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pen to debate

JFK assassination panel hears theories while it hunts for files in Dallas

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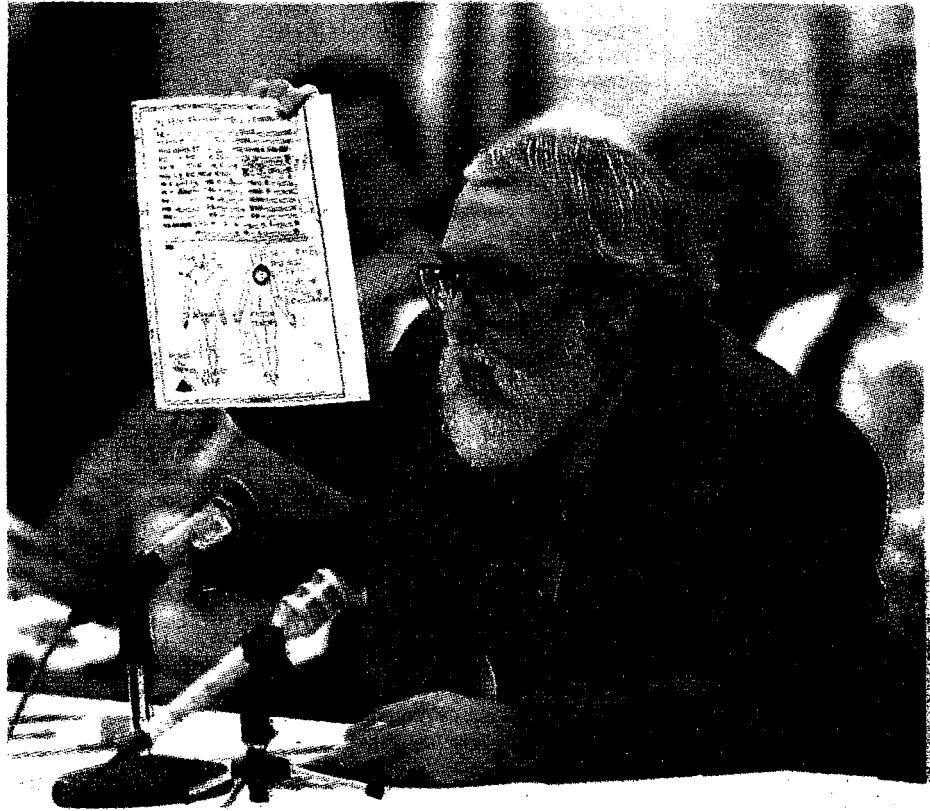
They came not to praise conspiracy theories or to bury them.

Instead, the five members of an independent federal panel hunting JFK assassination records brandished the government's newest strategy in America's most controversial murder case: openness.

Friday in downtown Dallas, the Assassination Records Review Board held a daylong public hearing saturated with more speculation about a 31-year cover-up than specific leads about where to look for hidden documents.

In a long meeting room at the Earle Cabell Federal Building, board members sat beneath the emblems of various government agencies, some of which are still withholding records related to the Nov. 22, 1963, assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

About 50 people turned out to listen to the wide-ranging comments; 20 of them. Please see JFK on Page 35A.



The Dallas Morning News: Ariane Kadoch

Jim Marrs, whose conspiracy-based book helped form the foundation for the movie *JFK*, speaks at Friday's hearing in Dallas. He said he doubted the panel's power to find hidden documents.

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spoke.

They covered many of the case's infamous theories: that sniper Lee Harvey Oswald did not fire the only shots and had help in the planning; that he had links to the CIA and the Soviet Union; that anti-Castro Cuban exiles or the Mafia were behind it; that Oswald knew his killer, Jack Ruby; even that there was more than one Oswald.

One man began his remarks lightheartedly, holding up his bottle of Dr Pepper and telling the board that he also enjoys "Lee Harvey Oswald's favorite drink."

The members' quest is to locate and unseal as complete a public record as possible, not to reinvestigate President Kennedy's death or to resolve the persistent questions surrounding the case.

But board members showed a willingness to listen to whoever came their way and agreed that their mission to dispel years of secrecy involves a good dose of public relations.

