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Aaron Kohn Attacks Corruption in New Orleans: An Intersection of Media and Politics, 1953-1955

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Aaron Kohn Attacks Corruption in New Orleans: An Intersection of Media and Politics,
1953-1955

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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in
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Public History

by

Kyle Willshire

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Dedication

For my father, Michael C. Willshire.

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Abstract

Aaron Kohn's career as a driven professional crime fighter with the Special Citizens Investigative Committee, and later the Metropolitan Crime Commission, began after the Kefauver Hearings on organized crime, one of the first Senate investigative committee hearings broadcast on the evolving medium of television, gripped the American public in 1950. Sen. Estes Kefauver's committee visited cities across America, including New Orleans. The hearings' popularity revealed public thirst for coverage of sensational topics like organized crime, and established how Kohn would soon approach the SCIC job: with force and bombast, featuring flair and sometimes bended truth. Aaron Kohn combined Kefauver's crusading spirit and media savvy and attempted to apply it to his own long career as a citizen crime fighter in New Orleans, but he met limited success taking on a corrupt establishment in a career that could ultimately be deemed a failure.

New Orleans, Louisiana, corruption, organized crime, Estes Kefauver, media, crime commission, DeLesseps S. Morrison, 1950s

Introduction

On an evening in September of 1953, a New Orleans police officer of whom disturbing and brutal allegations had been leveled against him by the public, called WDSU-TV's news director, Pat Michaels.¹ Sgt. Edward Touzet asked if he could come to the WDSU station and have a chat with Michaels. Unfamiliar with Touzet, Michaels agreed to the meeting.

According to Michaels, Sgt. Touzet warned Michaels to stay out of his (Touzet's) business and away from a certain building in the French Quarter where the police were investigating a supposed narcotics ring. Michaels denied any knowledge of the investigation. He mentioned that a WDSU employee lived in the building and that might be the source of Touzet's confusion. At that point, Michaels alleged Sgt. Touzet pulled a gun on Michaels, pointed out how new and shiny the gun was, and mentioned it would be a shame if he had to dirty it. Three other police officers then arrived in the room and continued the intimidation. Michaels, anticipating possible trouble, had previously called a friend of his, Jack Richter, to come to the television studio and observe but remain hidden during the planned meeting. Michaels had also called Marcell LeGrange, WDSU's police officer, to be on hand and out of sight also.²

¹ MCC, Digest of Files, 3 Feb. 1954, folder Politics and Police, box 7, Records of the New Orleans Metropolitan Crime Commission, JFK Assassination Records, National Archives, (College Park, MD.) A high school dropout, Touzet joined the NOPD in 1944. Despite his violent reputation, he only had one blemish on his official personnel record when he was suspended for thirty days without pay for neglect of duty. Touzet failed to call an ambulance for an unconscious person in the street. Touzet's relatively clean personnel file did not reflect his true nature. According to a Sgt. Simoneuax, Touzet allegedly killed two or three people in the line of duty, but he had not been disciplined for any of the incidents so they did not appear in his file. According to the SCIC records of newspaper stories, there were four "time[s] Touzet figured in the news by shooting negros." Three of Touzet's four reported shootings followed a similar pattern: He would only fire after the other person pulled a knife. The fourth shooting was of a man 60 feet away who was attempting to flee. Aaron Kohn personally noted in the Touzet file: "(Sergeant Touzet has the reputation of being kill-crazy. -AMK)."

² Ibid.

Later that evening, a distraught Michaels met with Aaron M. Kohn, the chief investigator of the Special Citizens Investigative Committee (SCIC). The SCIC was a committee designed to root out political and police corruption that had been established by the New Orleans city government in 1953 and Aaron Kohn was the committee's chief investigator. Kohn agreed to investigate Michaels's claims against Touzet as part of Kohn's ongoing investigation into police corruption. During Kohn's brief time in New Orleans, Kohn and Michaels had quickly developed a working relationship which would lead to Kohn's informal partnership with WDSU-TV. The police department was quick to resist Kohn and the SCIC, and Touzet's message to Michaels could easily have also been meant for Kohn. If having a determined investigator like Kohn on its tail was bad enough for the NOPD, a blooming relationship between Kohn and the New Orleans media, especially television, was most unwelcome.

After a short internal investigation in which the police neglected to question multiple people who reported being present, the New Orleans Police Department cleared Touzet of all wrongdoing in the incident, claiming that the investigation came down to the sole statements of Michaels, who was deemed unreliable.³

Predictably, the SCIC investigation found the statements of Michaels, Richter, LaGrange, and others to be reliable. The evidence gathered by the SCIC and the press coverage in the local papers made the issue impossible for the city establishment to ignore. A grand jury was convened in the case and turned up evidence of police brutality. Touzet was indicted on a perjury

³ Ibid.

charge in another case after Cuban emigrant Shobain Rodriguir testified Touzet had beaten him.⁴ (After years of legal wrangling, the perjury charge was dismissed in January of 1957.⁵)

Sgt. Touzet's menacing visit is emblematic of an era and culture of public corruption that ranged from Mayor DeLesseps Morrison's administration (1946-1961) to the lower rungs of the New Orleans Police Department. This was the city that Aaron Kohn entered assigned with the task of exposing and eliminating corruption. One of Kohn's greatest strengths was he understood the potential of the media to help complete a fruitful and successful corruption investigation, and he attempted to utilize this potential during his time with the SCIC and throughout the rest of his career with the citizen watch dog group, the New Orleans Metropolitan Crime Commission (MCC.)

The 1950s saw one of the best organized attempts by New Orleans civic leaders to clean up political and police corruption, yet scholarship on this era is thin compared to other decades such as the 1960s (which saw the JFK assassination and New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's pursuit of a conviction in the case.) This study seeks to help rectify this void by focusing on one of the key players during what may have been the best funded and most robust effort to expose and eradicate corruption within New Orleans politics and the police department. Armed with a \$50,000 budget and recruited by three civic-minded businessmen, Aaron Kohn entered New Orleans as a former FBI agent whose attempts to clean up the Chicago Police Department had led to his hiring by the SCIC for the same work in New Orleans. Kohn's story in New Orleans is not one of success, but one of determination and small victories against long odds before ending in overall failure. Perhaps the lack of tangible results from his lifetime efforts is one of the reasons Kohn, a crucial figure during this time in New Orleans history, has been

⁴ *The Times-Picayune*, "Two Cops Face Perjury Count," 9 Oct. 1953, 1.

⁵ *The Times-Picayune*, "Touzet Cleared as State Abandons Perjury Count," 16 Jan. 1957, 33.

relegated to the margins. For all of his efforts, Aaron Kohn made little difference. Official corruption remained. Sixty years later, this is reflected in New Orleans' continuing struggle against crime and official corruption, illustrated by a police department that in 2013 operates under federal oversight.

Historiography

No biography exists on Kohn the citizen crime fighter, and secondary source mentions are scarce. Kohn is often treated tangentially in the works in which he does appear, but his importance is often noted. Edward Haas's *DeLesseps S. Morrison and the Image of Reform*, which focuses on the mayor whose career began with the promise of reforming city politics, offers one of the more comprehensive examinations of Kohn's early career in New Orleans. Haas does a thorough job establishing Aaron Kohn's pivotal role in the hearings during the police scandals connected to Morrison.

Destroying organized crime became Kohn's great passion, and he sometimes shows up in "true crime" books, for popular readers. Such books lack scholarship, but Kohn is also included in trade books focused on the assassination of John F. Kennedy and alleged connections with organized crime in New Orleans. Most of the time he is given little more than a mention, but when Kohn is mentioned, his battles with Carlos Marcello are often the focal point. John H. Davis's *Mafia Kingfish: Carlos Marcello and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy* covers in detail many of the efforts of Kohn to take down Marcello. As with Haas's book, though, Kohn is not the focus and therefore is not subject to scrutiny. A greater in-depth study of Aaron Kohn's life and career is overdue.⁶

⁶ John H. Davis, *Mafia Kingfish Carlos Marcello and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1989).

Aaron Kohn took his media strategy from Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver, who ran the nationally televised Kefauver Hearings on organized crime in 1950-51. Two important biographies have been written on Kefauver. Joseph Bruce Gorman's *Kefauver: A Political Biography*, and Charles L. Fortany's, *Estes Kefauver: A Biography*, are rather similar, but Gorman focuses on Kefauver's political career over his personal life, while Fortany gives a more complete biography, spending ample time on Kefauver's childhood in Madisonville, Tennessee. Both biographers do excellent jobs examining the televised hearings and their popularity with, and effect on, the American public. According to Gorman, "In Kefauver's view, one of the major accomplishments of the investigation was the encouragement it provided to local law enforcement supporters to correct conditions in their communities. More than seventy local crime commissions were established..."⁷ Aaron Kohn's career exemplified how Kefauver's national model of using the media to expose crime and corruption could be applied at the local level and deserves closer examination.

Psychologists were fascinated by the effect of the Kefauver Hearings on the general public. In 1952, Dr. G.D. Wiebe analyzed New York City residents' reaction to the hearings and published the results in *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Wiebe polled 260 New York City residents, and came to the conclusion that while most people understood organized crime to be a nationwide problem, very few were able to act on this knowledge in a constructive manner. Wiebe coined this reaction "social impotence," and defined it as "when many individuals who belong to a single group share both a feeling of protest regarding leadership behavior and an overriding conviction that the problem will not be solved."⁸

⁷ Joseph Bruce Gorman, *Kefauver: A Political Biography*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 186.

⁸ G.D. Wiebe, "Responses to the Televised Kefauver Hearings: Some Social Psychological Implications," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol 16, no. 2, (July 1, 1952), 196. Wiebe admittedly did not have the most diverse sample.

