

~~SECRET~~APPROVED FOR RELEASE 1993
CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM

SUBJECT: MORT(ON LYON) SAHL

He has been called a comedian, monologist, iconoclast, political satirist and sick comic. His private brand of humor, disparaging of almost anything ranging from women to the so-called "Establishment" with almost nihilistic impartiality, is heavily loaded with savage invective. Yet, though his routines have caused him many enemies, Mort Sahl has risen in the past fifteen years from beatnik clubs to the better supper clubs, radio, television, motion pictures and recordings, with an annual income of over a quarter of a million dollars.



EARLY LIFE Morton Lyon Sahl was born 11 May 1927, at Montreal, Canada, the son of a U.S.-born tobacco shop proprietor and his Canadian-born wife. The father, Harry Sahl, was the son of an immigrant family on New York's Lower East Side. After failing to attain success as a playwright, Harry Sahl relocated to Montreal. Source materials fail to identify his mother other than her origins in Montreal, and she is referred to only in generalities.

When Sahl was about seven years of age, his father returned to the United States to take a position described variously as a clerk for the Department of Justice which required considerable moving about the United States and as an employee of the Federal Bureau of Investigation at Los Angeles. (An informal inquiry on this employment is pending.)

During his high school years, young Sahl is pictured as highly dedicated to American concepts. He won an American Legion Americanism Award and was active in Junior ROTC. In August 1943 he applied for officer status in the Army Air Force. He was rejected as unsuitable for flight status as a result of a physical examination which noted eye muscle imbalance, underweight, 60 per cent nasal obstruction, fainting without adequate cause in 1941, bedwetting up to age eight and emotional instability (not further explained.)

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

In May 1944, Sahl enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserves, and later that year quit high school to enlist in the U.S. Army. When his mother notified authorities of his being underage, he was quickly discharged. (The National Personnel Records Center records an induction into the Army on 22 August 1944 and an honorable discharge on 31 August 1944 as a result of induction error.) Sahl's next effort to enter the military, an attempt to obtain a Congressional appointment to West Point, was a failure.

In June 1945, as Mortimer Sahl, he entered on active duty with the Army Air Corps. His physical and psychiatric examinations were rated as normal. He received Army Air Crew Member badge wings in October 1945 and was assigned the military occupational specialty of Flight Engineer. From February to November 1946 he was assigned to the 93rd Air Depot Group, Elmendorf Field, Anchorage, Alaska. In addition to his regular duties as a crew chief on a portable oxygen generator, he edited the organization's newspaper, Poop from the Group. He was honorably discharged as a Private First Class in January 1947. His file at the National Personnel Records Center records his military rating as "excellent", and indicates no court martials. He did not have a security clearance.

Sahl has described his military service period as one of rebellion. He has boasted of a "record" of 83 consecutive days on K.P. "for attacking the privileges of command." He claims to have been drafted, when in truth he entered on active duty as a reservist. In describing his rebellion to military service, Sahl stated in 1964: "If I had gone to West Point and had been part of the military establishment myself, it would have been OK. But a few months under the heel of authority killed it for me. I could never have been an officer after that." It might be speculated that much of this latter-day resentment toward the military stems from his failures to obtain a commission and his failure to win promotion to the non-commissioned ranks.

Upon his separation from the Army in 1947, Sahl entered Compton Junior College in Compton, California, under the GI Bill. After two years he transferred to the University of California where, in 1951, he received a BS degree in city management and engineering, specializing in city traffic flow. (A confidential source advised that on 22 December 1950, apparently while attending school, Sahl applied for a position with the California Highway Patrol. There is no indication his application was favorably considered.)

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

PROFESSIONAL LIFE Although there are indications Sahl had been contemplating graduate studies, he left school after obtaining his degree and embarked on what has been described as two years of "fairly consistent unemployment." He dabbled in experimental theater and in writing for the so-called "little magazines" on the West Coast. In the fall of 1953 he was booked as a stand-up comedian at San Francisco's "hungry i" ("i" for intellectual), a rendezvous for the college crowd and assorted beatnik elements. His impersonations and routine humor were not particularly successful, but as he added political satire to his routine his popularity increased and brought a generous increase in the club's clientele. His salary rose from an initial \$75 a week to \$5,000 a week.

Describing his mode, Variety magazine stated in 1959:

"Sticking to a tieless shirt and a crew sweater, Sahl comes on like a beatnik, with this big difference: he's got something to say and a funny way of saying it. There is no subject that's safe from the Sahl scrutiny. President Eisenhower, Queen Elizabeth, veepee Nixon, Lewis Straus, Governor Rockefeller and he makes mince meat of them all. It's irreverent, but it's not irresponsible and the forty minutes he's on doesn't seem long enough to cover what's on everybody's mind."

