

On Laying Murders to Rest

If the United States keeps reopening investigations of the assassination of President Kennedy, a New Republic writer recently suggested, well then let Italy reopen an inquiry into the assassination of Julius Caesar. "Whose word do we have anyhow that Caesar said 'Et tu, Brute!'" If he said no such thing the whole story is wide open." Such acid comment was prompted by the House Assassinations Committee and was surely justified by the way it began investigating the murders of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. and the conspiracy theories generated by both. Poisonous feuds and lurid leaks soon made the committee look even more irresponsible than the fearful fantasies.

But then came a new chairman, Representative Louis Stokes of Cleveland, and a new chief counsel, G. Robert Blakey, of Cornell Law School. Abruptly, the leaks stopped and the committee's work became disciplined. If it continues on its prudent course, the committee will make two important contributions after all.

The first concerns the billow of conspiracy theories generated by the Dallas assassination: the Russians did it; no, the Cubans; no, the Mafia. A Soviet writer now claims that it was *Peking*, in cahoots with the Mafia. Some critics thought the Warren Commission naive, or worse, for believing that the same, barely damaged bullet, could have struck both President Kennedy and Governor Connally. Others, referring to an umbrella twisting up and down in an amateur film

of the assassination, insisted that an "umbrella man" was sending trigger signals.

In airing such theories it first appeared that the House committee was putting the Warren Commission on trial. Instead, the committee has put the conspiracy theories on trial — and found them invalid. For instance, using new technology, it proved the validity of the "magic bullet" theory. And it located the umbrella man — an insurance salesman who says he was heckling President Kennedy that sunny day by flaunting the symbol of Neville Chamberlain's appeasement.

The committee appears, so far, to have pursued the King investigation with equal diligence. James Earl Ray, who originally confessed to killing Dr. King, insists now that he was set up by a mysterious Raoul — whose name he spells Roual. The committee's rigorous cross-examination has made the Ray claim of innocence sound as improbable as his spelling.

It may be that the committee's Memphis investigation will be more important even than its assessment of the events in Dallas. The Martin Luther King murder has never before been officially studied. There is no formal record against which to test suspicions or theories — even now that new ones have arisen from the disclosure of F.B.I. efforts to discredit Dr. King. The case ought not be left, like Caesar's, only to historians. There is a real need for responsible scrutiny of the murder in Memphis, and the Assassinations Committee appears to be filling it at last.