Media historian David C. Clark's 1997 book, *The Cinematic City*, covers how the Kefauver Hearings inspired the production of many crime genre films and television programs during the 1950s. Harry Lisby covers the topic more in-depth in his 1985 article "Early Television on Public Watch: Kefauver and His Crime Investigation," in *Journalism Quarterly*. Jeanine Derr's 1986 article, "The Biggest Show on Earth" in *The Maryland Historian*, argues that the Kefauver Hearings gave the new medium of television a practical reason for existing beyond entertainment. Examining the work of media historians on the Kefauver Hearings validates the importance of the hearings being broadcast on television and gives a national context to Aaron Kohn's local work. Aaron Kohn hoped to follow in Kefauver's footsteps by using the media to reach a public whose obsession with crime and corruption was displayed during the Kefauver Hearings.

The Kefauver Hearings

Background of the Birth of the Investigating Committees

On New Year's Day in 1950, "Robert E. Dunn, a wealthy contractor-engineer from Nashville, walked into a French Quarter bar and never came out alive."⁹ Dunn was well known in the Nashville business and political communities. He was in New Orleans celebrating the Sugar Bowl and New Year's when he and his companion, Sgt. T. G. Fite of the Tennessee Highway Patrol, ducked into the Latin Quarter Bar at 427 Bourbon Street for a drink. After multiple drinks, Dunn lost consciousness and was taken to the back of the club where he was

His main respondents were white males. He considered them to have the most social agency, thus they are what he refers to as a single group.

⁹ Edward F. Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison and the Image of Reform*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 181.

robbed and later died. His death was first ruled a heart attack, but after a thorough autopsy and toxicology tests the cause of death was later ruled a homicide by poisoning. Chloral hydrate, commonly referred to as “knock-out drops” or “Mickey Finns,” was found in Dunn's system and deemed to be the fatal substance in his drink. Sgt. Fite, Dunn’s companion, was also drugged but woke up and left the bar at 4:30 a.m. not knowing Dunn’s whereabouts. The bar’s maid found Dunn’s lifeless body at 5 a.m.¹⁰ Carlo Quartararo, the owner of the bar, and Lucielle Cotta, a waitress, were charged with Dunn's death but were later acquitted of first degree murder. According to *The Times-Picayune*, “The defense contended that the evidence was 'circumstantial' and succeeded in discrediting the testimony of a Tennessee chemist who analyzed the chloral hydrate.”¹¹

Dunn’s death set off a firestorm of criticism aimed at city authorities for allowing crime in the French Quarter to carry on unabated. The dead Nashville contractor had been a famous college football player for Vanderbilt University during his youth. Numerous token gestures were made to the public by Mayor Morrison and Police Superintendent Joseph Scheuering to ease public outrage. Scheuering transferred some problem officers to other districts, while Morrison spearheaded the formation of the French Quarter Crime Commission, a citizen’s committee that had limited success proposing legislation. Almost nothing changed. According to Haas, “the police made token arrests. If they raided a bawdyhouse that sheltered twelve girls, they arrested two and moved on to another establishment.”¹² It was in this environment of rampant crime and

¹⁰ *The Times Picayune*, “Death Cabaret Seized by Feds,” 25 Mar. 1950, 1; *The Times-Picayune*, “Carlo’s Bribery Attempt Told,” 30 Nov. 1950, 5.

¹¹ *The Times-Picayune*, “Quartararo Dies of Heart Attack,” 1 April 1954, 3.

¹² Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison*, 183.

feigned official action that Senator Estes Kefauver arrived in New Orleans and big cities across America.

The Kefauver Hearings and Their Aftermath

In 1950, Democratic Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee became a celebrity to millions of Americans when he headed the Senate Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce. Broadcast on network television, the traveling inquisition focused its efforts on outing and humiliating public officials and criminals engaged in organized crime. The Kefauver Hearings were an instant public sensation, and according to psychologist G.D. Wiebe, “in New York City...[t]he routine life of the city was substantially altered as people interrupted normal pursuits to sit and watch the parade of local corruption and bribery that was unfolded on their television screen.”¹³ Preceding the McCarthy Hearings by four years, the Kefauver Hearings were one of the first series of government hearings to be shown on the rapidly evolving medium of television. In 1950, Kefauver rocketed to the national consciousness with the Kefauver Hearings, where he charged that La Cosa Nostra ran a nationwide organized crime racket. Attempting to ride his wave of popularity, Kefauver twice failed to win the nomination for Vice President. Swept up in the fervor over the new national menace of organized crime, the American general public's reaction to the Kefauver Hearings led the way to the subsequent mania surrounding the McCarthy Hearings and their reckless accusations.

A politician with progressive tendencies, Kefauver had concluded that a massive organized crime operation was at work in the United States, and that this organization was

¹³ Wiebe, “Responses to the Televised Kefauver Hearings,” 180.

funded by and subservient to Sicilian crime families; he believed it was his responsibility to expose these hidden criminal elements as the first step towards ultimately prosecuting them.¹⁴

The most effective way to bring his crusade to the forefront of public consciousness, he believed, was to travel the United States and hold a series of investigative hearings on organized crime that could be locally and nationally televised. It was not Kefauver's initial intention to have the proceedings broadcast on live television, but this changed once he arrived in New Orleans and local NBC affiliate WDSU approached him. Before the committee hearings were broadcast live in New Orleans the summer of 1951, only newsreel footage of closed testimony had been shown on local stations across the country.¹⁵ Live television images provided a visual context to the hearings that the more established technology of radio could not offer, and moving images captured the public's imagination in ways static photos in newspapers did not. With television, Kefauver found the perfect medium to carry his message. Kefauver had fought hard to have his committee approved in the senate, where according to John H. Davis, it had faced "almost overwhelming opposition."¹⁶ Once the deciding vote in favor of the committee had

¹⁴ Senator Carey Estes Kefauver (1903-1963) (D. Tenn.) was a congressman, senator, and vice-presidential candidate from Madisonville, Tennessee. A six-foot-four successful college athlete, Kefauver was physically and charismatically gifted. Historian Charles L. Fortany's *Estes Kefauver: A Biography*, treats Kefauver's early life in great detail. An avid reader, Kefauver would sometimes skip school to listen to lawyers argue cases in the Madisonville courthouse. Kefauver would become politically active at an early age. According to Fortany, during his freshman year at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, Kefauver "won his post on the Student Council by a margin of fifty votes in a four-way campaign." Politics would soon become Kefauver's professional life. In his *Kefauver: A Political Biography*, historian Joseph Bruce Gorman writes: "Supreme self-confidence- indeed a generous measure of self-riotousness- is the prop of any political maverick, and Kefauver was no exception to the rule." Kefauver was considered a moderate on civil rights and a liberal on "civil liberties, foreign policy, and economic matters." He died in 1963 after giving a speech on the floor of the Senate.

Charles L. Fortany, *Estes Kefauver: A Biography*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 31.

Gorman, *Kefauver: A Political Biography*, 3, 331.

¹⁵ Michael D. Murray, *The Encyclopedia of Television News*. (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999), 116.

¹⁶ Davis, *Mafta Kingfish*, 69.

been cast by Kefauver supporter and Vice President Alben Barkley, Kefauver began his efforts to expose organized crime in earnest.

In New Orleans, principal among the people called to testify was purported crime boss Carlos Marcello. Despite Marcello's criminal connections being well known in New Orleans, Roy Godson points out, "there is no evidence that Marcello had direct connections with his political sponsors and partners. He utilized third-party intermediaries who would function as 'go betweens.'"¹⁷ If Kefauver and the rest of America hoped for tales of gangland bloodshed and midnight back-alley French Quarter deals, they must have been sorely disappointed by the time Marcello ended his testimony, which consisted of him repeatedly invoking his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination. In all, Marcello answered one inconsequential question during an entire day's worth of testimony. If anything, Marcello's constant refusal to answer the Senator's questions further entrenched his reputation as the head of Louisiana's organized crime syndicate. Kefauver was determined to punish Marcello for his constant stonewalling, but the contempt of Congress charge he filed against Marcello was overturned by an appeals court and Marcello escaped six months in prison.¹⁸

Public Reaction to the Hearings

The public voraciously seized upon the idea of a nationally organized criminal syndicate with its tentacles wrapped around all levels of American society, and as a result the Kefauver Hearings were an instant national hit. These hearings promised to reveal to the public the secret world of a national organized crime syndicate that had been denied for so long by public officials

¹⁷ Roy Godson, *Menace to Society: Political-Criminal Collaboration Around the World*, (Transaction Publishers, 2003), 115.

¹⁸ Davis, *Mafia Kingfish*, 70.

such as J. Edgar Hoover.¹⁹ As Weibe observed, “the televised Kefauver Hearings were a new phenomenon in American life...The content of the Hearings combined the zest of a scandal sheet with the high purpose of righteous reform.”²⁰

Hoping to arouse public consciousness and action against organized crime by televising the hearings, Kefauver was working within a combination of the media theories known as the “effect model” and the “uses and gratification model,” which focus on what the media “does” to people and what people “do” with the media, respectively.²¹ Kefauver’s use of television and its effects on people and the result of those effects have been analyzed by numerous media historians. Historians David B. Clarke and Gregory C. Lisby both agree that one of the effects the hearings had on the public was “an increase in the number of crime movies and televised crime dramas.”²² Clark’s book, *The Cinematic City*, specifically shows how the Kefauver Hearings inspired numerous movies. According to Clark,

A number of other films produced in the early and mid-1950s refer directly to the Kefauver Hearings or the investigations undertaken in their wake. These include *The Phenix City Story*, *Portland Exposé*, and *Kansas City Confidential*. Other films –*New*

¹⁹ Athan G. Theoharris, *The FBI: A Comprehensive Reference Guide*, (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1999), 121.

Hoover did not deny that organized crime existed, but until the Kefauver Hearings denied that there was a nationally organized syndicate. “Organized crime was a local problem, Hoover stressed, and existed because of the failure or ineptness of local law enforcement. The FBI could assist local police, but it lacked jurisdiction to tackle what was a local problem.”

²⁰ Wiebe, “Responses to the Televised Kefauver Hearings,” 186.

²¹ Within the frames of the theories, broadcasting the hearings not only brought some cities to a standstill, but also encouraged some citizens to become actively involved in efforts to combat organized crime in their cities. As far as Kefauver, and later Aaron Kohn, hoped, a concerned populace would be more likely to react to the criminal threats it faced.

