

Are There New Leads?

For the much battered House Select Committee on Assassinations, the deal was simple enough. In return for jettisoning abrasive chief counsel Richard Sprague, the panel last week won a new two-year charter to investigate the murders of President John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. But its vote of confidence in the House (by 230 to 181) was soon overshadowed by controversy over the committee's alleged new evidence in the assassinations—and the sudden suicide of a man one panel member called “a crucial witness for us, based on new information.”

Like most leaks from the committee over the past seven months, last week's disclosures seemed more tantalizing than substantial—more likely to promote public interest and votes for the committee than to resolve unanswered questions about the two murders. The suicide, for example, was a Russian immigrant—and recent mental patient—named George de Mohrenschildt who had known Lee Harvey Oswald before the Kennedy murder but only recently told a foreign journalist that he felt “responsible” for Oswald's behavior. The journalist said de Mohrenschildt claimed that a conspiracy of anti-Castro Cubans and Texas oilmen, including the late millionaire H.L. Hunt, had actually arranged Kennedy's death. But the newsman conceded at one point that de Mohrenschildt also told him that he had made the whole story up, and de Mohrenschildt apparently killed himself with a 20-gauge shotgun almost immediately after learning that committee investigators wanted to question him about it.

The panel's major achievement to date has been simply staying alive through

months of internal friction and external criticism. Following a nasty clash between chief counsel Sprague and Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez of Texas—in which most other panel members backed Sprague (NEWSWEEK, Feb. 21)—Gonzalez resigned as chairman. But his replacement by Rep. Louis Stokes of Ohio did not end the committee's crisis of confidence. At a March 17 secret session, according to a transcript apparently released by accident, members talked about the need for “choreography” and a “scenario” of public disclosures to maintain support for their work. And last week, members decided that their survival demanded that they dump Sprague, a tough Philadelphia prosecutor who alienated many House members.

‘Shocking’: News reports of de Mohrenschildt's death also may have helped swing the vote, following as it did the violent deaths of two other witnesses—underworld figures Sam Giancana and John Rosselli—who had been called to the Hill in connection with the Kennedy assassination. Chairman Stokes said de Mohrenschildt was crucial to the Kennedy investigation, despite the fact that his “shocking confession”—as Dutch journalist Willem Oltmans called it—followed a stay in the psychiatric wing at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas last fall and winter.

De Mohrenschildt was hardly a new figure in the Kennedy case. As a member of the Dallas Russian-émigré community in the early 1960s, the Warren Commis-



De Mohrenschildt and wife: A crucial witness?

sion said, de Mohrenschildt befriended Oswald and his Russian wife, Marina; but he said he was threatened by Oswald after helping Marina to leave him at one point. The commission reported that it found no evidence of involvement by de Mohrenschildt in the Kennedy murder, nor any proof that he was a government agent (some sources suggest that de Mohrenschildt's wide-ranging travels as a petroleum engineer were a CIA cover). The commission's files also contain a letter from de Mohrenschildt to Jacqueline Kennedy's mother—Janet Auchincloss, whom he had met years before—that expressed “lingering doubt, notwithstanding all the evidence, of Oswald's guilt.”

‘Blood Debt’: This was a far cry from the account by journalist Oltmans, who told various television interviewers—and then the House committee—that de Mohrenschildt had confessed that he was part of a “Dallas conspiracy” of oilmen, a trucking-company executive and Cubans with “a blood debt to settle—they thought President Kennedy had betrayed them at the Bay of Pigs.” “His ties upwards were toward H.L. Hunt directly . . . and downstairs they were going to Lee Harvey Oswald,” Oltmans said, adding that de Mohrenschildt admitted Oswald “acted at his guidance and instructions.” Oltmans said that de Mohrenschildt had also named Jack Ruby and a number of CIA and FBI officials in connection with the conspiracy, and added that these and many other details would be found in the manuscript for a book that the dead man had left with his lawyer in Dallas. But he also told some interviewers that de Mohren-



‘Give us one more round, barkeep—we, the House assassinations committee, have decided on unity!’

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schildt had once confessed to him: "I only made up the story [about Oswald] because everybody makes a million dollars off the Kennedy assassination . . ."

Two other new witnesses in the Kennedy case, mentioned in the committee transcript that slipped out last week, also presented problems of credibility and corroboration. A former Dallas nightclub waitress told investigators for the panel that Jack Ruby had introduced her and another woman to "Lee Harvey Oswald of the CIA." That was two weeks before the assassination—after which the other woman disappeared, and the witness herself said nothing about the meeting until now. Another witness, formerly a nurse at Parkland Hospital, said that she saw bullet fragments removed from the body of Texas Gov. John Connally, who was injured in the Kennedy shooting. Committee sources suggested that finding these fragments and testing them might disprove the Warren Commission's theory that a single bullet had wounded both Kennedy and Connally. In fact, such fragments *were* tested by the FBI in 1964. The results were not inconsistent with the single-bullet theory.

Fantasies: Beyond those dubious leads, Hill sources said the committee planned to use its scaled-down budget (\$2.7 million this year) to interview everyone in Dealey Plaza when Kennedy was shot, conduct another round of ballistics tests on the bullet that killed Martin Luther King and search for more new witnesses in both cases. Progress was possible, said panel member Richardson Preyer of North Carolina, "now that we've gotten beyond developing something every week to keep the committee alive." But the question remained whether the committee was really on to any genuine new leads in the two murders or was simply pursuing the rumors and fantasies that both cases have produced in abundance.

—DAVID M. ALPERN with HENRY W. HUBBARD and JOHN J. LINDSAY in Washington

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