
The Exner File

Truth and fantasy from a president's mistress

BY MICHAEL O'BRIEN

THE DEATH OF JUDITH CAMPBELL Exner on Sept. 24, 1999, reminds us of the enormous impact she had on the reputation of President John Kennedy and on media coverage of the private lives of public figures. Exner had a two-year affair with Kennedy, and because of her gangland connections and Kennedy's CIA connection, their relationship became a public scandal when it was revealed in 1975.

Of all the Kennedy sex scandals, the Exner story may be the one that troubles his admirers most. It is also a tale that remains clouded with uncertainty. Exner changed it several times, amplifying her original confession of an affair into bizarre claims about her role in a conspiracy involving Kennedy and the Mafia. The first accusations were bad enough; the later ones would seriously injure Kennedy's reputation as president, if true. For that reason, it's important to be clear about which of Exner's claims we should believe, and which appear to be fantasy.

The name Judith Campbell Exner burst into the national headlines on December 17, 1975. A month earlier the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (the Church Committee), in its report on CIA assassination attempts, had discreetly stated that a "close friend" of President Kennedy had also been a close friend of mobsters John Roselli and Sam Giancana. After her identity had been leaked to *The Washington Post*, Exner, then 41, called a press conference. Sitting next to her second husband Dan Exner, a golf pro, and hiding behind large sunglasses, she denied any knowledge of underworld activities. Two years later, in her autobiography, *My Story*, Exner recounted her sexual tryst with JFK and her simultaneous relationship with Giancana, plus her friendship with Roselli. That the

president would share the sexual favors of a Mafia don's girlfriend was shocking and frightening.

A short, dour, homely Sicilian, Sam Giancana held court at the Armory Lounge in Forest Park, Illinois, ordering murders and managing his crime empire. An extraordinary criminal, Giancana had allegedly been responsible for more than two hundred murders up to 1960. A leading member of the La Cosa Nostra, the national crime syndicate, Giancana was Chicago's Mafia boss, the successor to Al Capone. His crime network ranged from protection rackets to numbers games, loan sharks to bookmakers. He had served time in prison and been arrested more than 70 times, including three times for murder. Giancana's friend and associate, John Roselli, represented the Chicago mob on the West Coast.

Born Judith Immoor, Exner grew up in Pacific Palisades, California where her father worked as an architect. The family was well off, but when Judith was 14, her mother nearly died in an auto accident. Traumatized, Judith withdrew from high school and was privately tutored. At 18, she married the alcoholic actor William Campbell, but after an unhappy marriage they divorced in 1958. Stunningly beautiful, she resembled actress Elizabeth Taylor and became a regular at Hollywood parties. One evening in 1959 she met singer Frank Sinatra, and they engaged in a brief affair.

Then on the evening of February 7, 1960, Campbell met then-Senator John Kennedy and his entourage at Sinatra's table at the Sands lounge in Las Vegas. After perfunctory introductions, Kennedy conversed with all the women at the table, but focused on Campbell. When he listened to her, she recalled in her autobiography, "it was as if every nerve and muscle in his whole body was poised at attention. As I was to learn, Jack Kennedy was the world's greatest listener." The next day Kennedy invited her for lunch on the patio of Sinatra's suite. Again he seemed to have "an almost insatiable interest in what and who I was." They talked

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for three hours.

After their Las Vegas encounter, Kennedy phoned her constantly, telling her how much he missed her and wondering when they could meet again. "He called almost every day," said Campbell, "no matter where he was, or how tired." They finally rendezvoused on March 7, 1960, at the New York Plaza Hotel, where they had their first sexual encounter. In Florida in late March, Sinatra introduced Campbell to a man named "Sam Flood." It took a while for Campbell to learn that this new friend was actually Sam Giancana. Was it just a coincidence, critics wondered, that within a two month period Sinatra's introductions had sparked Exner's romances with a future president and a notorious criminal? Was Giancana using Exner because she was Kennedy's girlfriend? In her autobiography Exner dampened such speculation. It "never occurred to me that Sam's interest in me was simply because of my association with Jack Kennedy." She added, "Sam never asked me for anything."

On April 6, 1960, Kennedy invited her for dinner at his Georgetown home while Jackie was away. Exner recalled the visit:

"We wandered through various rooms until we came to the master bedroom, which was upstairs at the front of the house. There were twin beds with pale green spreads, very filmy and delicate. He put his arms around me and we sat on one of the beds. We kissed and he was almost immediately amorous. I went to the bathroom to undress, and when I came back into the room, the lights were very low and Jack was already in bed.

