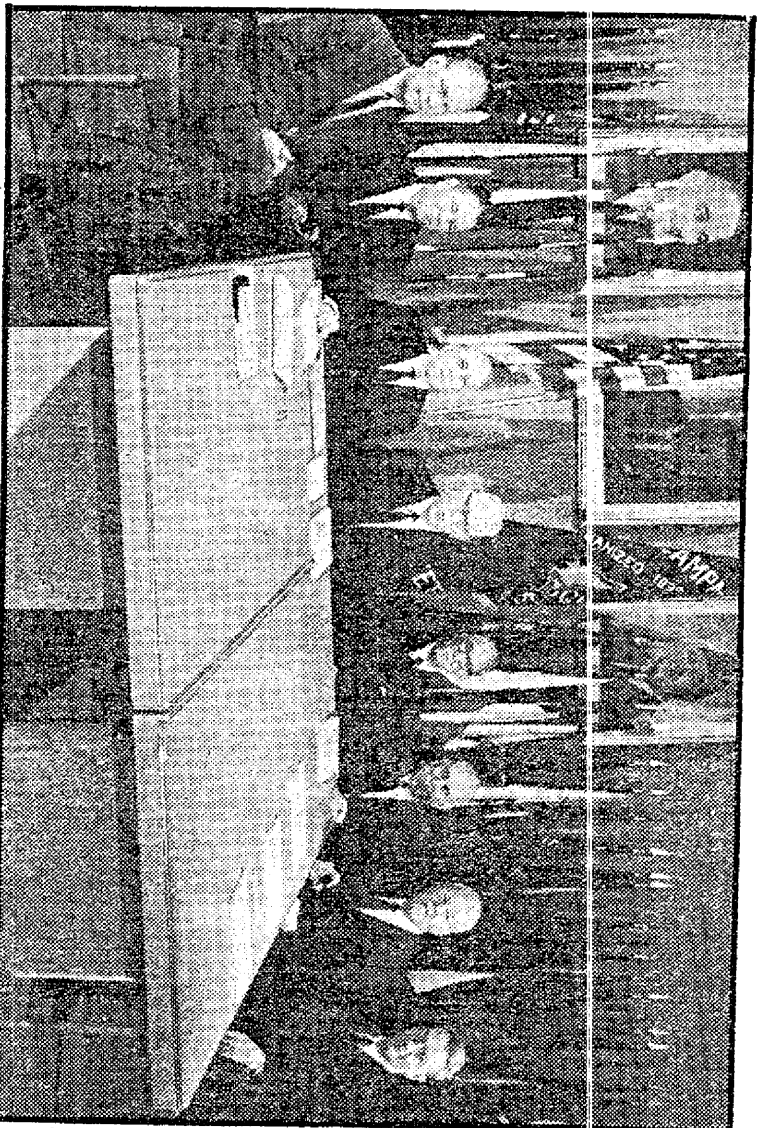


The Nation

Continued

After 15 Years, Plot Theories Still Thicken



HARRIS & EMMING
A 1964 portrait of the Warren Commission. From left: Representatives Gerald Ford and Hale Boggs, Senator Richard B. Russell, Chief Justice Earl Warren, Senator John Sherman Cooper, Presidential adviser John J. McCloy, former C.I.A. director Allen W. Dulles, and J. Lee Rankin, commission counsel.

By JOHN HERBERS

WASHINGTON — The record of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, disbanded last week after a two-year, \$5.8-million investigation, may tell more about the times than the murders of President Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The committee was formed to explore the numerous conspiracy theories surrounding the deaths and to assure the public one way or the other that the Government of the United States had done all it could to arrive at the truth. Although its final report is not out, the committee seems to have come up with just enough evidence to keep the conspiracy circuit buzzing for another 15 years or so, but not enough to quiet those who believe the investigation itself was no more than a political response to public distrust, with little hope of proving or disproving anything.

In its final days, the committee produced some startling testimony. Two acoustics experts testified that a dictabelt recording of sounds from a policeman's motorcycle radio indicated a 95 percent possibility of better of a second gunman at the scene of the Kennedy assassination, and that in addition to the shots fired from the Texas Schoolbook Depository one shot was fired from the grassy knoll ahead and to the right of the President's car. But the trail stops there, with a stilted dictabelt that the Warren Commission felt was not worth examining in detail.

The committee concluded that there "probably" was a conspiracy in Mr. Kennedy's death and a "likelihood" of one in Dr. King's. The controversy surrounding that report underscores the enormous change in attitudes that has taken place in the 15 years since the Warren Commission sat in judgment, and concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.