²² Gregory C. Lisby, “Early Television on Public Watch: Kefauver and His Crime Investigation,” *Journalism Quarterly* Vol 62, no. 2, (June 1, 1985), 240.

York Confidential and *Chicago Confidential* - ... clearly position themselves as coming after the Kefauver Hearings, thereby benefitting from their publicity.²³

Several movies took place in New Orleans, as the genre movies *New Orleans Uncensored* and *New Orleans After Dark* were both released in the 1950s as well.

Historian Jeanine Derr argues that a major effect of televising the Kefauver Hearings was that they “presented the industry an opportunity to prove itself.”²⁴ In a time when television was not a fully established technology or industry and its role in society was still questionable,

The offering of such a public service enabled the television to demonstrate its ability to create an informed and educated public. At the same time, the American public’s fascination with the corruption and lax morals uncovered by the Kefauver committee guaranteed an audience. Television proved its claim that it was not just a medium for entertainment, but could be utilized to better acquaint the individual citizen with the workings of government.²⁵

Indeed, understanding the workings of government and entertainment went hand-in-hand during the hearings.

According to an article in the magazine *American Heritage*, Consolidated Edison, NYC’s utility provider, had to “add an extra generator to power all of the sets. Stores were empty during

²³ David B. Clark, *The Cinematic City*, (Psychology Press, 1997), 119-20

²⁴ Jeanine Derr, “The Biggest Show on Earth,” *The Maryland Historian*, Vol 17, no.2, (Dec. 1986), 29.

²⁵ Ibid.

'Kefauver hours' and swamped when the committee took its noon recess."²⁶ New York City was just one of many American cities that came to a halt to watch characters like New York organized crime boss Frank Costello take the stand. Daily articles in local newspapers recounted the highlights of the day's testimonies, including incidents such as New Orleans gambler "Diamond" Jim Moran ridiculously offering to cook for Kefauver if they ever went on a hunt together.²⁷

People who were unable to catch the day's testimony could watch it later during special rebroadcasts. The March 16, 1951, television listings in *The Times-Picayune* informed the reader: "Rebroadcast of the day's current Kefauver Hearings in New York is scheduled on WDSU (11:30 pm)."²⁸ This allowed sections of the public who would normally be working during the hearings to catch up during their off hours, thereby increasing the number of people who could be exposed to Kefauver's upright crusade. The surge of media coverage on the hearings allowed Kefauver to emerge as a political celebrity in the wake of the hearings. In an April 27, 1951, national Gallup Poll, seventy-two percent of respondents had heard of Kefauver and his commission.²⁹ The same medium that had catapulted him to stardom allowed him to maintain his presence in the public eye. The quick-witted Senator from Tennessee appeared on numerous television shows, won an Emmy for the hearings, and eventually made unsuccessful bids for Vice President in 1952 and 1956.³⁰

²⁶ J.K., "The Kefauver Show." *American Heritage* Vol 51, no. 4, (Aug. 2000), 82.

²⁷ *The Times-Picayune*, "Jimmy Moran' Answers Freely," 27 Jan. 1951, 7.

²⁸ Ed Brooks, "On the Square," *The Times-Picayune*, 6 Mar. 1951, 31.

²⁹ George Gallup, *The Gallup Poll 1935-1971 Vol.2*, (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1972), 979.

³⁰ Gorman, *Kefauver: A Political Biography*, 102.

Many Americans tuned in to the hearings for entertainment, and some came away startled and upset by what they had seen. Wiebe's poll of two hundred and sixty New Yorkers showed the many different emotional responses the hearings elicited in people. Some people felt "diffuse/undirected"; others experienced "power fantasies" and "disassociation"; most constructively, some people felt the need for "problem solving."³¹ Yet of those who took a problem-solving approach to their feelings, very few indicated they would actually act, and it can be assumed an even smaller percentage of those would indeed become involved in fighting the spread of organized crime and public corruption.³² As with many public sensations, once the mania of the moment had passed, many people simply shifted their attention elsewhere and eventually relegated the hearings to memory.

Unlike the average citizen who soon forgot about the Kefauver Hearings, some citizens were compelled to act, and former FBI agent Aaron Kohn was front-and-center in the effort. His arrival in New Orleans in June, 1953, at the behest of the Special Citizen's Investigative Committee, who were tasked with conducting an investigation into corruption in the New Orleans Police Department, began Kohn's decades-long effort to turn the public fascination with organized crime whipped up during the Kefauver Hearings into the second act of his career as a citizen crime fighter.

³¹ Wiebe, "Responses to the Televised Kefauver Hearings," 183.

³² Ibid.

The Formation of the Special Citizens Investigative Committee and Aaron Kohn's Arrival

The Formation of the SCIC

In 1946, New Orleans Mayor DeLesseps S. Morrison was elected on a reform platform. The citizens of New Orleans had grown tired of the corruption of Mayor Robert Maestri and the political machine, at the local level, run by the Regular Democratic Organization (RDO), more commonly known as the Old Regulars. In April 1946, Morrison, victorious in the mayoral election, recognized the importance of political organization to political survival, and formed his own political machine, the Crescent City Democratic Association (CCDA), as a rival to the Old Regular organization. After 1946 there were two active political machines in New Orleans. Many Old Regulars, such as Criminal Sheriff John Grosch, switched sides and joined with the CCDA when it became apparent Mayor Morrison was consolidating his [Morrison's] power.³³ To the extent that Morrison was considered the leader of a corrupt political machine later in his career, for the most part he was mimicking the Old Regulars with his creation and leadership of the CCDA. Morrison understood that a machine of equal or greater power than the Old Regulars was necessary to keep his opponents at bay and secure his own political future.

Morrison enjoyed popular support in the city as well as a good relationship with Gov. Jimmie H. Davis, who was not an Old Regular, but the warm feelings with Baton Rouge would not last. In 1948 Old Regular Earl K. Long, the brother of assassinated former governor Huey Long, was elected governor after a contentious race with reform candidate Robert F. Kennon. Throughout the race, Morrison and Long had traded barbs with one another, and once Long had won, Long set about conducting what would become known as the "rape of New Orleans."

³³ Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison*, 85.

Using the special provisions in Louisiana's constitution that allowed the state legislature to control many New Orleans municipal agencies, the Louisiana state legislature, at Long's behest, passed bills that Haas argued "seriously undermined the political, financial, and administrative structure of New Orleans."³⁴ If Long's ultimate goal was to squeeze Morrison out of office, he failed. Morrison became even more popular in New Orleans for refusing to back down to Long and was supported by the local press and business communities as well.³⁵ By 1950, as support for Morrison continued to grow in New Orleans and the outlying parishes, Long began to back down. Morrison's reelection the same year, 1950, confirmed his popularity and consolidated his power. The reformer had defeated the Old Regulars, but Morrison's political battles were far from over.³⁶

Morrison presided over an administration that took great steps to control its public image as upright and law abiding, but below his constant public relations efforts laid layer upon layer of corruption. Particularly singled out by citizen's groups such as the Metropolitan Crime Commission was the New Orleans Police Department under the head of Superintendent Joseph Scheuring, who was later shown to have protected the numerous illegal gambling rackets in town at the behest of Morrison. According to Haas, in 1950 when a grand jury convened to investigate illegal gambling, Scheuring "ordered local handbooks to close two days before the investigation and reopen gradually after the grand jury disbanded."³⁷ Tactics like these were common. Morrison would espouse the virtues and dedication of the police department all the

³⁴ Ibid, 125-25.

³⁵ Ibid, 130.

³⁶ Ibid, 139.

³⁷ Ibid, 180.

while playing a shell game with the public involving the constant moving and hiding of the illegal and corrupt activities of his administration.

Between the Kefauver Hearings in 1950, and Aaron Kohn's arrival in 1953, the NOPD was involved in multiple scandals the Morrison administration attempted to brush away. Not much changed in the years since the Kefauver Hearings. Mayor Morrison, politically damaged by the hearings but intact, continued to insist that there was no gambling in Orleans Parish. Yet on March 6, 1951, newspaper reporter "Emile Comar of the *States* reported that despite 'all-out efforts' to stop lotteries and gambling, he had recently bought tickets from permanent lottery vendors at six different locations in downtown New Orleans," according to Haas.³⁸ Other prominent scandals included a case where crooked detectives participated in safe robberies, and another "in April, 1953, [where] police booked two patrol men for the rape of a deaf-mute."³⁹

In the midst of these scandals, with the city administration not interested in reform, the city's Commission Council, i.e. the city government, chose to set up the SCIC in order to investigate police corruption.⁴⁰ Groups such as the fledgling Metropolitan Crime Commission, led by Richard Foster, nominated "Leon D. Hubert, Jr., Tulane University law professor; George C. Stohlman, a railroad executive; and Dudley C. Foley, Jr., an attorney," to oversee the formation and execution of the SCIC.⁴¹ Because of his experience running a similar investigation in Chicago, Kohn was unanimously chosen by the SCIC executive board to head the inquiry as chief investigator.

³⁸ Ibid 184-186. According to Haas, "After the hearings Morrison admitted that he received campaign money from the pinball operators, but said that he had promised them no favors."

³⁹ Ibid, 195.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 195. Commissioners Ott, Brahney, and A. Brown Moore set up the SCIC.

⁴¹ Ibid, 194

Aaron Kohn's Background

Aaron Kohn, a first generation Russian-American orthodox Jew, was born in Philadelphia in 1911.⁴² Kohn joined J. Edgar Hoover's Bureau of Investigation in 1930, when “[t]he FBI took him on when he was 19-years-old and only a high school graduate. The J. Edgar Hoover letter lists his first job as ‘student fingerprint classifier.’”⁴³ After he joined the Bureau, Kohn moved to Washington DC to complete law school at Columbus School of Law at The Catholic University of America. By 1934, FBI documents indicate Kohn was a fingerprint expert with the Identification Division in the Bureau’s Chicago office.⁴⁴ In one of the highlights of his career with the Bureau, he would serve as a government expert at the trial of “Doc” Barker, a member of Ma Barker’s notorious gang.⁴⁵ Throughout his later career as a citizen crime fighter, Kohn’s early training in the FBI, which reflected the dedication to organized investigation demanded by J. Edgar Hoover, would serve as his investigative model. Hoover’s influence on the Kohn as a mentor would remain throughout Kohn’s life. Kohn’s career with the FBI lasted until 1939, when he retired to work for Sears for five years and then start a one-man importing business. Although he was successful in business, by 1947 Kohn wanted to pursue a different path, years later recalling, “I realized my major responsibility lay in the challenge of helping the community govern itself better.”⁴⁶ Kohn would get his chance soon enough. Kohn left

⁴¹ Ibid, 197.