'I've missed you so much,' I said, as I went into his arms. We kissed passionately, and he said, with his lips still on mine, 'Do you think you could love me?'

'I'm afraid I could,' I whispered, and it was so true."

On the evening of Monday, July 11, 1960, the opening day of the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, she met him in his hotel suite. Kennedy brought a second woman along and proposed to Exner that they engage in a ménage à trois. Exner was furious and refused.

Nonetheless, throughout the fall of 1961 and the winter and spring of 1962, she continued seeing Kennedy in the White House. Their routine seldom varied. The president's secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, made reservations for her at the Mayflower Hotel. In the evening the White House car drove her to the East Gate, the one tourists used in the daytime. "Either Jack would meet me in the entrance hall near the door or

an aide would escort me to the little elevator and Jack would be waiting in the family quarters." After her arrival about 7:30 p.m., she and the president usually had frozen daiquiris and then dinner.

By late spring 1962, their romance had cooled off. He phoned her infrequently, and she returned his calls less often. "It happened so gradually that I wasn't really aware that it was over until long after it had ended," she said.

True at First

Was it true? By the time Exner wrote her autobiography in 1977, Kennedy, Giancana, and Roselli were all dead. Was she simply telling her story or had she concocted all or most of it in order to sell a book?

Kennedy's advisors Ken O'Donnell and Dave Powers both denied even knowing Exner, then known as Judith Campbell. "The only Campbell I know," Powers told the press in late 1975, "is chunky vegetable soup." But both of them were lying. So was Evelyn Lincoln, who claimed Campbell was merely a campaign volunteer. The dates in the gate logs of Campbell's White House visitations generally coincided with her own recollections. And O'Donnell and Evelyn Lincoln personally authorized some of Exner's visits. During Kennedy's presidency, telephone logs show Exner called Lincoln more than eighty times and there were also calls from Lincoln to Exner. Exner's autobiography convincingly listed fifteen telephone numbers where she had reached both Lincoln and Kennedy from 1960-1962. The evidence she offered—addresses, telephone numbers, descriptions of White House décor—"makes the defensive protestations of the keepers of the Kennedy flame somewhat dubious," said a review in *The New York Times*.

In addition, her claims were limited to the affair. Exner had told the Church Committee that her relationship with Kennedy was only personal and that she had no knowledge of any relationship between Giancana and Kennedy. She made the same denials in her December 1975 press conference and in her autobiography. At her press conference she accused the media of "wild-eyed speculation" for suggesting that she was an intermediary between JFK and Giancana.

Goodfellas

But 11 years after her book was published, Exner began telling another, very different story. In 1988 *People* magazine published an article by Kitty Kelley based on the author's interviews with Exner. "I lied when I said I was not a conduit between President Kennedy and the Mafia," Exner told Kelley. "I lied when I said

that President Kennedy was unaware of my friendships with mobsters. He knew everything about my dealings with Sam Giancana and Johnny Roselli because I was seeing them for him. I wouldn't have been seeing them otherwise."

Why had she lied before the Church Committee, during her 1975 press conference, and in *My Story*? She needed to protect herself, she said. "If I'd told the truth,

When Kennedy supposedly selected Exner as his courier to Giancana, he had known her for only two months—and she had known Giancana for only about two weeks.

I'd have been killed. I kept my secret out of fear." Exner's fear seemed well-founded. Senate investigators were about to call Giancana to testify before the Church Committee when, on the night of June 19, 1975, he was shot seven times in the head in the kitchen of his Oak Park, Illinois residence. The killer was never found, but it was a mafia-style murder. Days later Roselli testified before the Senate committee about the CIA's attempts to kill Castro, including Giancana's role. A year later, Roselli's dead body was found in a 55-gallon oil drum weighted with heavy chains floating in Dumfoundling Bay, near Miami.

Exner claimed that her first assignment as courier was suggested by JFK at the dinner in his Georgetown townhouse on April 6, 1960. That evening had not just focused on dinner and lovemaking, as she had stated in her autobiography. A third person, a lobbyist named Bill, was at the table, and he and Kennedy had spent the entire evening discussing strategy for the upcoming West Virginia primary on May 11.

During the conversation Jack turned to her and said, "Could you quietly arrange a meeting with Sam [Giancana] for me?" Pleased to be of help, Exner called her new friend Giancana the next morning and arranged a rendezvous. "I arrived at 8:30 a.m. on April 8th and talked to Sam at a Chicago club," said Exner. "I told Sam that Jack wanted to meet with him because he needed his help in the campaign." Giancana agreed, and the meeting was set four days later at the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami Beach. "I called Jack to tell him, then I flew to Miami because Kennedy wanted me to be there."