He achieved some success as a guest performer on local and network radio and television programs, including those of Jack Paar, Steve Allen and Eddie Fisher. In 1958 he was selected for an appearance at the 1958 Academy Awards show, and soon netted his own semi-weekly radio program, Nightline. He appeared in a short-lived (13 performance) Broadway show in 1958, appeared in two motion pictures, and made recordings of his monologues. He appeared at the better supper clubs in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami Beach, and Las Vegas and by 1960, according to Time magazine of that year, his night club earnings alone were estimated at \$7,500 a week. In 1964, he announced plans for another Broadway show, but there is no indication this second effort succeeded.

As his success mounted, Sahl reportedly made no secret of his hostility toward other successful comedians who followed him.

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

into the field of "social commentary," including his one-time protege Woody Allen. Though not exclusive in the claim, Sahl claims to have been thrown off the Ed Sullivan television show in December 1965 for refusing to eliminate his comments about the President and Vice President. Stated Sahl, "Sullivan pulled me off and told me not to mention Johnson or Humphrey and to attack Murphy and Reagan. I wouldn't go along and they threw me off the show." As will be noted later, he has twice claimed being "blacklisted" because of his comments.

A recent evaluation of his night club routine notes:

"Sahl's act consists of prepared and ad-lib comment on social and political topics. His usual line is anti-Establishment and anti-Vietnam war. The entertainment value of his performance depends upon how outrageous and exaggerated his comments are and how ridiculous he can make political figures appear."

PERSONAL LIFE Sahl was married in June 1955 to Sue Babior (no further information), but the marriage ended in divorce in 1957. According to a female informant of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, Sahl's wife initiated divorce proceedings after returning home one evening and finding him in bed with another man.

The same police informant advised that Sahl experienced a nervous breakdown in San Francisco in 1956 following the incident which caused his wife to sue for divorce. The same source stated that Sahl recently had another nervous breakdown (dates not indicated) while staying at the Playboy Club, Los Angeles, during appearances in that city. (Overt sources at Los Angeles reflect Sahl's hospitalization in New York City in September 1964 for a "back injury" and a May 1965 hospitalization in Los Angeles for "removal of a growth on his larynx", but no information concerning hospitalization for nervous disorders.)

In 1961, Sahl was charged in a paternity suit by one Patricia Manley, age 35. It was claimed that prior to the suit Sahl and Manley travelled to Europe together and were intimate and that as a result of the relationship a child, Adam Matthew Sahl, was conceived.

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

Information dated 27 October 1964 indicates that Sahl paid \$35,000 settlement for dismissal of the suit. Later an attorney for Sahl in the paternity suit sued him for larger compensation, but the case was decided in favor of Sahl.

In 1962, Norman Granz of Verve Records sued Sahl for money claimed as a result of having served as Sahl's manager. The court found in favor of Sahl.

Sahl reportedly spends much of his time in his Japanese-style home in Beverly Hills, California, where he surrounds himself with such electronic diversions as a closed circuit television system and an eleven-speaker high fidelity sound system. He is reported to be a frequent visitor to West Coast coffee houses. He is indicated to seldom drink or smoke.

POLITICAL LIFE In describing his political beliefs, Sahl once stated: "I run a very elusive course, leaning a bit to the left to correct for drift in the country."

In January 1960, according to press reports of the period, Sahl participated in a television program conducted in England by Kenneth Tynan during which "Angry Americans" expressed their dissatisfaction with the American way of life. Among others appearing with Sahl on the telecast were novelist Norman Mailer, cartoonist Jules Feiffer, poet Alan Ginsberg, Alger Hiss, Norman Thomas, John Kenneth Galbraith, C. Wright Mills and Robert Maynard Hutchins. Commenting on the program, one U.S. magazine noted:

"We trust that our friends across the seas got a good closeup of America's dirty linen. We also hope that they gave a long and thoughtful look at the people who hung it up. It might give them a better idea of what is really wrong with America."

The article described Sahl as a "sick comedian." (Congressional hearings on the Fair Play for Cuba Committee report on this telecast)

In February 1960, Sahl and actor Jeff Chandler provided the entertainment at a Frontier of Freedoms Celebration held in

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

Los Angeles for the announced purpose of honoring Justice William O. Douglas. A confidential source has noted, however, that among the reception committee were Isaac Pacht, more recently of the Committee of Professions for Peace in Vietnam, and Loren Miller, a controversial attorney connected with the American Civil Liberties Union. Sahl was also noted by the confidential source to have attended meetings or served as a sponsor of meetings of the ACLU Committee for a Los Angeles Police Review Board, and to have attended meetings of the Student Civil Liberties Unit of the ACLU of Southern California (dates not given).