⁴³ Leo Adde, “What is the Story Behind Crusader Kohn?” *New Orleans Item*, 15 Aug. 1954, 41.

⁴⁴ U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Bremmer Kidnapping, Part 44 of 459, Washington, D.C.: 4, <http://vault.fbi.gov/barker-karpis-gang/bremer-kidnapping/bremer-kidnapping-part-44-of/view> (accessed April 30, 2013).

⁴⁵ U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Bremmer Kidnapping, Part 396 of 459, Washington, D.C.: 58, <http://vault.fbi.gov/barker-karpis-gang/bremer-kidnapping/bremer-kidnapping-part-396-of%20459/view> (accessed April 30, 2013).

⁴⁶ Leo Adde, “What is the Story Behind Crusader Kohn?” 41.

Philadelphia for Chicago in 1952 when he was asked for help investigating police corruption by Virgil Peterson, and old FBI friend and head of the Chicago Metropolitan Crime Commission.

Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, Chicago resembled New Orleans in its wholesale corruption of the police department and city government. According to Mike Royko, a Pulitzer Prize-winning Chicago newspaper columnist: “Besides being corrupt the police department was inefficient... On Friday and Saturday nights, the overloaded police radio would be giving the same assignments out, over and over, hours after the crime was reported.”⁴⁷ On Peterson’s recommendation, Kohn became chief investigator of the Emergency Crime Committee of the Chicago City Council. Committee chief counsel Thomas A. Bane hired Kohn for the position. Following the wave of public scrutiny given to individual and institutional corruption in the aftermath of the Kefauver Hearings, Kohn's committee investigated alleged corruption in the Chicago Police Department, and the findings were damning. In September of 1952, before the report could be released, chief counsel Bane resigned and Kohn was dismissed from his position by the new chief counsel, the pro-administration Charles F. Rathbun, almost a year before Kohn would arrive in New Orleans.⁴⁸ A story in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* noted, “Kohn is the author of a six volume report of which little has been published... Rathbun dismissed the Kohn report as having little value.”⁴⁹ According to *The Times-Picayune*, “Kohn’s hard hitting probe... produced so much controversy that the Chicago crime commission replaced him.”⁵⁰ In

⁴⁷ Mike Royko, *Boss Richard J. Daley of Chicago*, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1971), 107.

⁴⁸ *Morning Advocate*, “Investigation of N.O. Police Activity Slated,” 5 June 1953, 43.

⁴⁹ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, “Crime Prober's Job is Offered to Ald, Merriam: Bid by Rathbun Rejected for 'Obvious Reasons,’” 21 Mar. 1953, 2.

⁵⁰ *The Times-Picayune*, “Kohn Plans Query to Enlist Citizen Aid in Police Probe,” 11 June 1953, 11.

December of 1952, Kohn's six volume report was ultimately released by the Chicago City Council.⁵¹

The recognition Kohn received for his work with the Chicago City Council brought him to the attention of civic and business leaders in New Orleans who were concerned about the levels of corruption that pervaded the city's public, political, and economic spheres. The New Orleans Police Department was particularly corrupt in reputation and execution, and in 1953 Kohn was asked to come to the Crescent City by the newly formed SCIC to investigate the department and these charges. His arrival in New Orleans would put him on a crash course with much of the establishments of Orleans and Jefferson parishes, such as the Fraternal Order of Police in New Orleans, whose members routinely closed ranks in order to protect their fellow officers. The environment of New Orleans in the 1950s was the perfect setting for the highly publicized public and legal war Kohn would soon wage against the Morrison machine.

SCIC Work Begins

Setting Up Shop at the SCIC

Arriving in New Orleans, Kohn wasted no time getting started. On August 11, 1953, he announced he would turn to the public for information on police corruption as well as “have a look at the bank accounts, homestead accounts, and real estate assessments of members of the police department.”⁵² Kohn's plans to examine these documents were possible because the Commission Council gave the SCIC subpoena power like that of the Orleans Parish grand jury;

⁵¹ Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison*, 195.

⁵² *The Times-Picayune*, “Kohn Plans Query to Enlist Citizen Aid in Police Probe,” 11 June 1953, 11.

however the SCIC would not be allowed to file criminal charges. The grand jury, however, would be able to file charges based upon the testimony given before the SCIC.⁵³ With a driven Kohn at the helm and \$50,000 in funding from the city, the SCIC investigation was set to begin. According to Haas, Morrison chafed at the idea of the SCIC receiving as much money as they did. Haas notes, “At a party in Audubon Park, the mayor stated: ‘Why in the hell did we give them \$50,000. We could have given them \$10,000, they would have gotten a couple of little guys, and that’s all there would have been to it.’”⁵⁴ Before Kohn could even begin the SCIC’s investigation, he was facing private resistance from Morrison. Encountering official obstructionism would become a normal part of Kohn’s job and would last throughout the SCIC investigations and hearings. In the very beginning though, two of the most important tasks that required immediate attention would be the SCIC’s formation of a media strategy and the hiring of confidential investigators.

SCIC Media Strategy

Aaron Kohn began working on a media strategy that would engage the public and, he hoped, encourage their participation in his investigation. In an interview with the *New York Daily News*, Richard Foster, the head of the MCC and a close ally of Kohn’s, firmly stated:

⁵³ The grand jury, led by Morgan Whitney, was favorable to the work of the SCIC and Kohn. In the SCIC’s final published report, exhibit one in the first volume is a March 1, 1954 letter from the grand jury to the mayor and commission council that states: “During our six months exposure to law enforcement matters, we came to the inescapable conclusion that there is a lack of enforcement of the laws in the City of New Orleans.” SCIC, Final Report, Volume 1, 6 Dec. 1954, folder 1, box 22, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

⁵⁴ Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison*, 194. The actual source of this quote is difficult to determine due to the author’s loose footnoting structure. The following are the possible sources Haas lists in his note: DSM to McGuire, March 31, 1953, Duffoure to Moore, April 29, 1953 in DSM Papers, TU; *States*, April 1, 2, 1953; AMK, Confidential Memorandum, February 27, 1954 in Crime Commission Files.

The one thing organized crime fears is publicity, and publicity can only be obtained by a proper investigative body... [I]t is my opinion that nothing other than aroused action on the part of the citizens after being presented with such information will place in authority men of integrity and ability, both willing and able through the day to day processes of government to maintain control over the criminal element in the community.⁵⁵

The two main media Kohn and the SCIC chose to publicize their efforts were local newspapers the *New Orleans Item*, *New Orleans States* and *The Times-Picayune*, along with television station WDSU.⁵⁶

Like Foster, Kohn felt publicity of the investigation would draw a greater response from the general public. Kohn could see this was especially true after the reactions of the local and national public to the Kefauver Hearings. One of Kohn's earliest efforts to involve the citizens of New Orleans in his work was a July 7, 1953, press release consisting of twelve questions for which he hoped the public would answer. These included: "1. Have you ever been solicited by any member of the police department to make payments of money or other things of value? Please describe the circumstances, giving names, dates, places, etc.," as well as, "8. Do you know any persons who have been able to escape punishment for crimes by the payment of bribes?"⁵⁷ All twelve questions followed this line, but Kohn desired a presentation that would

⁵⁵ Richard Foster, interview with *New York Daily News*, 3 Feb. 1953, folder 11, box 1, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

⁵⁶ SCIC, press release instructions, 1953, folder 12, box 11, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.). Each press release would have one copy sent to each newspaper, two to WDSU, and one for SCIC records keeping. Press releases were scheduled to be sent out twice a week on Mondays and Wednesdays.

⁵⁷ SCIC, press release, 7 July 1953, folder 11, box 1, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

maximize the public's interest in the SCIC's progressing inquiry. At the bottom of the press release, Kohn made this request to the various newspapers:

(Special Request to the Press:- We are attempting to reach the maximum possible number of N.O. citizens with the above questions. If it is possible for you to present them in bold face type in a front page box, providing for a name and address write-in space at the bottom, it is believed the maximum results could be accomplished. Please also consider the possibility of a repeat printing at a later date.)⁵⁸

Kohn's very specific instructions for print and request for "a repeat printing" showed he planned to maximize the means the press provided for reaching the public.

But Kohn's strategy did not stop there. In order to prevent a decline in public interest, less than three weeks after Kohn sent the press release with the questions to the local papers, Kohn again contacted the press, this time asking that the questions be run on the front page one at a time. In a memorandum for the SCIC's public relations file, Kohn notes that "[a]greement was received from Buddy Felts of the *Times-Picayune*, Allen of the *States*, and Tom Sancton (speaking for Henri Wolberette) of the *N.O. Item*."⁵⁹

While Kohn asked for the help of the press in publicizing his investigation's existence, he also asked for silence concerning the course of the investigation. In early July of 1953, he met with George W. Healey, Jr., editor of *The Times-Picayune*. Healey agreed on the proposed silence

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Aaron M. Kohn, memorandum for Public Relations File, 24 July 1953, folder 11, box 12, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

and also offered to turn over any information he had in order to help the investigation.⁶⁰ While early in the SCIC's work Kohn received encouragement and cooperation from the press, this cooperation would not always be the case during the course of the investigation and the hearings that followed. As Kohn and the SCIC continued to engage the newspapers, they also turned their attention to the evolving medium of television.