On April 12 Kennedy met with Giancana at the Fontainebleau. "I was not present," Exner said, "but Jack came to my suite afterward, and I asked him how the meeting had gone. He seemed very happy about it and thanked me for making the arrangements." Apparently in gratitude, Kennedy gave her \$2,000 in cash. Kitty Kelley speculated that the April 12 meeting concerned the West Virginia primary.

Even after becoming president, Exner contended, JFK continued to use her as a courier. A few days after the bungled Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, Kennedy called her in California and asked her to fly to Las Vegas, pick up an envelope from Roselli and deliver it to Giancana in Chicago. Then she was to arrange a meeting between the President and the Mafia boss, one that took place in her suite at the

Ambassador East on April 28, 1961.

"It was a short meeting early in the evening," Exner said. "Sam arrived first and then Jack, who put his arms around me and said, 'I'm sorry I can't stay and see you for the evening.'" (He was in town to address a Democratic party dinner.) After the President and Giancana shook hands, JFK asked Exner to stay in the suite while he and Giancana talked.

On April 29, Exner flew to Florida at Kennedy's request, where she met with Giancana and Roselli, picked up another envelope and returned to Washington on May 4th. "We were scheduled to have lunch at the White House on Saturday, May 6," she said, "but [Kennedy] said the envelope couldn't wait, so I took it to him late Friday afternoon." The following day, May 6, she lunched at the White House where Kennedy gave her another envelope for Giancana.

Meanwhile the FBI was hounding Exner and Giancana; she was terrified, but when she told Kennedy, he seemed unconcerned. "Don't worry," he told her. "They won't do anything to you. And don't worry about Sam. You know he works for us." According to Exner "He told me that over and over. 'Don't worry. Sam works for us.'"

For 18 months in 1960 and 1961, Exner claimed she served as the president's link with the Mob. She crisscrossed the nation carrying envelopes between the president and Giancana, and arranged about 10 meetings between the two, one of which, she thought, took place inside the White House. "They were sealed but not taped," Exner said of the plain 9" by 12" manila envelopes. "They weighed about as much as a weekly

magazine and felt as if they contained papers, but I don't know for sure because I never looked inside. It never occurred to me to do something like that. I didn't know what they contained."

Secrets and Lies

In 1997, 20 years after the publication of *My Story*, Exner significantly changed her account again. In separate interviews with journalists Liz Smith (for her article in *Vanity Fair*) and with Seymour Hersh (for his book, *The Dark Side of Camelot*) Exner unveiled new sensational allegations.

On April 6, 1960, at the dinner and lovemaking session at JFK's Georgetown home, JFK not only asked her to deliver an envelope to Giancana, he revealed to her the contents of the envelope. "I want you to know what's in it," Kennedy told her. He opened it and showed her the money, perhaps as much as \$250,000 in hundred-dollar bills. To buttress his story that Exner delivered money to Giancana in Chicago, Hersh produced a witness: Martin Underwood, a former political operative for Mayor Richard Daley, and a Kennedy campaign worker in 1960. According to Hersh, in April 1960 Kenny O'Donnell asked Underwood to take the overnight train from Washington to Chicago and keep an eye on Exner. Underwood claimed he watched her on the train and saw her deliver the envelope to the waiting Sam Giancana.

JFK also revealed to Exner the contents of envelopes she subsequently delivered to Giancana and Roselli. "I knew what [the documents] dealt with. I knew they dealt with the 'elimination' of Castro and that Sam and Johnny had been hired by the CIA. That's what Jack explained to me in the very beginning."

For the first time Exner implicated Robert Kennedy in the CIA-Mafia-Castro story. "I used to be at the White House having lunch or dinner with Jack, and Bobby [Kennedy] would often come by," she told Liz Smith. "He'd squeeze my shoulder solicitously and ask, 'Judy, are you O.K. carrying these messages for us to Chicago? Do you still feel comfortable doing it?'"

Exner also told Hersh that she was a conduit for payoffs to Kennedy from a group of California businessmen desperate for defense contracts. Her close friend Richard Ellwood, a neighbor and vice president of a small electronics company in Culver City, California, introduced her to "two senior Pentagon procurement officials." She began socializing with all of them during her frequent trips to Washington. Eventually, Exner told Hersh, "I took payoffs" from the California businessmen to Kennedy in the White House. "I didn't want to go to Jack" with the payoff

money, she said. But "I asked Jack about it and he thought it was a good idea." She recalled three separate contract proposals for which she brought payoffs into the White House.

