you weren't at work already."

Even decades later, Wacks says, Marcello could not hide his hatred for the Kennedys. "Historians don't understand the loyalty mob bosses felt politicians owed them. They thought they were on the same level. If they put someone into power and he didn't do their bidding, their solution was to take him out."

Even though Wacks was exposed as an agent, Marcello remained cordial to him. "We had spent so much time together," Wacks explains, "that the old man treated me almost like a son."

After Marcello went to prison for Brilab in 1983, he suffered a stroke. Doctors believed he was in the early stages of Alzheimer's, and he started muttering in his sleep about the Kennedy assassination. A plan was devised to transfer him to a federal prison hospital in Minnesota and embed an agent as his cell mate to record the nocturnal admissions. Again, word leaked out and the operation was aborted.

Wacks did not believe such subterfuge was necessary. When he went to visit him in prison, he found Marcello as lucid as ever. The old man refused to talk about the assassination with the case agent Wacks brought from Dallas, but he told Wacks, "If I ever get out of here, you come to see me with my lawyer, and I'll explain my involvement with dat thing."

Only 18 months later, in 1990, Marcello's convictions were overturned and he was released. But Wacks's superiors would not permit him to take Marcello up on his offer. "That really pissed me off," says Wacks. "I said to my boss, 'What's it going to harm us?' But he said, 'We don't want to go there.' For some reason, the bureau wanted to close the book on the assassination. That bugs me to this day."

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For G. Robert Blakey, now a professor at the Notre Dame Law School, what Zack Shelton and the other agents have found adds weight to his thesis about organized crime's role in the assassination. "Little by little, more pieces about organized crime's involvement keep coming out. Nothing of substance has come out on the CIA other than that it wanted to cover things up. The stories of most substance are related to organized crime. Trafficante's confession to his lawyer is very significant. Ragano was in a position to know, and he made notes about the conversation soon after it took place."

For similar reasons, Blakey says, "I would believe what Lenny Patrick told Jim Wagner. The phone records showed he was in the middle of everything with Ruby, and I'm sorry he never felt he could talk to the House Select Committee."

Blakey is more skeptical about Files. "The acoustical evidence does show a bullet was fired from the grassy knoll, and it was fired at a supersonic rate nearly simultaneous with the third shot. But I believe that bullet missed. If you look at the X-ray evidence of the skull, it's pretty conclusive the fatal shot came from behind." (The committee also concluded that bullet fragments taken from Texas governor John Connally and JFK came from Oswald's Mannlicher-Carcano. In 2004, however, the science behind the FBI's analysis was discredited, and the gun that fired the bullets remains unknown.)

Shelton does not dispute Blakey about the shot or that Files may have embellished his story with information he got from Joe West. Despite Files's claims about CIA contacts, nothing has ever been found to corroborate them. Shelton did meet Files in 1998. Files will remain in prison until 2016, when he will be 74. Shelton says, "I am 100 percent convinced that Files was there. I'm not sure he made the fatal shot, but you had the best hired killers in the world there to do it."

Even if Files was no more than a fly on the wall, for Shelton he still had a unique vantage point. "You talk to some people in this field, and they think people don't care to know what really happened in Dallas. But I don't find that to be the case when I talk to other FBI agents. They are absolutely in awe of this information. It's almost 50 years after the assassination. Don't you think it's time we finally found out who did it?"