The Kefauver Hearings had proven that television was a viable medium to reach the public. From the very beginning and throughout the life of the SCIC's investigation, Kohn and his cohort would appear on television time and time again. One of the early appearances by a SCIC member was in a June 30, 1953, interview with Leon D. Hubert, Jr. by television host and radio announcer Pat Michaels at WDSU, the same television station that had carried the Kefauver Hearings and eventually the SCIC hearings. Michaels, a personal friend of Kohn's, was more than favorable to the SCIC, and the interview was little more than a carefully edited, televised press release.⁶¹ Hubert, closely following the script, explained the history and mission of the SCIC and informed citizens how they could become involved.⁶² One of Kohn's earliest televised interviews in New Orleans occurred on television station WTPS on Sunday, September 6, 1953, when he was the guest on "Off the Beaten Path" with Jack Dempsey. According to *The*

⁶⁰ Aaron M. Kohn, memorandum for Administrative File, 20 July 1953, folder 11, box 12, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

⁶¹ It can be surmised that Kohn and Michaels were friends. When examining the memos of the SCIC it becomes apparent that Pat Michaels was one of Aaron Kohn's most frequent visitors at the SCIC's Carondelet Street office during the early days of the investigation. Also, Michaels called Kohn for help directly after Touzet threatened him.

⁶² SCIC, proposed script – television interview of Leon D. Hubert, Jr., by Pat Michaels, WDSU TV, Tuesday June 30, 1953 at 9 p.m, Public Relations file, 25 June 1953, folder 12, box 11, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

Times-Picayune, “Dempsey says Cohn [*sic*] has promised to give as full an answer as possible to all questions.”⁶³

From the outset, Kohn and the SCIC sought to make effective use of the press and television to convey their pleas for public support. If they could win over the public, not only would it allow for a more robust investigation, but it could also position public opinion on the side of the SCIC, thereby putting pressure on the mayor and police department to comply. Kohn knew this would be a difficult task, as Morrison and his corrupt machine would do everything in their power to keep the truth obscured.

Confidential Informants

While Kohn and other members of the SCIC appeared on television and issued press releases early on appealing to the general public, they could not rely on the press alone. A cadre of confidential informants employed by the committee handled the essential investigative work.

Under the rushed circumstances in which the SCIC’s investigation had been birthed, confidential informants were hired quickly. In a hand-written memo to the rest of the committee in June 1953 concerning the hiring of confidential informants, Committee member George Stohlman’s noted, “Undercover - no time to scour country- taking men who can develop - in position to get info - crosscheck whenever possible- have you any to offer. All hired at once - not trained men - close supervision.”⁶⁴

According to Haas, these confidential informants included “Henry Muller and John S. Waterman, father-in-law of the mayor [,]” along with Pershing Gervais, “an embittered man who

⁶³ Ed Brooks, “The Column on the Square,” *The Times-Picayune*, 5 Sept. 1953, 11.

⁶⁴ George Stohlman, Directives to committee, 30 June 1953, folder 20, box 12, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

sought revenge against the police department.”⁶⁵ These were but some of the many confidential informants on the SCIC payroll. Due to the sensitive nature of the informants’ jobs, the SCIC set up a list of guidelines in order to protect their identities. In a memorandum from May 13, 1954, Stohlman explicitly stated, “Do not divulge the identity of undercover investigators. Their compensation [has] to be by cash. Obviously, it would be revealing of identity to [...] [pay] them by Committee check.”⁶⁶

The amount of evidence gathered by the confidential informants was staggering, if not always credible. Many informants had questionable pasts, but their familiarity with the New Orleans Police Department had to be given priority in the investigation. Clearly someone like Gervais had an axe to grind with the police department, but the sheer amount of information collected by the SCIC pointed to more police corruption than a few bad apples like Gervais could fabricate.⁶⁷ Once the public hearings began, the work of the investigators and their accusations of police corruption would come to light. While Kohn and the SCIC were building their case against City Hall and the police, Mayor Morrison and his cohorts sought to waylay the investigation, through rumor-mongering and direct threats against Kohn.

⁶⁵ Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison*, 195.

⁶⁶ SCIC, comment from Mr. Stohlman by telephone, 13 May 1954, folder 14, box 31, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

⁶⁷ Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison*, 195.

SCIC, Confidential Memorandum, 4 Nov 1953, folder 3, box 11, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.). In this memorandum, Kohn speaks of rumors passed to him by confidential informant #76. This adds credence to Haas’s argument that Kohn had too many informants for all of them to fabricate the truth.

Obstructions

Kohn's work immediately alarmed Morrison and his cronies, who subjected Kohn to harassment and intimidation during the course of his investigation. In October 1953, the investigation was in full swing but several months remained before the beginning of the hearings. J.F. Delany, an SCIC investigator, reported to Kohn that a confidential informant had relayed to him that the mayor was conferring with local ward leaders "in plain words to do what they could to block the investigation."⁶⁸ These efforts included rumors spread suggesting that Kohn had abandoned his family (he was divorced), was a communist, and had never served with the FBI.⁶⁹ While Kohn was disturbed by these rumors, he resolved not to let them derail his task at hand, and he "refused to permit [him]self to be drawn into personal controversies."⁷⁰

The local newspapers were at first openly willing to help Kohn and the SCIC. Only after the hearings began did their editorial tone shift to an obstructionist bent in favor of Morrison's machine.

Local Media Response to the SCIC Investigations

As the investigation progressed into the fall of 1953, the local press continued to cover the new developments closely. At times, their attention helped Kohn and his investigators keep pressure on City Hall and the police administration to comply in the constructive manner they

⁶⁸ Aaron M. Kohn, Investigative Memorandum, 23 Oct. 1953, folder 11, box 3, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

⁶⁹ Aaron M. Kohn, efforts of Mayor Morrison to hamper this investigation, Confidential Memorandum, 4 Nov. 1953, folder 11, box 3, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

⁷⁰ Aaron M. Kohn, memorandum to Richard J. Foster, 4 Jan. 1954, folder 11, box 3, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

were outwardly compelled to project. The Randolph Becker, Jr., incident serves as a perfect example of the press assisting Kohn in his endeavor.

At the very end of August of 1953, a memo on Fraternal Order of Police letterhead began making its way around police headquarters informing officers to consult with Becker, an attorney retained by the FOP, before consenting to testify before the SCIC. Becker also informed the media that he planned on sitting in with any officers who did testify. This was news to Kohn, who told *The Times-Picayune* that “he had not agreed to this, as his committee was a legally constituted city agency charged to investigate another city agency.” He later added, “Never before in my entire career have I heard of an outsider trying to be present at a conference between an employer and an employee.”⁷¹ Becker defended the move, declaring, “It’s not that the police department is afraid of anything, anything at all. But in the past we feel there hasn’t been enough fair play [...] There have been a lot of slurs and the police are tired of being kicked around.”⁷²

After the story of Becker’s attempted interference in the SCIC investigation broke on August 29, *The Times-Picayune* quickly offered an editorial on August 31. Strongly taking the side of the SCIC, the editorial slammed Mayor Morrison and Police Superintendent Scheuering (despite their public opposition to Becker’s claims that officers should consult with him before testifying) for allowing such distractions in an effort to stall and ultimately undermine the investigation.⁷³ Kohn wrote a letter to the editor the next day, praising *The Times-Picayune* for

⁷¹ *The Times-Picayune*, “See Becker Before Quiz, Cops Advised,” 29 Aug. 1953, 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *The Times-Picayune*, “Threat to Police Inquiry Should Be Rebuffed,” 31 Aug. 1953, 10.

its “forthright and explanatory editorial [that] was a genuine contribution to the process of clarifying the facts and the values.”⁷⁴

The press coverage and public denouncement of Becker’s intended actions brought about in Becker a swift reversal of position. Following a meeting with Kohn, “Atty. Becker denied [...] he had requested council be present when police officers undergo quizzes by the staff of the special citizens’ investigating committee.”⁷⁵ As quickly as this new distraction had developed, it was quashed by the near immediate news coverage. By drawing attention to an obvious attempt to obstruct the investigation, *The Times-Picayune* publicly deflated Becker, demonstrating the ideal objective Kohn hoped could be achieved by utilizing the media to his advantage.

The Public Hearings

The End of the Investigation and Preparing for the Public Hearings

As the SCIC investigation into local political and police corruption progressed, allegations of police misconduct appeared publicly in the press (such as the before mentioned Touzet-Michaels incident) and privately in confidential informant reports. Informants continued to provide information on gambling operations, houses of prostitution, and the like. Cooperation between Kohn and WDSU was in full effect. One example of this cooperation can be found in an investigative report submitted to Kohn on September 2, 1953. Confidential Informant #3 tells of a meeting between himself, WDSU reporter Bill Grosch, and Morrison’s bagman who collected payoffs from brothels, Isadore Mattes, whom the confidential informant misidentified

⁷⁴ *The Times-Picayune*, “Views of the Readers: Clarity Necessary in Police Issue,” 2 Sep. 1953, 7.

⁷⁵ *The Times-Picayune*, “Police Council Advice Labeled as ‘False Issue’,” 1 Sep. 1953, 1.

as Mississippi River Bridge Chairman Captain Neville Levy.⁷⁶ According to the informant, Grosch surreptitiously recorded the bagman, who wanted to establish preliminary off-the-record talks with Grosch, because he (the bagman) feared “that Chep is crawling on Kohn’s wagon now and is getting ready to turn on everyone now like he turned on Muller, when he (Morrison) was first elected.”⁷⁷ According to Haas, Muller was a “known operator of houses of prostitution” who once gave Morrison a substantial campaign donation.⁷⁸ Eventually the identity of the bagman came out (Mattes testified at the public SCIC hearings), but the way in which this particular portion of the investigation was carried out proved that Kohn sometimes resorted to questionable sources and underhanded tricks to achieve his ends and, at least in this incident, an employee of WDSU was willing to help him. Kohn was up against a political machine that made every effort to discredit him personally and professionally, and he needed to take every investigative advantage possible, as the Mattes report illustrates.