"We need to give people an opportunity to tell the government what they think, which is so important because the government's response to the assassination and the aftermath was so secretive," board chairman Jack Tunheim said as the panelists walked the 1963 route of the Kennedy motorcade during their lunch break. They became the most influential tourist group to visit Dealey Plaza since members of the House Assassination Committee 17 years ago.

The panel tolerated speakers taking as much time as they wanted, although the members' attentiveness seemed to be tested during parts of the five-hour discourse.

Many people urged the board, which was given broad subpoena powers when it was created by Congress in 1992, to force the hand of government agencies at every possible turn. But there are many doubters.

"I can't for a minute believe these people are going to be given carte blanche to sensitive documents. There's too many ways to hide them," writer Jim Marrs said after serving as lead-off witness.



The Dallas Morning News: Ariane Kadoch

Members of the Assassination Records Review Board — (from left) Dr. Kermit Hall, Jack Tunheim, Dr. Anna K. Nelson and Dr. William L. Joyce — listen Friday to Adele E.U. Edisen of San Antonio.

Mr. Marrs' conspiracy-based book helped form the foundation for the Oliver Stone movie *JFK*. Despite widespread public criticism of the movie's speculative and fictional nature, it sparked a furor in 1992 that led to the creation of the records review board.

Mr. Tunheim acknowledged the irony. "It is pretty amazing, isn't it?" he said. "The movie was the only information a whole new generation of Americans had, and they felt that their government was behind the assassination of the president."

Congress initially considered ordering all relevant records unsealed, then authorized the review to sidestep constitutional issues.

The review board will decide, in effect, what Americans should know and when they should know it.

The law already has loosed the floodgates, with at least 25 agencies poring over files and determining what they will release.

In the past two years, the FBI and CIA, the two largest repositories for assassination-related records, have released more than 550 boxes of documents containing roughly 1 million pages, said Steve Tilley.

head of the National Archives' JFK Collection, where the records are being massed.

An unknown number of documents have been withheld or have omissions. The federal board can challenge those suppressions and force the records open if their revelation does not compromise government intelligence interests, presidential protection methods or individuals' personal privacy.

In cases where documents remain closed, Mr. Tunheim said board members favor opening them relatively soon, perhaps in five to 10 years, rather than the law's maximum of 25.

The public hearing in Dallas was the board's second, following one in Washington five weeks ago.

In Dallas, Dr. Gary Aguilar, head of surgery at a San Francisco hospital, used a human skull to point out discrepancies in bullet entry points on the president's head and to call for the release of autopsy records.

The only person to express support for the Warren Commission's conclusion that Oswald acted alone was David Murrah, a Texas Tech University librarian administrator. He derided many of his fellow witnesses.

He said there were no public requests until 1992 to view the school's collection of more than 6,000 JFK documents bequeathed by Waggoner Carr, Texas attorney general from 1963 to 1967.

"Careful and meticulous scholars would have and should have utilized this material long ago," he told the board.

Robert Vernon, a TV producer, said he found a Joliet, Ill., prison inmate who admits firing the fatal shot and has confessed on videotape.

His video, CD-ROM and book are due out soon.

The assassination personalities included Beverly Oliver Massegee, who claims she was the "babushka lady," who appears in photos to have been taking home movies of the president's limousine as he was shot.

She said her undeveloped film was confiscated two days later by a purported FBI agent.

Mrs. Massegee, who has just published a book on her experiences, said she never intended to be a public figure in the case.

She and many of those who testified are in Dallas this weekend for what has become an annual for-profit JFK symposium in November. It began Friday night and continues through Tuesday, the anniversary date.

Speakers and board members called the panel the country's last chance to compile a complete assassination record. It may be the final official inquiry into the 20th century's greatest national obsession.

Board members say they know they won't be able to please critics who believe agencies already are shredding records.

"They think we can't get at something that doesn't exist, and you can't find it because someone's already destroyed it," said board member Kermit Hall.

Mr. Tunheim does not expect a reopening of the case.

"I think it's unlikely that after 30 years any record exists that would be so astonishing as to change the way an entire country looks at the assassination," he said. "But I do keep an open mind."

TO: H. WEISBERG

HAC - THE UNDERLINGS

& PENCILLED IN COMMENTS

ARE NOT MINE - SOME ONE
WHO SENT ME THIS ARTICLE
DID IT!

- Hal Vee