"What I want to tell you is my very last secret—an extremely personal one," Exner dramatically told Liz Smith in 1997. The secret was the abortion she had as a result of her last sexual encounter with the President. She was "too ashamed" to tell it earlier. "But now, before I die, I think the Camelot myth should also be demystified, and the Kennedy legend examined for its reality. I don't have a single, solitary thing to hide."

Kennedy, she said, had begged her to come back and talk, to try again. She went to see him one last time in late December 1962. "I said I wouldn't see him anymore; it was too painful. But we were intimate that one last time, in the White House." Shortly afterward she realized she was pregnant. "I hadn't been with anyone but Jack—not ever during the whole time." By her calculations she was "almost two months" pregnant. Because abortion was then illegal, the President said, "Do you think Sam would help us? Would you ask Sam? Would you mind asking?" Giancana agreed to assist her.

The same evening she told Giancana she needed an abortion she was sexually intimate with him. "It was the one time with Sam and it was an emotional response to his loving-kindness and caring for what I was going through. But I would hardly say that that was having a simultaneous affair with two men." Exner claims she had her abortion at Chicago's Grant Hospital, and left the hospital on January 28, 1963.

Fantasy Land

Exner's autobiography had been convincing because her key contentions could be documented with FBI reports, Secret Service logs, White House telephone records, witnesses, and evidence in her own possession. The same is not true for her later revelations. Her supporters, mainly Liz Smith and Seymour Hersh, have tried to bolster her recollections but their evidence is not compelling. The sensational charges—that money and documents were directly exchanged between JFK and Giancana; that Robert Kennedy also colluded with Giancana; that the President welcomed payoffs from California defense contractors; and, finally, that Exner aborted a child conceived by JFK—all rely primarily on Exner's testimony.

Exner's post-1977 observations defy logic. Why would JFK select Exner as his courier to the Mafia? She thought she was the perfect choice because Kennedy didn't trust the CIA. She was the "one person around

him who didn't need anything from him or want anything. He trusted me." But John Kennedy had plenty of aides—and Joe Kennedy plenty of retainers—who could have performed the role of courier far more safely and capably. When Kennedy supposedly selected Exner to be his courier to Giancana, he had known her for only two months, and she had been introduced to "Sam Flood" less than two weeks earlier.

Secret Service agents who candidly testified about the President's womanizing do not confirm any of Exner's contentions about JFK's relations with Giancana. Moreover, Hersh's account of the train ride Campbell took on Kennedy's behalf in April 1960 to deliver money to Giancana has unraveled, because the key witness recanted his original story. Martin Underwood denied that he followed Judith Campbell on the train, and claims he had no knowledge about her alleged role as a courier.

If the FBI "hounded" Exner and Giancana, wouldn't the G-men have trailed or wire-tapped Giancana when he supposedly had all these meetings with Kennedy in Chicago, Florida, and the White House? Finally, why did Exner wait until 1997 to reveal that she had met Robert Kennedy and that he colluded with the President and Giancana? She would not have risked her life by mentioning that fact a decade earlier.

Those who have examined the record carefully claim that Exner's post-1977 stories are impossible to believe. As the historian Garry Wills notes, "Ms. Exner has, like all of us, read about the CIA's attempt to use Giancana to assassinate Castro, so—sure enough—Kennedy relied on her to send messages and documents to Giancana dealing with this explosive matter. What documents? Hersh might have asked himself at this moment."

Evan Thomas, for many years *Newsweek's* Washington bureau chief and author of a forthcoming book on Robert Kennedy, asked why JFK would have used a "none-too-bright girlfriend to handle something so incredibly sensitive as passing bribes to the Mafia? Surely Father Joe taught his sons a few tricks about keeping secrets. Using emotionally fragile lovers as bagmen could not have been one of them. ... It also stretches credulity to suggest that Giancana, the all-powerful don, would have been waiting around on a station platform in Chicago to meet the train."

Even conservative critics, who might have been expected to treat Exner's later revelations more favorably, were unimpressed. After reading Exner's 1977 autobiography, columnist William Safire severely criticized Kennedy. But her subsequent assertions left him cold.

"She's changed her story too often over the decades," Safire concluded.

So why did Exner concoct her story? First, she had a long history of instability, making her an exceptionally unreliable witness. She admitted to lying repeatedly and changed her story several times. She had been addicted to alcohol and amphetamines, suffered from depression and paranoia, seriously contemplated suicide, endured two divorces (one from an alcoholic). She was hounded and harassed by the FBI, feared death at the hands of the Mafia, and was told her cancer was terminal. Her background and problems do not inspire confidence in her veracity.

