

House board OKs JFK dox release

BY DENNIS WHARTON

WASHINGTON—The House commercial law subcommittee yesterday passed legislation authorizing federal agencies to release documents related to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

The bill establishes creation of an independent five-member Assassination Materials Review Board to decide which FBI, CIA, Warren Commission and other federal files will be released to the public.

Documents will not be released that compromise the identity of intelligence agents or intelligence sources, or create an invasion of privacy of living persons. Without passage of the bill, the documents would remain sealed until 2029.

Passage of the bill came after a proposed amendment offered by Rep. Hamilton Fish (R-N.Y.) had been defeated on a party-line vote.

Under the Fish proposal, President Bush would appoint the five-member review board with the consent of the Senate; as written, the legislation states that a judicial panel will appoint the board.

The bill now goes to the full

House Judiciary Committee, where passage is expected.

Lawmakers have conceded that they were spurred to act on the proposal in part by the Oliver Stone film "JFK," which alleged a massive conspiracy on the part of various branches of government to kill Kennedy.

The Warren Commission concluded in 1964 that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, had killed Kennedy. Conspiracy theories have abounded ever since.

No smoking gun

"Is there going to be a smoking gun? No," said Jeff Goldberg, a journalist who wrote extensively on conspiracy theories. "Is there stuff in there that's going to be historically interesting? Undoubtedly."

As the debate continues, the FBI and the CIA are reviewing the JFK files and gradually making thousands of pages available to the public. Some of the recent releases appear to reveal more about the workings of government than about the assassination.

With some fanfare, for example, a CIA historical review panel recently released the agency's 110-page file on Oswald predating the slaying. Assassination researcher

James Lesar said the CIA blacked out a key word from one document even though historians have long known the full text.

The Oct. 10, 1963, memo from CIA headquarters to its Mexico station describes Oswald's contact with the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City a week earlier. "Lee Oswald who (contacted) SOVEMB 1 Oct. probably identical Lee Henry Oswald (201-289248) born 18 Oct. 1939..."

The classified message stamped "secret" got Oswald's middle name wrong. More important to Lesar, the word "contacted" was handwritten over a blacked-out word. Lesar said that word is "phoned." The CIA, for some reason, remains sensitive about acknowledging that it was bugging the Soviet Embassy, he said.

"What's really comical about it is that you've got this historical review program and apparently they don't know enough history to know that they've already released this stuff," Lesar said.

CIA Director Robert Gates acknowledged the problem in recent testimony before the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.