That same year, 1960, Sahl received some notoriety when he cut short a planned five-day visit to Moscow. Sahl told the press he had left Moscow after only 48 hours because he didn't like the way he was treated in the Soviet Union. He claimed that "they" were "looking over his shoulder" during the visit and that he had no privacy. He claimed the Soviet press was so anti-American that he "couldn't take it." The visit, he told the press, had been to gather material for future monologues.

In 1961, Sahl's name first appeared as a financial backer and member of the Council of Advisors of radio station KPFK, Los Angeles, an affiliate of the Pacifica Radio chain which California authorities have charged with disseminating Communist-line propaganda.

According to the press, on 23 May 1961, Sahl was awarded a judgment in the amount of \$51,000 against the magazine "Hollywood Closeup". Sahl's suit was based on a statement made in the magazine that Sahl was a "phony liberal and Communist sympathizer."

Sahl's first documented involvement with U.S. major party politics occurred during the Presidential nomination campaign of then-Senator John F. Kennedy. Although he did not ordinarily write his own material, Sahl agreed to write campaign material for the Senator which would tend to counteract the religious issue with humor. At that time, Sahl shared the same agent-manager, John Foreman, with actor Peter Lawford, and was a frequent entertainer without fee at Democratic Party functions, including the gala at the Los Angeles Coliseum the night of Senator Kennedy's acceptance speech.

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

About a year later, he claims, the political machinery turned against him and his career suffered severe setbacks. It began, he stated, when his press agent approached him and said, "I don't like what you are saying about our President." According to the Saturday Evening Post of 19 September 1964 after an interview of Sahl, "The Kennedy people kept telling Mort they didn't understand how he could say such things about 'us'." Sahl claims that he was offered a "seat at the knee of power" in return for eliminating undesired material from his routine. He claims to have refused, with the following result:

"And then the Liberal community in Hollywood--my employers in television and pictures, the bookers--they're almost all registered Democrats, they're all Jewish and they think they're Liberals, they started practicing the black list on me... Look at the irony...I helped them into office. A year after they went into office we were on the brink of war, which I could have blown up in, namely Cuba; and I couldn't get a job. And it came under the Liberals, people who call themselves Liberals."

His claimed \$400,000 annual income shrank to \$19,000 by 1964. His fatalistic moral to the claimed grievance: "It's better to remain outside. I camp alone."

He has continued to carry his grievance against the Democratic Party. While claiming to be against the Republican Party "for what they are," he accuses the Democrats "for what they aren't." "The Democrats are the worst," he stated. "They know they'll always keep leaning farther and farther to the right to accommodate the party. They have no conscience, no sense of history, no candidate, no program, no future." The "Liberal blacklist" ended, he stated, after President Johnson assumed office. The same "Liberals", he stated, "distrust" President Johnson. "He speaks a dialect--he has an accent, he has no style, he didn't go to Harvard, he has cuffs on his pants." As a result of this "distrust" of the President, his former blacklists now offer him regular employment, according to Sahl.

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

In August 1966, West Coast law enforcement agencies learned that Sahl was reportedly a member of an organization known as "TRUTH" which was described as "basically a pacifist group composed of rich movie, television and community leaders and Communists." The group reportedly was sympathetic to the civil rights movement and "other oppressed individuals." Members, according to the police report, sell and use narcotics, believe in free love, and support the theory that those who desire to work should take care of those who do not. (It should be noted that the foregoing description of "TRUTH" is that furnished by police authorities.)

An informed West Coast police source recently advised that Sahl claims to hate all law enforcement personnel, particularly the FBI and CIA. According to the source, Sahl has participated with members of the Communist Party and Communist sympathizers in protesting against the activities of the U. S. Government. The same source indicates that Sahl had participated in meetings (not further described) in which Communist Party members held an interest. In April 1967, a police report named Sahl in connection with the Peace Action Council which actively participated in the demonstration against President Johnson at the Century Plaza Hotel.

Since his latest political adventures appear to stem from his interest and involvement with the investigation being conducted by New Orleans District Attorney James Garrison, it is compartmented in the following section of this report.

SAHL'S GARRISON STAGE The occasion of Sahl's entry into the ranks of those who attribute the assassination of President Kennedy to agents of the FBI, the CIA, or both, is not known. However, in December 1966, when fired by television station KTTV, Sahl blamed the dismissal on his continued discussion of the Kennedy assassination. A "Committee to Reinstate Mort Sahl" was formed and received the support of both his fans and the radical left. He was subsequently rehired, only to be dismissed a second time.

Police information dated 26 September 1966 quotes Sahl as again complaining of a blacklisting. He stated that he was running the risk of being called paranoid when he talked of a conspiracy to keep him from being employed. He claimed that the blacklisting was working and that he worked only twelve weeks in 1965. At the same

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

time he referred to Paul Newman, Frank Sinatra and Steve Allen as "former buddies," with the possible implication they were involved in the blacklisting.

