

# Last opportunity to solve the mystery

By Gary Owens

The writer teaches history at the University of Western Ontario

For many people, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy stands as an ugly crack in time. Rightly or wrongly, the feeling persists that the more unfortunate events of American history over the past 15 years — including Watergate, the Vietnam war, and the political violence which rocked the country during the late 60s and early 70s — somehow traced themselves to that dark day in Dallas a decade and a half ago. What makes it all the worse is the prevailing notion that the full story of the assassination has not been told. According to the most recent Gallup poll, four out of five Americans believe that if Lee Harvey Oswald acted at all in shooting the president, he did not act alone.

On Monday the House of Representatives select committee on assassinations is scheduled to begin public hearings on both the J.F.K. and Martin Luther King assassinations in the latest effort to solve the mystery that refused to go away. The committee will focus first on the King shooting and will hold hearings on the Kennedy assassination through the autumn.

Few people who have followed the Kennedy case closely over the years believe that these sessions will uncover a smoking gun. But most hope the committee will at least provide more satisfactory answers to the hundreds of questions surrounding the assassination than government officials, particularly the Warren Commission, have put forth in the past.

Time has not been kind to the Warren Commission or its report. It is now well known that the commission conducted an overly hurried investigation, that it was reluctant to follow leads that pointed in the direction of a conspiracy, and that the White House and justice department expected the panel to produce its "lone-gun" verdict from the start.

It was partly to rectify the inadequacies of the Warren inquiry and partly to ease public pressure to reopen the case that the House created the select committee on assassinations in September, 1976. Within weeks of its inception, however, the 12-man body had become an embarrassment on Capitol Hill and appeared headed for certain destruction. Well publicized squabbles between the committee chairman and chief counsel, together with requests for \$13 million to hire a staff of more than 200 and purchase an array of electronic bugging devices, unleashed a storm of opposition in the House. The committee was allowed to continue only after its chairman and chief counsel agreed to resign in the spring of 1977.

Under its new chairman, Louis Stokes of Ohio, and chief counsel, G. Robert Blakey, the committee immediately shaved its budget to \$2.8 million, imposed a total news blackout on its proceedings, and put together a staff of some 150 investigators. Over the past year and a half the body has been gathering and computerizing information drawn from more than 1,500 interviews and stacks of FBI and intelligence files. It has also asked the courts to grant use-immunity to an estimated 100 or more witnesses.

Despite the year-long news blackout, it is apparent that the committee is retracing some of the Warren Commission's steps and at the same time

is pushing into new areas of investigation. In a short interim report issued last January, the select committee noted that it has conducted highly sophisticated analyses of bullet fragments found at the scene of the Kennedy shooting to determine whether more than one gun was involved.

In most of its most controversial findings, the Warren Commission concluded that Kennedy was first wounded by a bullet that passed through his neck and went on to lodge in Texas Governor John Connally who was seated directly in front of him. Recent improvements in a technique called neutron activation analysis, which can measure parts per billion in metals, should tell whether fragments removed from Connally's body came from the bullet that allegedly wounded both men. If these tests show the fragments were from another bullet, there is a strong likelihood that a second sniper took part in the assassination. The committee has also run similar tests on a bullet fragment discovered three years ago in Dealey Plaza where the murder took place.

In a related area, the committee has called upon a number of forensic pathologists to re-examine evidence from the Kennedy autopsy. Private researchers have long been frustrated in their efforts to gain complete access to this material which could be a key element in discovering whether a lone gunman killed the president.

The committee has also gathered more than 1,000 photographs relating to the assassination, including movies and stills taken at the time of the murder which the Warren Commission did not examine. In addition, staff members have obtained acoustic recordings of the shooting which until now were believed to be non-existent.

The new areas which the committee is investi-

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gating have mainly to do with identifying possible conspirators. It has been suggested, for example, that members of organized crime and the anti-Castro Cuban community plotted JFK's death.