Moreover, Exner deeply resented critics of *My Story* who portrayed her as a vapid party girl, the mistress of the President and a Mafia don. She referred to it as her "stupid" book. She wasn't a "tramp, a slut," she said. "I was never anybody's kept woman." Probably to counter her image as simply a scarlet woman who sexually serviced two celebrities, she invented a role, concocted fanciful tales, trying to recreate her image into a serious, sympathetic and important person.

She reveled in the drama and intrigue of her post-1977 stories. She was dying of cancer, she dramatically told Kelley, Smith and Hersh. "For that reason, I must now tell the truth." As if she had just tumbled out of a spy novel, she breathlessly explained her techniques for arranging contacts between Kennedy and Giancana. "As a rule I would just call Sam," she said. "I learned to almost speak in a kind of code. I would usually say, 'Have him call the girl from the West.' And if something was happening in Florida, it was, 'Can you meet him in the South?' Sam always knew that 'him' was Jack. I really became very adept. I think that I was having a little bit of fun with this also." The \$50,000 *People* magazine paid Exner in 1988 for telling her amplified story to Kitty Kelley may also have stimulated her imagination.

Historians may never prove or disprove Exner's assertions. Scholarship on the Mafia and on the Presidents' private lives, observes historian Michael Beschloss, "is not subject to the same precision as the study of diplomatic history, for which there are official documents drafted and preserved according to professional standards in public archives." Perhaps evidence will emerge in the future to bolster Exner's recent contentions. Until then, we should assume that the first story regarding the affair was true, because it was supported by White House logs and other evidence; but that her later claims about her role in an alleged Giancana-Roselli-Kennedy triangle, because they are not supported by other sources, are fantasy. ●

"To most American eyes, these look like poverty neighborhoods,
but this is the snapshot view; in the video version

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frames on the way
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A Real Senate Man

A new biography highlights Ted Kennedy's strengths

By Martin F. Nolan

IN 1957, HIS FELLOW SENATORS ASKED JOHN F. Kennedy to chair a committee honoring five of their predecessors whose oval portraits would adorn the President's Room off the Senate floor. After consulting historians and politicians, the author of *Profiles in Courage* chose Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, Robert M. LaFollette Sr., Robert A. Taft Sr., and Daniel Webster.

Few would then have predicted that JFK's youngest brother would someday be a candidate for similar enshrinement. Make room for Teddy? At the time, Edward Moore Kennedy's only public record was on the blotter of the Virginia State Police, who issued speeding tickets to the University of Virginia Law School student. His reputation as a Rabelaisian roustabout lingered until 1992, when he remarried at 60. Yet the man who transformed Chappaquiddick and Palm Beach into campgrounds of dysfunction, if not debauchery, "deserves recognition not just as the leading senator of his time, but as one of the greats in its history," writes Adam Clymer.

The Senate is an intimate, forgiving institution where a colleague's flaws are visible daily and where most members know that being chaste and sober is no guarantee of being honorable or effective. When Republicans controlled Congress and while his own party was drifting rightward, Kennedy never compromised on core issues, like civil rights, while working incrementally for other changes. Millions of Americans are healthier physically and even financially because of Kennedy's efforts on health care and the minimum wage. "A son of privilege, he has always

identified with the poor and the oppressed," Clymer writes.

Edward M. Kennedy: A Biography is a story of the peculiar triumph of starting at the top and overcoming low expectations. The 30-year-old politician elected to the Senate in 1962 was the ninth of nine children. Less cerebral than Jack or Bobby, Teddy relied more on a charm that masked a ferocious tenacity. Often tongue-tied in interviews, Kennedy had a ready answer in 1994 during his

seventh successful campaign for the Senate. Asked to list his greatest strength, he said "Perseverance."

In the Senate's all-time roster of seniority, Kennedy now ranks seventh, still behind those sequoias, Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia. In 1969, after Kennedy was elected majority whip, Majority Leader Mike Mansfield of Montana delivered the ultimate tribute: "Of all the Kennedys, the senator is the only one who was and is a real Senate man." Kennedy lost the whip's job in 1971 to Byrd, an avid historian of the chamber, who said six years later, "Ted Kennedy would have been a leader, an outstanding senator, at any period in the nation's history."

Kennedy's journey from playboyville to the Senate's enduring pantheon is a terrific story, and Adam Clymer is a terrific reporter, as faithful readers of *The New York Times* know. If the prose style of his biography can evoke the heft and pace of the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, that only suggests the astonishing range of Kennedy's legislative interests. Since first elected 37 years ago, he has plunged his thick Irish mitts deep into every topic of public policy, save perhaps the environment: health care, housing, civil rights, criminal justice, labor, education, transporta-

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