

25 years ago, Warren panel pulled the wool over our eyes

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Today marks the 25th anniversary of a great and murky evasion: the release of the Warren Commission Report on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. On this date, Chief Justice Earl Warren hand-delivered a bound copy of the report to a somber President Lyndon B. Johnson.

The commission's final product, a 900-page tome with 26 volumes of testimony and exhibits, was immediately touted by the government and the press as both comprehensive and definitive. Nearly one year after Dallas, the American people could rest easy again. The crime of the century was solved.

It was a therapeutic day, but a hollow one. Over the past 25 years, the initial credibility assigned to the Warren Report has fallen into tatters. The report's assumptions and conclusions have been ingeniously attacked by private citizens, revised significantly in 1979 by the House Select Committee on Assassinations, and generally dismissed by a skeptical public. Its findings are widely regarded as transparently biased and politically motivated. The nation still has no satisfactory resolution to the mystery.

At the heart of the confusion linger grave questions as to why Chief Justice Warren and the other commissioners — men of national stature — signed off on a report that willfully refused to confront the essential facts of the Kennedy assassination. While we may never know the full truth, a large collection of government documents throws light on the internal workings of the Warren Commission. These documents — readily available through the Freedom of Information Act but largely ignored for years — help to reveal why the commission decided to conspire with the administration and the FBI in falsifying our national history.

To be fair to the Warren Commission and its legal staff, the "solution" to the Kennedy assassination was fabricated at the highest reaches of government before the commission was even constituted. Just two or three days after the act, the White House and FBI worked out a politically acceptable solution — that JFK was killed by a lone-nut gunman with vague pro-Communist sympathies.

President Johnson, in collaboration with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, apparently decided that an open and unfettered investigation was not in the national interest. The contrived version of the Nov. 22 assassination quickly took bureaucratic form in an FBI secret report (Commission Document 1, or CD-1) completed around Dec. 6 and transmitted to the Warren Commission three days later. In a little over three weeks, Hoover and his FBI had solved the case.

CD-1 concluded that Oswald was the lone assassin and there was no evidence of conspiracy. CD-1 contained less than 450 words on the murder itself, omitted a wound in Kennedy's throat, and ignored a missed shot that struck a bystander. Anyone who undertakes a fair evaluation of CD-1 cannot escape the conclusion that Hoover and the FBI had no idea what happened on November 22, 1963.

Warren Commission members soon became very aware that they were being manipulated. Their work was already done for them and they merely had to ratify a predetermined solution. This shock of recognition was dramatically reflected in the commission's executive session of Jan. 22, 1964, in which general counsel J. Lee Rankin objects to CD-1's conclusion that Oswald was alone and there was no conspiracy:

Rankin: "In my experience with the FBI they don't do that. They claim they don't evaluate, and it is uniform prior experience they don't do that. Secondly, they have not run out of all kinds of leads in Mexico or



AP file photo

Chief Justice Earl Warren presents findings to President Lyndon Johnson.

in Russia and so forth. . . ."

Commission member Allen W. Dulles replied by expressing puzzlement over the FBI's rush to judgment in CD-1. But Congressman Hale Boggs understood Rankin's line of thinking:

Boggs: "I can immediately . . ."

Rankin: "They would like to have us fold up and quit."

Boggs: "This closes the case; you see. Don't you see?"

Dulles: "Yes, I see that."

Rankin: "They found the man. There is nothing more to do. The commission supports their conclusions, and we can go home and that is the end of it."

Clearly distressed, Dulles requested that all records of this session be destroyed. Warren reluctantly agreed. However, the day's conversations *did* survive, only because a stray stenographic tape escaped erasure.

Commission member Richard Russell, the powerful Democratic senator from Georgia, complained bitterly about leaks from CD-1 to the press but was assured by Hoover that they did not originate with the FBI. However, when these covert press releases were discussed in the commission's Dec. 5, 1963 executive session, Acting Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach confirmed that the FBI was deliberately leaking.

Before the commission called its first witness or examined any of the physical evidence, it was being boxed in, manipulated and pressured to accept the White House/FBI version of the assassination.

The Warren Commission acquiesced to this pressure and spent the remaining nine months behind closed doors attempting to reconcile the bitter reality with a public report that needed to be made before the American electorate went to the polls in November. The commission was powerless to battle this kind of intimidation without igniting a devastating confrontation that might have shaken the country to its roots.

Truth, in short, became irrelevant in the investigation of the assassination of an American president.

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