By November 1953, closed sessions of the SCIC had begun and public sessions were set to begin on November 23. Before the SCIC had decided whether or not to televise the proceedings, clear instructions for the televising process were developed at a SCIC meeting. An internal memo from Dudley C. Foley, Jr. discussed the spin the Committee desired:

It was agreed that prior to granting any requests for permission to broadcast or televise public hearings, the applicants should meet with Kohn and the full committee to discuss the many factors involved such as types of witnesses, character of witnesses, kind of

⁷⁶ SCIC, Investigative Report, 22 Feb. 1953, folder 1224, box 7 Prostitution to William J. McNamera, Records of the New Orleans Metropolitan Crime Commission, JFK Assassination Records, National Archives, (College Park, MD.) Kohn presented Confidential Informant #3 with a series of photos and Levy was misidentified from these photos.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison*, 201.

language and subject matter of questionings, which might cause certain witnesses not to be broadcast or televised and others to appear, which might operate unfavorably to the goals of the Committee. Also Committee must reserve right to discontinue such programs at any time if any interference with orderly and successful hearings.⁷⁹

Kohn and the SCIC sought only favorable televised conditions in an attempt to rally public opinion in their favor. With their initial \$50,000 budget rapidly depleting, and with continual setbacks, Kohn and his cohort understood favorable public opinion was the lifeblood of the investigation and television was their great hope.

Once their strategy was set, Kohn and the SCIC began preparations with WDSU to film the public portions of the proceedings, which would be held at City Hall. A November 22, 1953, SCIC internal memo of a committee meeting spelled out the specific technical details of filming the hearings, while noting the objections to filming of Morrison and Commission Council members Schiro, Classen, McCloskey, and Duffour.⁸⁰ Brandon Chase, representing WDSU, agreed to film the hearings to be rebroadcast during news slots and other times if necessary. The technical set up would require “2 -1000 watt lights, at side, within 15 feet of witness; one camera at 15 feet away; microphone in front of witness.” The committee members stated that they wanted to make the witnesses feel as comfortable as possible, and they agreed that the lighting should not be too intense and could be removed altogether if necessary.⁸¹ Aaron Kohn’s

⁷⁹ Dudley C. Foley, Jr., Memo for files, 9 Nov. 1953, folder 20, box 12, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

⁸⁰ SCIC, Committee meeting, 22 Nov. 1953, folder 20, box 12, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

⁸¹ Ibid.

interrogations could be intense enough. Due to dwindling monetary resources and a lack of physical space at City Hall, the SCIC was unable to have live broadcasts of their hearings as Kefauver had. Despite these limitations, they were still able to hit the airwaves.

The Public Hearings and the Media⁸²

The public hearings on political and police lasted a little more than one day. On November 24, Kohn, the SCIC, and the Commission Council were hit with a temporary restraining order barring continuation of the hearings. The restraining order was the result of a lawsuit filed by former police officer Alois Hirt, who argued that citizens of New Orleans should not have to foot the bill for the SCIC. Though Hirt played the role of a concerned citizen, his associations and the timing of the suit made his efforts appear plainly to be another attempt by the police and administration to stop the hearings. The situation was somewhat alleviated for the SCIC investigators when the injunction was partially lifted the next day. The public hearings could continue, but they were now under the control of the Commission Council. Kohn would remain as acting interrogator, but the SCIC had effectively lost its independence. Kohn would have to assume a volunteer role, as the injunction prevented any member of the SCIC from being paid. This did not bode well for the continuance of televised coverage.

ON December 2, Judge Walter B. Hamlin ruled to reinforce the initial November 25 restraining order which had temporarily shut down the proceedings. In response to the televising of the initial public proceedings, Hamlin came down hard:

⁸²After Judge Hamlin's initial injunction was temporarily relaxed on November 25, 1953, public hearings proceeded until December 2. At that point, public hearings were stalled by Judge Hamlin restoring the temporary injunction in full from December 2 until December 16, 1953. Public testimony resumed on December 17 when the injunction was temporarily lifted by the Louisiana Supreme Court. Testimony would last until January 7, 1954 until it would be shut down by again by another injunction from Judge Hamlin.

The court can very easily assume and does conclude that where a person is subject to television, whether it be over a commercial program or as a news program at the television station, that the moment that that picture of that person is flashed out to thousands and thousands of people, there is an aspersion cast upon that individual, no matter how innocent he may be.

And the court is not too sure that the televising of a witness while under oath, exposing him to thousands of persons is not cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the constitution.⁸³

The historical record is unclear regarding whether proceedings were filmed and broadcast later in December again on WDSU once the police probe resumed while the Louisiana Supreme Court mulled over the constitutionality of the probe.⁸⁴ Regardless, some footage of the hearings had been broadcast.⁸⁵

If Kohn and the SCIC only barely succeeded in having portions of the hearings televised, they still succeeded. Public interest continued to grow in the hearings and the pace would only accelerate once the salacious testimonies of witnesses such as confirmed prostitute Doris Gellman and former Morrison driver Isadore Mattes testified respectively to wild parties with local leaders and late night drop offs and pick-ups of bags of cash. Haas described reporters

⁸³ *The Times-Picayune*, "Text of Judge Hamlin's Decision," 3 Dec. 1953, 53.

⁸⁴ Primary and secondary sources researched make no mention of television or radio broadcasts once the hearings resumed. It is possible they were, but it is not well documented.

⁸⁵ *The Times-Picayune*, "Court Enjoins Mayor, Council," 3 Dec. 1953, 3.

This was confirmed during arguments over the constitutionality of the committee and hearings when, under questioning from Judge Hamlin, "[s]everal spectators in the court, including attorney Braniff, who represents Edward M. Allen, who had challenged the right of the special committee to subpoena him (Allen), volunteered information that portions of the proceedings had been presented over television."

rushing to phone booths with their stories once the hearings would break, eager to get the first scoop the for scandal-hungry public to devour.⁸⁶

Televised or not, public testimony brought a who's who of politicians, police officers, and criminals to City Hall. Mayor Morrison, Superintendent Scheuering, Assistant Superintendent Durel, Chief of Detectives Harry Daniels, and club owner Gaspar Gulotta gave some of the most memorable testimony (printed in their entirety in *The Times-Picayune*) but were only a few of those who testified.⁸⁷

Quite often the exchanges between Kohn and the witnesses were testy. At one point during his testimony, Gaspar Gulotta grew exasperated with Kohn trying to get him to admit that Gulotta's friend, Norma Wallace, was a prostitute. "Do you know what her business is?" Kohn asked. "I'm not interested," Gulotta replied. This went on for a bit until Gulotta admitted he knew what Wallace did for a living and protested to Kohn, "I have a daughter and don't want to be embarrassed. If you are going to keep asking me about that to embarrass me, I'll throw down this mike and walk out of here."⁸⁸

Others who testified about the presence or absence of political and police corruption had their names also printed in the paper. A December 1, 1953, article in *The Times-Picayune* lists the names and addresses of seventeen people who had recently testified. One of those listed was Joan Ellerman, the employee of WDSU who lived in the building Sgt. Touzet claimed he was staking out in a narcotics investigation. Months after the incident between Touzet and Michaels, Ellerman, it was noted, was a "former employee of WDSU-TV, whose address is kept secret for

⁸⁶ Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison*, 201.

⁸⁷ *The Times-Picayune*, "Scheuering Testimony Given in Police Investigation by Council," 17 Dec. 1953, 22.

⁸⁸ *The Time-Picayune*, "Night Club Operator Testifies," 7 Jan. 1954, 8.

protective reasons.”⁸⁹ At least Ellerman showed up. Henry D. Muller, the onetime SCIC informant, operator of brothels, and mayoral briber chose to ignore the subpoena, although that did not prevent his name from being disparaged throughout the hearings.⁹⁰

Up until Doris Gellman’s controversial testimony in late December 1953, *The Times-Picayune*’s editorial voice seemed to back Kohn and his investigators. Internal SCIC documents reveal Kohn had the support of *The Times-Picayune*’s editor George Healy, Jr., in July of 1953.⁹¹ A shift seemed to take place by December 31, 1953, however, when *The Times-Picayune* editorial echoed the complaints of city attorney Henry Curtis, who called into question Kohn’s graphic line of questioning with Gellman. Kohn’s line of questioning of Gellman, which involved numerous sexual details, clearly struck a nerve with the editorial staffs at *The Times-Picayune* and *New Orleans States*. *The Times Picayune* editorial proclaimed: “Let this investigation continue, but let it be more concerned with its real purpose: a disclosure of actual conditions existing within the New Orleans police department. [...] We think the community can stand fewer sordid details and fewer sensational theatrics in the prosecution of the hearing.”⁹² The *New Orleans States* agreed: “The people want the investigation conducted thoroughly, but not with emphasis on vulgarity that could just as well be omitted.”⁹³

⁸⁹ *The Times-Picayune*, “Witnesses Defy Subpoena,” 1 Dec. 1953, 3.

⁹⁰ Ibid. Mattes gave testimony identifying Muller as a briber of Morrison.

⁹¹ Aaron M. Kohn, Memorandum for the Administrative Files, 20 July 1953, folder 11, box 12, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

⁹² *The Times Picayune*, “Whence Our Investigation?,” 31 Dec. 1953, 8.

⁹³ *New Orleans States*, “States’ Editorial,” 2 Jan. 1954, 10.

To say Kohn was offended that his interrogation style would be questioned in the press would be an understatement. He was livid. In a January 2, 1954, press release to all papers, Kohn shot back at *The Times-Picayune* and *New Orleans States*:

First of all, as an investigator, I believe it would be highly unethical and improper for me, as it would be for the Commission Council sitting as an investigative body in public hearings, to decide for an entire community which facets of evidence are to be revealed or concealed. The entire truth, and evidence relating to full truth, must be arrived at before it is possible to evaluate "actual conditions existing in the New Orleans Police Department.

But Kohn was not finished, and turned to a dramatic metaphor to fully make his point:

Not very many years ago, cancer of the individual was considered abhorrent and was shunned, resulting in premature and unnecessary deaths. Not until there was a willingness to courageously face the unpleasant aspect of cancer did it become possible for science to make substantial progress against it. The cancer of corruption within any phase of municipal government must also be fully exposed to the spotlight of community recognition and comprehension before it can be subjected to progressive control. Cauterisation [sic] is painful and startling, but it destroys infection.

The process of organized prostitution must be realistically understood before the effectiveness of sincerity or police efforts can be evaluated.⁹⁴

Kohn's strong response to *The Times-Picayune* did little to help their relationship, it seems.

