

JFK probe facts

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The House Select Committee on Assassinations has had to overcome some extraordinary obstacles in its search for the truth behind the murder of John F. Kennedy 15 years ago today.

It managed to survive continuous fiscal pressure from congressional critics and an internal squabble that led to the departure of the committee chairman and chief counsel.

But now the committee faces its greatest challenge — getting its findings accepted by the American public.

Only two years ago, a Gallup poll showed that 80 percent of the American people believed that a conspiracy was behind the assassination.

In a few weeks, the committee (HSCA will release a report that will probably tell those people that they were wrong, that the evidence proves that Lee Harvey Oswald killed the President on his own.

COMMITTEE member and Indiana Second District Rep. Floyd Fithian said the committee conducted a superb, thorough investigation that should set reasonable minds at rest.

That does not satisfy the critics of the Warren Commission, President Johnson's panel to investigate the assassination, who have long argued the case for a conspiracy and coverup. They charge that the com-

mittee entered its investigation with preconceived notions, mishandled witnesses and lacked the insight or courage to perform an adequate probe.

The critics' calls for a new investigation of the assassination lacked widespread congressional support until the mid-1970s when it was learned that the FBI and CIA withheld important information from the commission.

FITHIAN himself originally was opposed to a new investigation. "I accepted it (Warren Commission report) as the whole story. I felt that historically every generation comes along and wants to inquire into whatever sensational political assassination occurred," the former Purdue history professor said.

He said he changed his mind after Purdue students began asking him solid, responsible questions about the case — questions Fithian could not answer even after digging for the facts. Finally, 13 years after the assassination, the HSCA was created in 1976 to investigate the murders of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King. The committee is expected to complete the final report on its \$5 million study by the end of the year.

FITHIAN joined the panel in early 1977 to replace a member who had retired. "I think I was selected primarily because I had professional training as an his-



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torian. They probably weren't looking for another lawyer," he said.

At the time, the committee probably needed a referee more than an historian. Chairman Henry Gonzalez (D-Tex) and chief counsel Richard Sprague began a bitter clash of egos that eventually led to Gonzalez's forced resignation. "Mr. Gonzalez's actions were just destroying the credibility of the committee. And becoming irrational," Fithian said.

SPRAGUE, an unpopular figure in the House because of his abrasive personality and demands for a large budget, was fired two months later because, Fithian said, "We could not win funding and keep Sprague."

With a new chairman and chief counsel, the committee began making progress under a spirit of non-partisanship which Fithian said is unparalleled in his congressional experience.

Some Warren Commission critics say the congressmen clearly were united from the start — united in wanting to prove that Oswald alone killed the President, no matter what the evidence proved.

"From the very beginning, they knew where they were going. Anyone who says otherwise is either a naive jackass or a malicious liar," says Dr. Cyril Wecht, coroner for Pennsylvania's Allegheny County and lone dissenter on the committee's nine-member panel of medical experts.

FITHIAN said only Gonzalez might have had preconceived notions on the Kennedy case. "Our goal was to get at the historical truth and to explore it to its ultimate depth," he said.

Another complaint against the HSCA, as well as against the Warren Commission, is that it didn't

still need 'belief'

allow anyone to present Oswald's case.

"(The) case against Oswald looks as good as it does primarily because no one with equal staff, budget and time has had the opportunity to ... show the world what it is really made of," states the Assassination Information Bureau, a non-profit group devoted to research and public education on what it considers to be the deliberate suppression of the truth behind America's recent political murders.

FITHIAN replied that the committee raised questions and pushed hard for answers that might have indicated Oswald's innocence. But the public must understand that congressional committee hearings are not trials, he said. "The function of a congressional committee is to bring out the facts on something, not to convict anyone."

Anyway, Fithian added, there would be no practical way to organize hearings with an Oswald advocate participating.

For Fithian, some of his work with the committee will stand out clearer than the rest in retrospect. One of the most unforgettable tasks he had to perform was looking at autopsy pictures of the President's body.

"I don't have a very strong stomach," Fithian said. "The first time I saw them I could barely finish looking at the last three plates. Some people say these pictures should be put on the screens so Americans could look at them. What a terrible request. No way. Ever."

FITHIAN said he expects all the documents and testimony that came before the committee will be available to the public, with only a few exceptions for national security purposes.

The critics say they can't comment on the committee's work until its report comes out, but they're not convinced by what they've seen so far.

The committee does not expect to change the critics' minds, Fithian said. "Our

goal is to set out the story for the American public."

BUT WILL the American public buy what the committee is offering? Fithian said that depends on how the media reports the committee's findings.

On the other side, there are those who say the committee's work was a waste of money. Fithian argues that the committee was worth every penny it spent.

"Eighty percent of the American people didn't be-

lieve they had the full story on the Kennedy and King assassinations. A sizable chunk believed in the complicity of the FBI and the number was growing. Can we afford that cancer?" Fithian asked.

"If it turns out some FBI guy was conspiring, you turn it over to the Justice Department and put the guy in the clink. But it's of crucial importance that you try to clarify this.

"Is \$5 million too much for that? No way."