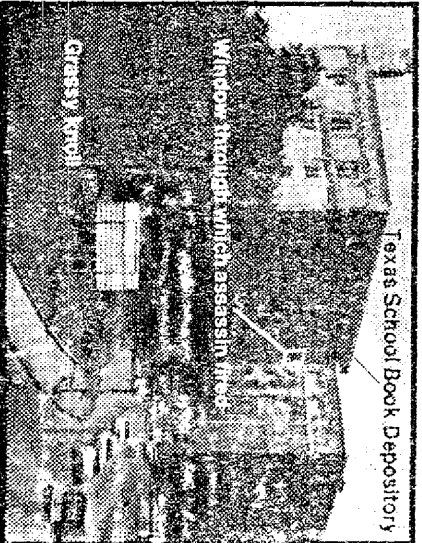
In the gray November days following the President's death and the fatal shooting of Mr. Oswald by Jack Ruby in the police station, reporters from all over the world descended on Dallas. A disproportionate number seemed to have come from France, each having made up his mind that some diabolic conspiracy was behind it all. Conditioned by their own history to conspiratorial assassinations, the French newsmen would argue late into the night with American reporters conditioned by their history of Presidents being killed by psychopaths acting alone.

When the Warren Commission met to consider the evidence, the nation was still grieving the loss of one of its most popular leaders. Trust in authority was

high, especially among liberals, who were encouraged by the Government's activist role against segregation in the South. Members of the commission were products of the time too, holding institutions such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency in almost unquestioning esteem. To the applause of most of the nation, the commission made a case against Mr. Oswald of the kind that usually brings a guilty verdict by a jury. It did not pursue a whole range of possibilities for a conspiracy. Mr. Oswald had shown all the characteristics of the psychotic acting alone.

But then came Vietnam, Watergate, disclosures of corruption in the intelligence agencies, and loss of an innocence that had been based at least partly on native. Conspiracy theories about the Dallas murder sprouted and flourished. The Russians, the Cubans, the F. B. I., the C. I. A., the Mafia, right-wing ideologues, the Warren Commission itself were alternately suspected and accused. A cottage industry in conspiracies emerged, with Mark Lane as a chief practitioner, whose writings and lectures kept suspicion and curiosity seething. Ultimately, national opinion polls showed a majority of Americans believed there was conspiracy in the Kennedy death.

In the wake of the Watergate disclosures, Mr. Lane moved his road show to Washington, where he tried to persuade Congress to reopen the investigation into the Kennedy assassination. Turned down, he went to Memphis, became engrossed in the King assassination. Students of both assassinations had long felt



The John F. Kennedy assassination site in Dallas.

there was a much greater possibility of proving a conspiracy in the King death. The case against James Earl Ray had never gone to trial and many questions about the death had never been explored. Mr. Lane obtained the support of Dr. King's widow, Coretta King, and the Congressional black caucus, who suspected the F. B. I. Finally, with the support of people who did not suspect conspiracies but who felt a deeper official probe was needed, the committee settled down to a search for new evidence.

While it was critical of the Warren Commission and the investigative agencies for being less than thorough, the committee found no evidence that any Government agency was involved. And until the last few days of its existence, it appeared the committee would find little to upset the central finding of the commission — that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone — and would find only strong indications, not proof, that James Earl Ray was in league with others.

But the testimony of the two acoustics experts — Mark Weiss and Ernest Aschkenasy, New York professors — suddenly changed the picture. Representative Richardson Preyer, Democrat of North Carolina, a former Federal judge who went into the hearings suspicious of the conspiracy theories, found their testimony "persuasive." The finding nevertheless was greeted with some of the same kind of skepticism that the commission report encountered.

Why did the testimony come only as the committee was going out of business? Why was not more than one outside expert called to corroborate it? The committee said the testimony came unexpectedly after its fact-finding had been completed. But the questions go on. Who was in league with Mr. Oswald? Or, from the other side: Could it have been a law enforcement officer on the grassy knoll firing in response to the other shots? Are acoustical techniques really so sophisticated enough to place the source of a gun shot on that poor a recording? Why did the motorcycle patrolman contradict his own testimony last week and claim the recording couldn't have been his?

The committee hopes the Justice Department will continue the inquiry. But the department clearly is reluctant to pick up a 15-year-old trail with no more evidence to go on. If it found nothing, would it be believed any more than it was the first time around? The questions will go on, perhaps in ruder to the intensity of public distrust in leaders and institutions.

John Herbers is national correspondent for The New York Times.