Kohn still had allies in the press. A January 3, 1954 editorial in *The New Orleans Item* agreed with Kohn, stating:

We note [a] reaction which ignores hours of testimony on police payoffs in order to express shock over a few minutes of testimony... noting some sordid facts of New Orleans prostitution. The *Item* believes... most of ... Gellman's testimony... was important... and that its implications warrant the serious attention of every citizen of New Orleans.⁹⁵

On January 7, 1954, the public hearings of the SCIC and Commission Council on police corruption came to an end, when another injunction was enforced by Judge Hamlin. At the end of the hearings, public support had turned towards the mayor. Haas notes: "Many believed that the investigating committee and its witnesses wanted to smear the administration. Others disliked the blunt manner and the controversial tactics of Aaron Kohn."⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Aaron M. Kohn, Press Release to All Papers, 2 Jan. 1954, folder 12, box 11, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

⁹⁵ *New Orleans Item*, "The Gellman Story," 3 Jan. 1954, 10.

⁹⁶ Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison*, 204-5.

On January 12, 1954, *The Times-Picayune* endorsed Mayor Morrison for reelection.⁹⁷ By the middle of February 1954, Kohn and *The Times-Picayune* had become openly antagonistic toward one another. In a February 19, 1954, internal SCIC document Kohn reported:

C.I #8 also advised me that Assisting [sic] District Attorney Screen told him that it was his belief that the Mayor would not rest until they had successfully used all of their facilities to make this writer [Kohn] appear to be too questionable and too controversial for the Crime Commission directorship. The anonymous confidential informant stated that the *Times-Picayune* management was expected to deliberately use its facilities to help the Mayor accomplish that objective.⁹⁸

Throughout his career, Kohn was seldom dissuaded, whichever side the press, from constantly engaging television stations and newspapers, giving and receiving information, in an effort to complete fruitful and effective investigations. The scorn of *The Times-Picayune* would not slow down Kohn, but it likely factored in the shift of public opinion against him.

The Great Letdown

The Aftermath of the Hearings

For all of his tenacity in the face of official obstruction, harassment and changing public opinion against him, Aaron Kohn would not win the battle against the mayor and police

⁹⁷ *The Times-Picayune*, "Morrison Deserves Re-election," 12 Jan. 1954, 8.

⁹⁸ Aaron M. Kohn, Confidential memorandum, 19 Feb. 1954, folder 3, box 11, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

department. For all of his investigational, organizational and interrogational talent, Aaron Kohn could not win the fight. Despite his attempts to emulate Kefauver and use the media to harness the public's attention during the SCIC investigation and hearings, Aaron Kohn was defeated. Morrison, victorious, was soon reelected.

On January 7, after the injunction took effect, the SCIC needed permission from Judge Hamlin to go forward with any further action. On Friday, February 12, a petition from the Commission Council, with the grand jury's backing, asked for the release of Kohn's interim report covering the SCIC investigations and hearings.⁹⁹ On February 15, in a stunning reversal, Judge Hamlin agreed and released the interim report. Of the thirty-nine recommendations from Kohn and the SCIC, the first was to terminate Police Superintendent Scheuring. The report also blasted City Hall and the police department for their obstructionism during the investigations and hearings.¹⁰⁰ The next day, *The Times-Picayune* carried front page statements released by Morrison and Scheuring, denying any charges and accusations against them made by the SCIC.¹⁰¹ The prominent place given to their personal denials could have been interpreted as a gift from *The Times-Picayune*. No statement from Kohn appeared on the front page. Then, in an editorial on page 10 entitled "Police Probe Progress," the editorial staff blasted the SCIC and Aaron Kohn, refusing to even call him by his name: "We think difficulties and harassment are to be expected in an investigation of this sort. Also it seems to us in some respects tactics adopted

⁹⁹ *The Times-Picayune*, "Ruling Due Monday on Reports Release," 12 Feb. 1954, 1.

¹⁰⁰ *The Times-Picayune*, "Morrison Denies He Hampered Inquiry as Charged in Report," 16 Feb. 1954, 1.

¹⁰¹ *The Times-Picayune*, "Hearing in Probe Fair Says Mayor," 16 Feb. 1954, 1.

The Times-Picayune, "Scheuring Attacks Kohn on Commenting on Report," 16 Feb. 1954, 1.

by the chief investigator were enough to bring difficulties for him.”¹⁰² The acrimony made it plain: *The Times-Picayune* apparently supported the corrupt establishment.

On December 6, 1954, the SCIC’s final report was released to the public after having been delivered to the mayor, outgoing Commission Council, and grand jury in early April.¹⁰³ Earlier, on October 27, 1954, City Councilman Fred Cassibry called for Mayor Morrison to publicly report what he [Morrison] was doing to implement the recommendations of the SCIC report. Morrison dodged Cassibry’s demands, so Cassibry decided to fight for the public release of the final report.¹⁰⁴ The six-volume SCIC report, in its entirety, was damning of Mayor Morrison and the New Orleans Police Department.

The demand to fire Superintendent Scheuering remained the primary recommendation of the report. The report also contained administrative recommendations (dealing with the running of the police department), along with recommendations on policing bars and clubs, gambling (handbooks, lottery, pinball, general), taxicabs and prostitution. The final recommendation, number thirty-nine, specifically targeted Morrison: “39. Mayor Morrison should devote more of his time and attention to the supervision of the activities of the police department and its top level officers, this being one of the most important responsibilities of his office.”¹⁰⁵

Despite the findings against City Hall and the police department by the SCIC, Morrison remained popular with the electorate and had the continued support of *The Times-Picayune* editorial staff. However, in March of 1955 Kohn had a reversal of fortune in public opinion and

¹⁰² *The Times-Picayune*, “Police Probe Progress,” 16 Feb. 1954, 10.

¹⁰³ In March 1954, the Commission Council was replaced by the City Council under the new 1954 city charter.

¹⁰⁴ Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison*, 206.

¹⁰⁵ SCIC, Final Report, Volume 1, 6 Dec. 1954, folder 1, box 24, New Orleans (La.) Commission Council/City Council. Special Citizens Investigating Committee Records, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (New Orleans, LA.).

even received public support when he was jailed for contempt for ten days for refusing to name his confidential sources to the grand jury. According to Haas, “the investigator became a martyr for the cause of law enforcement. Many indignant citizens... protested the decision[,]... formed a citizens’ sympathy committee... [and] marched on City Hall. The crowd numbered two thousand.”¹⁰⁶ *The Times-Picayune* carried the story of the protest on the front page and withheld any editorial on the subject.¹⁰⁷ Its editorial staff was somewhat sympathetic to Kohn, painting him as noble if not misguided in his refusal to give up his sources. The March 25, 1955, editorial “Kohn in Jail” ends by noting: “The Kohn imprisonment... will tend to maintain public interest in the police investigation that has moved from the hands of one group to another and is temporarily the main business of the police investigation bureau under Mr. Guy Bannister.”¹⁰⁸ Bannister was a police officer, and like Kohn, a former FBI agent, who came to New Orleans in January 1955, tasked with investigating corruption in the NOPD. Heading up the newly formed Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI), Bannister’s internal corruption investigation was publicly supported by Morrison. However, the mayor attempted to undermine his investigation every chance possible. Bannister eventually rose to become Assistant Superintendent of Police before being dismissed in March 1957 for drunkenly pulling a gun on patrons at a French Quarter bar and threatening to kill them.¹⁰⁹ From the tone of the 1955 “Kohn in Jail” editorial, it seems that *The Times-Picayune* editorial staff did not necessarily love the mayor and the police department

¹⁰⁶ Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison*, 211.

¹⁰⁷ *The Times-Picayune*, “Crime Commission Probe to Finish Urged at Rally,” 29 Mar. 1955, 1.

¹⁰⁸ *The Times-Picayune*, “Kohn in Jail,” 25 Mar. 1955, 10.

¹⁰⁹ *State Times*, “Guy Bannister Will Return to Duty on June 1,” 3 Apr. 1957, 23.

Bannister was reinstated after the gun incident, but in a capacity that gave him no real input or power. He resigned due to this only a few days later.

more than they simply disliked Aaron Kohn. Morrison and his machine used the same dirty tricks on Bannister as they had on Kohn, but Bannister elicited sympathy from *The Times-Picayune* where Kohn did not. In 1955 Bannister had not yet become a publicly divisive character as Kohn had. A nod in favor of Bannister served notice to Morrison that he could not curry favor with the press forever, but he could beat Aaron Kohn in a popularity contest any day judged by *The Times-Picayune* editors.

Ultimately, some small changes emerged from the SCIC investigation, hearings, and published report. In January 1954, Assistant Police Superintendent Milton Durel retired. Police Superintendent Scheuering was indicted, suspended, had the charges dropped and he was eventually reinstated in January 1955. He would be forcibly retired in May 1955, under a deal constructed by Morrison that would allow Scheuering to keep what public dignity he had left. In January 1955, Mayor Morrison created the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI) to conduct internal investigations of the department, although the results were mixed at best as Morrison and his machine continued to stonewall subsequent investigations with the same zeal they had exhibited throughout Morrison's mayoral career.

Kohn Continues the Fight

Epilogue¹¹⁰

On Saturday, May 1, 1954, Aaron Kohn, released from his official duties as the chief investigator of the SCIC, became the first executive director of the MCC, immediately after his

¹¹⁰ The following is not intended to be a detailed account of Kohn's career after the SCIC hearings, but to provide specific examples of how he continued to harness the media during his decades in charge of the MCC. Much work remains to be done on Aaron Kohn's career with the MCC.

tenure with the SCIC ended.¹¹¹ This had been the plan since his arrival in the summer of 1953. MCC President Richard Foster, a local business man, had been one of the citizens responsible for the formation of the SCIC. The local organizers of the SCIC had agreed to hire a mutual investigator who would “manage the police probe and later become executive director of the crime commission.”¹¹²

Kohn ran the MCC much the same way he had the SCIC, but now he was freed from the oversight of professed allies who repeatedly attempted to sabotage his efforts. He continued to utilize confidential informants in his investigations. In an internal MCC investigative report from February 1, 1963, confidential informant number six detailed the comings and goings of underworld racketeers from out of town at the Black Magic Lounge, where the informant was a bartender.¹¹³ Confidential informants would remain a mainstay of Kohn’s investigative tactics.

