JFK: another probe, still no answers

By JOSEPH VOLZ

WASHINGTON — Remember the House Assassinations Committee? It was going to answer, once and for all, who killed President Kennedy?

The committee went out of business six months ago. And although it spent $5.8 million over 2½ years — a congressional record — the panel, headed by Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), did not get around to finishing its final report.

Well, the long-awaited report plus backup material — 30 volumes' worth — will start dribbling out in about three weeks, and everything should be available by July 4.

A flurry of stories and a television report last weekend, purporting to predict what the panel had concluded, made a few ripples. But on second blush, the "news" turned out to be little more than a rehash of the "findings" that the panel had published in abbreviated form last December.

As a result of a conspiracy

Those findings, largely the work of the committee's chief counsel, G. Robert Blakey, who prefers to be called professor because he teaches organized crime studies at Cornell, concluded that Kennedy "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy."

But the committee has no real idea of who Lee Harvey Oswald's "co-conspirators" might be. No one has ever seen them. There has been no sound evidence of any meeting to plot Kennedy's death, and the only weapon or shells ever recovered were proved to have belonged to Oswald.

What makes the panel so sure that someone else was involved? Actually, the panel isn't so sure. The committee listened in awe last fall as two acoustical experts convinced them that a shot was fired from a grassy knoll at the same time Oswald was firing from the Texas School Book Depository.

However, three committee members don't believe the scientists, and neither does David Belin, a former assistant counsel for the Warren Commission, which concluded that Oswald was the lone gunman.

"There is only one place where people saw a gunman, and that was the School Book Depository (where Oswald fired his shots)," said Belin.

Blakey, now working free of charge as the last committee staffer, has been quoted as saying he thinks "the mob did it." Since Blakey is a confirmed mob-watcher — he delighted in putting aging Florida crime boss Santo Trafficante before a televised hearing last summer — it is not surprising that he would see the Black Hand in the murder, though no one has contended that the demented Oswald, a perpetual loner, was a mob hitman.

The committee report, in an apparent effort at fairness, says there is no available evidence that organized crime bosses sat down and put out a contract on Kennedy, "but the available evidence does not preclude the possibility that individual mob members may have been included."

That "available evidence" is so shaky that it is unlikely that any reasonable prosecutor would even take it to a grand jury for an indictment. It is based mainly on information, considered reliable, that top mobsters, including Trafficante, said they wanted Kennedy "hit" because the Justice Department, led by Bobby Kennedy, was conducting a vigorous campaign against organized crime. Oswald's possible tie to the mob is that he knew two men associated with the New Orleans crime boss, Carlos Marcello, a bitter enemy of the Kennedys.

Even if the top boys didn't give the word, Blakey thinks "some rogue elephant" group in the underworld may have done it. Blakey points to the fact that Jack Ruby, who killed Oswald, made calls in the summer and fall of 1963 to Trafficante, Marcello, and the Chicago boss, Sam Giancana, who was gunned down in his home shortly before committee investigators were to question him.

All of this might be of interest if there was any credible evidence that Oswald and Ruby knew each other. There is not.

The committee has been much influenced by a small group of die-hards called the Assassination Information Bureau, which has raised a lot of questions but has few answers. In any event, the bureau does not believe the Warren Commission answer that one gunman did it.

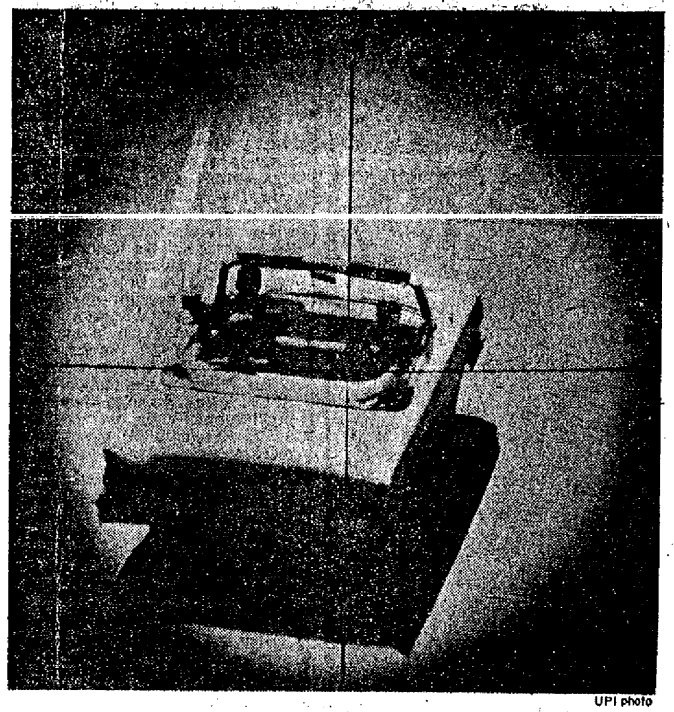
All had motive and means

The Assassination Information Bureau members have persuaded some otherwise responsible publications to print their far-fetched "theories." And one of their big questions is: "Did the mob kill Kennedy?" Carl Oglesby and Jeff Goldberg, bureau directors, don't tell us the answer but are clearly impressed that Blakey "has established that Marcello, Trafficante and Jimmy Hoffa (the No. 1 Kennedy-hater) all had motive, means and opportunity to assassinate the President."

But Oswald himself had the motive, means and opportunity, too. And he indicated, by shooting at right-wing Gen. Edwin Walker a few weeks earlier, that he had no hesitation about firing a weapon at someone. Is the committee going to tell us that the mob was out to get Walker, too?

One thing is clear: The panel spent a lot of money to confuse us. Bring back the Warren Commission.

Washington correspondent Joseph Volz has been covering the Kennedy assassination developments for many years.



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