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Murder case comes due for ex-FBI star



John J. Connolly Jr., 68, once a star agent in the FBI's Boston office, is accused of warning gangsters James "Whitey" Bulger and Stephen "The Rifleman" Flemmi, longtime FBI informants, that John B. Callahan (left) might tell the FBI they were involved in the murder of an Oklahoma businessman in 1981. Prosecutors allege that Connolly knew the tip would lead to Callahan's death.

By Shelley Murphy
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The night before he was murdered in the summer of 1982, Boston business consultant John B. Callahan called his wife to say he wouldn't be home because he was on his way to Washington, D.C.

He didn't say why, but Mary J. Callahan said she is convinced her husband planned to expose the orchestration of a Tulsa businessman's murder by gangsters James "Whitey" Bulger and Stephen "The Rifleman" Flemmi, with the help of FBI agent John J. Connolly Jr.

"That's the last time I ever talked to my husband," said Mary Callahan, who was already battling multiple sclerosis before she was widowed, then was left struggling to support two teenage children.

Her 45-year-old husband's bullet-riddled body was found Aug. 3, 1982, in a parking lot at Miami International Airport, stuffed in the trunk of a Cadillac he had given his wife as a birthday gift.

Today, the 68-year-old Connolly - once a star in the FBI's Boston office, now serving 10 years for federal racketeering - will face a trial in Miami on state murder charges that could keep him in prison for life. He is accused of warning Bulger and Flemmi, longtime informants, that

Callahan might tell the FBI they were involved in the businessman's murder. Prosecutors allege that Connolly knew the tip would lead to Callahan's death.

"It's a difficult case because we are prosecuting an ex-FBI agent for a murder that took place in Florida while he was in Massachusetts," said Miami-Dade Assistant State Attorney Michael Von Zamft. "And we're prosecuting him for his actions, his words, and his deeds without him being the shooter. That's unique."

Even though a hit man has admitted being the triggerman, 68-year-old Mary Callahan, of Burlington, said she holds Connolly responsible for allegedly leaking information that made her husband a marked man.

"I found my Judas," she said. "He was threatened because John would have ruined him."

Connolly retired from the FBI in 1990 after 22 years with the agency. Convicted in 2002 on the racketeering charges, he has been in solitary confinement in a Miami jail since his May 2005 indictment on charges of first-degree murder, which carries a life sentence, and conspiracy to commit murder, which carries up to 30 years in prison.

He proclaims his innocence but is "getting nervous" about the trial because "his life is at stake," said his Miami lawyer, Manuel L. Casabielle.

"John was not this rogue agent he was made out to be," Casabielle said. "I firmly believe he is an innocent man."

Jury selection begins today in the trial, which could take two months. Prosecutors have about 30 witnesses, and the defense says it may call even more.

The state's key witnesses include: Flemmi, 74, who is serving a life sentence for 10 murders; John Martorano, a 67-year-old former hitman who served 12 years in prison for killing 20 people and is now free; Kevin J. Weeks, 52, a gangster-turned-author who admitted assisting Bulger in five murders; and former FBI supervisor John Morris, 63, who admitted pocketing \$7,000 in bribes from Bulger and Flemmi and received immunity from prosecution.

"I don't think it's going to play well for the government," Casabielle said. "There's a moral vacuum in someone that commits that many murders and doesn't blink."

Noticeably absent is Bulger, 79, one of the FBI's 10 Most Wanted, who fled Boston before his 1995 federal racketeering indictment and was later charged with 19 murders. A jury determined that it was Connolly who warned Bulger to flee before his indictment. Last week, the FBI boosted the reward for Bulger's capture to \$2 million.

"There is this missing link in the evidence and that is Bulger," said Casabielle. Without him, the lawyer said, there is no one to corroborate Flemmi's assertion that Connolly's tip instigated Callahan's slaying.

Connolly, who grew up in the same South Boston housing project as Bulger, recruited the gangster as an informant in 1975. He won commendations from the FBI for getting Bulger and Flemmi to provide information about their rivals in the Mafia that helped decimate the New England family.

The 1997 revelation that Bulger and Flemmi were informants who were protected from prosecution for years triggered lengthy court hearings, a congressional investigation, an overhaul of the FBI's informant guidelines, civil suits, and criminal prosecutions.

It also prompted some of Flemmi and Bulger's Winter Hill Gang cohorts to turn on them, cut their own deals, and reveal evidence of murder and corruption - leading to Connolly's conviction on federal racketeering and obstruction of justice charges. He will finish his 10-year sentence in that case in June 2011.

In 2003, a year after Connolly's conviction, Flemmi pleaded guilty to killing 10 people, including Callahan, and began cooperating with the government under a deal that spared him the death penalty.

Testifying at a civil trial two years ago, Flemmi said Connolly routinely warned him and Bulger about potential witnesses against them, prompting them to kill Callahan, as well as two FBI informants, one in 1976 and the other in 1982.

Callahan, who grew up in Medford and graduated from Malden Catholic High School, was a brilliant businessman who loved Irish music, Boston, his children, and transforming troubled companies into money-makers, according to his wife. He served as a cryptologist in the Air Force, learned Chinese at Yale University, was a certified public accountant, earned a business degree at Boston College after attending night school for years, and worked at some of Boston's largest accounting firms and banks.

"He wasn't a gangster," said Mary Callahan, insisting that her husband began fraternizing with Winter Hill Gang members only in 1974, when he became president of World Jai Alai, a sports betting operation with frontons in Florida and Connecticut, and wanted to get to know the players.

"Anybody who knew him or worked with him knew that he was fair-minded and he did the right thing," said Callahan.

Her husband wasn't friends with Bulger, she said, recounting that a friend told her "the only time they saw John unhappy was when Whitey walked into a bar and John froze" because he didn't like him.

She said that after restructuring World Jai Alai and making it lucrative, her husband left the company in 1976, and later arranged its sale to Roger Wheeler, a Tulsa millionaire and chairman of Telex Corp.

Martorano has testified in prior proceedings that Callahan recruited him to kill Wheeler in 1981 because the Oklahoma businessman refused to sell World Jai Alai to Callahan and suspected the Winter Hill Gang was skimming from the company. Martorano said Callahan paid him \$50,000 after the hit man killed Wheeler in 1981.

Mary Callahan said she does not believe her husband was involved in Wheeler's slaying, because he was angry when he learned of the murder.

A year later, according to Flemmi, Connolly warned him and Bulger that one of their associates, Edward "Brian" Halloran, had turned FBI informant and implicated them and Callahan in Wheeler's slaying. Bulger is accused of killing Halloran, and a man who was giving him a ride, in Boston on May 11, 1982.

Soon after, Flemmi alleges, Connolly told him and Bulger that FBI agents were looking for Callahan and he feared he would be "a weak link" and cooperate.

Testifying at Connolly's racketeering trial, Martorano said Bulger and Flemmi warned him that "we're all going to go to jail for the rest of our life if something doesn't happen to John Callahan, because the FBI is going to put so much pressure on him he's just going to fold. There is no way he's going to hold up."

Martorano testified he lured Callahan to Florida and shot him.

For years, Mary Callahan said, she and her children - Kathleen and Patrick, who were 17 and 14 when they lost their father - were haunted by the questions of who killed John Callahan and why.

She said the Florida trial is "going to give us a little closure because we're going to know that maybe we'll get some justice." ■

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