Kohn also continued to use the media to push his citizen crime fighter agenda, often more effectively than during the SCIC investigation. In January 1967, when Kohn was informed that Louisiana Governor John J. McKeithen had accepted Joe Marcello, brother of notorious gangster Carlos Marcello, as an honorary colonel in the governor’s administration, Kohn used the media to protest and to get the governor to back down. Overlooked, the original story appeared in the *States-Item*, and was relayed to Kohn by an FBI agent friend. Kohn used his connection to WDSU Baton Rouge reporter Jack Kemp to publicize the story. Kemp scored an interview with Governor McKeithen on WDSU on January 11, 1967, and the governor backpedaled. According to an internal MCC investigative report: “When WDSU reporters interviewed Governor

¹¹¹ *The Times-Picayune*, “Speed In Report Study Is Sought,” 30 Apr. 1954, 35.

¹¹² Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison*, 195.

¹¹³ MCC, Investigative Report, 1 Feb. 1963, folder Criminal Organization-Interstate, box 2 President John F. Kennedy: Assassination of to Police/Politics, Rackets, Alliance Louisiana, Records of the New Orleans Metropolitan Crime Commission, JFK Assassination Records, National Archives, (College Park, MD.)

McKeithen... he claimed that when he issued the honorary colonel's commission, he believed that it was for a man named Joseph Marcello; [...] that if this commission was issued to the brother of Carlos Marcello, that it would have been recalled.”¹¹⁴

In conjunction with media outreach to further his investigations, Kohn went one step further and in the latter half of the 1950s, he created the MCC's own publication, *The Watchdog*.¹¹⁵ With *The Watchdog*, Kohn now had his own bully pulpit and no longer needed to rely solely on media run by others. *The Watchdog* ran articles educating the public about various types of criminal rackets along with pieces trumpeting the successes of the MCC. The arrogance of which many of Kohn's enemies accused him is at times on full display in *The Watchdog*. An issue from July 20, 1968, contains an article entitled “Who is Aaron Kohn?” A laudatory piece, the article trumpets Kohn's FBI background and investigative prowess. No praise is spared. After five paragraphs in, Kohn is made to sound like a cross between Sherlock Holmes and Elliot Ness; the article concludes, “More on our Managing Director in later issues.”¹¹⁶ As J. Edgar Hoover had done with the FBI, Kohn worked to build a cult of personality within the MCC.

During Kohn's early days in New Orleans with the SCIC, Mayor Morrison's regime consumed most of Kohn's attention. After Kohn joined the MCC, his investigative attention turned to Carlos Marcello, the reported head of La Cosa Nostra in Louisiana, who was based out of Jefferson Parish. In March of 1959, Kohn had testified before the US Senate Labor-Management committee that “the Mafia Mob is headed by Carlos Marcello and operates in

¹¹⁴ MCC, Investigative Report, 10 Feb. 1967, folder Police/Politics/Rackets/Organized Crime, box 2 President John F. Kennedy: Assassination of to Police/Politics, Rackets, Alliance Louisiana, Records of the New Orleans Metropolitan Crime Commission, JFK Assassination Records, National Archives, (College Park, MD.)

¹¹⁵ The earliest known issue of *The Watchdog* found by the author is from July 1958.

¹⁰⁴ *The Watchdog*, “Who is Aaron Kohn?” June 1968, 3-4.

Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, and Missouri.”¹¹⁷ Newspapers like the *Morning Advocate* followed the hearings closely and reported daily on them. This was just the beginning of Kohn’s public crusade against Marcello. If Kohn could not bring down corrupt politicians, he would bring down the man who he claimed corrupted them. From the late 1950s on, Kohn would hound Marcello every chance and way he could, whether by testifying during Senate hearings, blasting Marcello in the mainstream press, or in *The Watchdog*, until Kohn finally retired from the MCC in 1978.

Continuing his use of media, Kohn also used television to make frequent charges against Marcello and his associates, and Marcello was not shy about responding, sometimes legally. In January of 1970, Marcello and an associate, bail bondsman Nick Cristina, sued Kohn for slander. According to Cristina, Kohn linked Marcello and Cristina during a televised talk.¹¹⁸ Marcello refused to testify and the suit was shortly dismissed.¹¹⁹ If Kohn was going to attempt to make Marcello’s life miserable, Marcello was content to do the same to Kohn. This was not the first or the last slander case filed against Kohn by Marcello or his alleged associates, and as before, Kohn would not be deterred.¹²⁰ The February 1970 *The Watchdog* boldly proclaimed: “The MCC... will continue its program of organized crime education through speeches, luncheon meetings, billboards, and free tv and radio opportunities. In the process...we expect to be sued or threatened periodically by those attempting to maintain the false veneer of respectability.”¹²¹

¹¹⁷ *Morning Advocate*, “Mafia Said Protected in Jeff. Parish as Base of Operations,” 24 Mar. 1959, 1.

¹¹⁸ *State Times*, “Marcello Attempt Not to Testify in Slander Case Nixed,” 31 Jan. 1970, 3.

¹¹⁹ Marcello was not allowed to plead the Fifth Amendment in a slander lawsuit so he refused to testify.

¹²⁰ *Sunday Advocate*, “Slander Suit Filed Against N.O. Crime Head,” 5 Apr. 1979, 12.

Two months after the Marcello/Cristina suit was dismissed, the La Strade Inn Inc. filed a slander suit against Kohn for linking a motel owned by the corporation to Marcello.

¹²¹ Aaron M. Kohn, “Battle Plan to Defeat Louisiana’s La Cosa Nostra,” *The Watchdog*, Feb. 1970, 3.

The Watchdog devoted most of its space to fingering Marcello as the head of organized crime in Louisiana and the surrounding states. The column “Hoods’ Who” was dedicated to this purpose. In the February 1969 *The Watchdog*, “Hoods’ Who,” showed a diagram of the local La Cosa Nostra power structure, with Carlos Marcello, the only named person on the chart, occupying the top spot of Boss.¹²² Aaron Kohn could not have been clearer in his accusations, and *The Watchdog* provided him an unbridled forum to make them.

Whether through public speaking, newspaper, television, or his own newsletter, Aaron Kohn continued to harness the media during his approximately twenty-five year battle against corruption and organized crime with the MCC until 1978 when the veteran crime fighter finally decided to retire. Just as he had failed to topple Mayor Morrison, Aaron Kohn never was successful in his mission to put Carlos Marcello in prison. There was no victory to be had in his chosen quest, just endless, thankless toil that eventually nobody, not even the infatigable Aaron Kohn, could maintain. Kohn had been retired for eleven years before he died of cancer on Wednesday May 3, 1989, at Touro Hospital.¹²³ The Kohn Show was over.

Final Analysis

Aaron Kohn had the right blueprint to harness the media during the SCIC hearings, but he encountered too much organized obstructionism. Nothing changed too much with City Hall or the police department in the wake of the SCIC hearings. Kohn’s relationships with the media during the hearings were mixed. Kohn and WDSU had a working relationship throughout the SCIC investigation and hearings that brought Kohn threats of violence. This relationship did bear some fruit with the one television broadcast of the hearings that was shown early in the

¹²² *The Watchdog*, “Hoods’ Who,” Feb. 1969, 3.

¹²³ John Pope, “Retired Crime Commission Chief Aaron Kohn Dies at 78,” *The Times-Picayune*, 5 May, 1989, B7.

proceedings, but the filming of witnesses was quickly quashed by Judge Hamlin. Ultimately the effectiveness of the relationship between Kohn and WDSU during the SCIC hearings was stymied by Judge Hamlin's injunction. Kohn's relationships with newspapers, positive during the investigations, soured quickly during the SCIC hearings. Even though these relationships would eventually recover, Kohn was abandoned by the press when his investigation most needed their support. *The Times-Picayune's* editorial staff's decision to eventually side with Mayor Morrison and the police department was a great disservice to Kohn and the SCIC objectives. These failures with the press likely contributed to Kohn creating *The Watchdog* when he joined the MCC as its executive director. In *The Watchdog*, Kohn could control his own content and publish whatever he wanted. Some articles could be considered objective, but most of *The Watchdog* was purely editorial, sometimes with Kohn's arrogant bent on full display. Unrestrained by city authority, Kohn used *The Watchdog* to educate citizens and fight organized crime as well as create his own cult of personality. A complex man, Aaron Kohn could be selfless and selfish at the same time in pursuit of his two main driving forces, justice and attention.

The Kefauver model of using the media to draw public attention and support necessary to foster successful investigations into criminal activity, a model that worked so well at the national level during the Kefauver Hearings mostly failed in Aaron Kohn's hands at the local level during the SCIC investigations and hearings. Not only was Kohn an outsider attempting to bring down an established system of corruption, but Kohn also lacked Kefauver's title and resources. The obstacles put in Kohn's way by Morrison and his machine proved to be powerful enough to subvert the SCIC hearings and to allow Morrison to keep his political skin and remain in office until 1961. In the end, regardless of Kohn's meticulous organization, keen mind, and tireless

work ethic, he lost the opening battle in what would prove to be a lifelong war against crime in New Orleans. Aaron Kohn took on a machine destined to beat him.

Despite his lack of success, Aaron Kohn was not a minor figure in New Orleans history, despite the lack of scholarly attention given to his career. As part of the organized push to clean up New Orleans in the early 1950s, his efforts to help reform the city government and police department were deemed a true threat to those in power and caused Mayor Morrison to oppose Kohn in any way possible and every chance he could, whether through rumor mongering or threatening letters. A closer examination of the obstacles faced by Kohn and the reasons he failed during his stint with the SCIC might be relevant to contemporary efforts to quash corruption in a department overseen by the federal government. As long as politicians and the police continue to protect and serve their own self-interests above those of the citizenry, corruption will remain despite the best efforts of people like Aaron Kohn.

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