A recent Senate investigation revealed that a mob and groups of Cubans worked with the CIA in a series of assassination attempts against Fidel Castro in the 1960s. It is believed that at some point these men switched their target to Kennedy, hoping in the process to pin the blame on a known Castro sympathizer and thus rally public sentiment behind a new invasion of Cuba. The restoration of an anti-Castro regime in Havana would, among other things, allow the syndicate to resume its multi-million dollar gambling and heroin operations which were cut off when Castro took power in 1959.

Under this scenario, the JFK assassination also became a means of settling old scores. For the underworld it halted the Kennedy administration's unprecedented crack-down on their activities. For the anti-Castro Cubans it brought revenge for Kennedy's refusal to supply air cover during the Bay of Pigs invasion and it ended Washington's efforts in mid-1963 to resume normal relations with Cuba.

Recent events and revelations have heightened speculation along these lines. Since 1975, three major syndicate figures have been murdered who were wanted for congressional questioning in connection with the Kennedy assassination. The three had also been recruited by the CIA in 1961 to take part in the various plots to murder Castro.

One of them, Sam Giancana, was shot in his kitchen in June, 1975, a few days before he was to appear before the Senate intelligence committee. The body of the second victim, John Roselli, was found stuffed into an oil drum and floating in the Gulf of Mexico three months after he testified before the same committee about the assassination. Shortly after the select committee on assassinations tried to contact him last year, Charles Nicoletti, the third victim, was discovered dead at the wheel of his car with multiple gunshot wounds in the back of his head.

A more familiar name that continues to surface in connection with the mob's possible involvement in the assassination is that of Jack Ruby. Though the Warren Commission portrayed him as an unstable patriot whose grief jolted him into gunning down Oswald, disclosures about his background have given researchers grounds for suspicion. Among these are alleged meetings Ruby held with Roselli in the two months before the assassination and earlier visits he made to Cuba to confer with mob chieftan Santos Trafficanti. It was Trafficanti who ran the Syndicate's gambling empire in Havana and who later orchestrated the efforts to kill Castro.

Before last year's news blackout, the select committee summoned Trafficanti to appear at one of its hearings but he refused to answer questions concerning his friendship with Ruby or his knowledge of the assassination. It has since been learned that the committee has interviewed a former Trafficanti associate, Loran Hall, who has stated publicly that in the summer of 1963 he turned down an offer of \$50,000 to kill Kennedy. He also claims that he heard a Cuban exile mention Lee Harvey Oswald's name in conversation prior to the assassination.

Oswald continues to be a focus of attention in the current probe. The committee has been investigating new leads on his background, including allegations that during his two-year stay in Russia he was recruited by Soviet intelligence to perform espionage work in the U.S.

The committee is also taking seriously a mys-



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terious letter bearing Oswald's signature which turned up in 1975. Addressed to a Mr. Hunt and dated less than two weeks before the assassination, the letter asks for "information concerning my position" and requests a meeting to "discuss the matter fully before any steps are taken by me or anyone else." FBI experts last year confirmed that the handwriting was Oswald's.

If such things can be measured by the amount of writing devoted to them, it can be said that more is known about the Kennedy assassination than any single event in history. In the past 15 years, hundreds of books and thousands of articles have appeared, supplemented by mountains of documents released from government files.

The select committee is charged with the awesome responsibility of making more sense of the highly complex case than anyone has done so far. The job is made more difficult by the passage of time; some leads have grown cold and a number of key witnesses are dead.

But the task is not impossible. If the majority of Americans are correct and a conspiracy did exist to kill the president, the years should make no difference. After all, other cases have been solved long after the event. If the Warren Commission was right and Oswald acted entirely alone, the committee can at least do a better job of proving it.

Not that the Kennedy assassination will ever be "solved" in the manner of a detective novel. There are too many loose ends that can never be tied up. But the committee can certainly deal with the troublesome ones in a more thorough way than has been done in the past.

Most likely this will be the final chance. If this body, with its money and manpower, does not provide a more plausible explanation of what happened in Dallas, the Kennedy assassination will remain the most important and ominous mystery of our century.