In January 1967, in a published interview in the New Left Los Angeles Free Press, Sahl again repeated his theories on the Kennedy assassination, but restricted his name-calling to the charge that "Christians In Action" were responsible for the slaying.

Probably related to his continuing charges about the assassination was Sahl's formation of a committee known as "UPRISING" in June 1967. According to police sources, the meaning and purpose of the new organization were not clear. However, on one occasion (not detailed) Sahl appeared with Mark Lane and Lorry Sherman in connection with the work of the aforementioned committee. Mark Lane, known to be a leftist and sexual deviate, has been a self-appointed defense attorney for Lee Harvey Oswald and a leading advocate of the "conspiracy" theory which claims to clear Oswald of the Kennedy assassination and shifts responsibility to agents of the CIA, the FBI, or both. Sherman was described only as a former candidate for Congress. During the discussion, Sahl claimed that he was "in trouble" because of his views and Sherman charged that the much-publicized flag burnings during New York City "peace" demonstrations were "caused by CIA agents." (It might be noted that in a recent interview, Sahl stated that Mark Lane has encouraged and assisted Sahl in the writing of a book.)

In May 1967, Sahl, described by Garrison as a close friend, joined Garrison and New Orleans police superintendent Joseph I. Giarrusso, in meeting with "Truth or Consequences, Inc.," at New Orleans. The group reportedly is comprised of some fifty local businessmen who have contributed money to Garrison for his investigation.

Sahl made several other appearances on radio and television during this period during which he utilized his appearance to publicize Garrison's theories. In November 1967, the Chicago Daily News quoted Sahl as suggesting that some of the newsmen ridiculing Garrison and Sahl's conspiracy theories were in the pay of the CIA.

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

He is noted to have openly charged the CIA with the death of President Kennedy during a four-hour interview on radio station KPFK (Pacifica Radio, mentioned earlier) on 14 January 1968. During that interview he mentioned having discussions with Garrison and echoed many of Garrison's statements charging CIA agents with the death of President Kennedy. "This undercover thing of doing what you want to and countermanding orders of the President, and writing blank checks, and not being checked by the Congress, spawns a government-by-hoodlum," he stated.

During a radio interview of 1 March 1968, Sahl again repeated his charges against the Agency and specifically accused a small group of men in the Agency of wanting President Kennedy "out of the way." The radio interviewer noted that Sahl was also stating these opinions of the assassination during his night club act. The same month, Sahl participated in a fund-raising marathon by and on behalf of radio station KPFK (Pacifica Radio) during which he presented a lengthy discourse on the "conspiracy" behind the Kennedy assassination.

More recently, on the Dick Cavett Show of 17 June 1968, the Barry Gray Show of 30 June 1968 and the Merv Griffin Show of 8 July 1968, Sahl used the occasion of a guest appearance to repeat his many charges, including an allegation that Lee Harvey Oswald worked for both the FBI and CIA. As an "accredited investigator" for Garrison, Sahl stated, he had spent four months working on the case in New Orleans. On one of the programs he claimed to have found parallels in the assassinations of Martin Luther King and the Kennedy brothers and speculated that Senator Eugene McCarthy may be the next target. He implied that his own life was in danger because of his outspoken views on the case.

A report received 26 July 1968 from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office indicates that Sahl apparently is as deeply involved in the Garrison investigation as he has claimed. According to that source, Sahl and Mark Lane are serving as investigators for Garrison and are closely associated with former FBI agent William Turner of Ramparts magazine. According to the police sources, Sahl and Mark Lane recently (on an unindicated date) attended a meeting of Garrison's investigators which was held at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Santa Barbara, California. (The local

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

police contend that the Center is a Communist-front organization.) Also involved in the meeting, according to police sources, was a third member of Garrison's investigative team, Gerald Patrick Hemming. Hemming, the police indicate, is not publicly known as a member of the investigating team, and has a reputation with the police, of being a "snitch" (low level paid informer.) The same police source advised that Hemming was allegedly with Castro in Cuba and later, as "Captain Patrick" participated in the training of anti-Castro guerrillas in Florida. The police also note that Hemming is a close associate of one Lloyd Pullen, who was a local leader of an organization known as "STAFF" which served as a front-organization for the militant "Minutemen." (The activities of Hemming are being followed closely by this office because of Garrison's efforts to link the activities of Hemming's anti-Castro organization, "INTERPEN" with the Agency. The Agency is indicated to have had no association with that organization and its association with Hemming was limited to DCS contacts with him at Los Angeles which resulted in fifteen information reports. The FBI is aware of the latter.)

Sahl may be expected to continue his involvement in the Garrison investigation and charges. His motivation is not clear. However, perhaps the most revealing assessment of Sahl was given by him during a highly sympathetic interview on the Barry Gray Show. He said, in part: "You see, I've come to a point where I may be paranoid..."

~~SECRET~~