

Did Conspiracy Exist?

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Warren's Top Investigator Intends to Find Out

By Allan Cronley
(Washington Bureau)

WASHINGTON—"We have to establish the negative as well as the positive. We have to exhaust the possibilities."

That is the stated intent of J. Lee Rankin as he digs into the November 22 assassination of President Kennedy.

A 56-year-old former solicitor general of the United States, Rankin is the general counsel of a special government commission investigating the Dallas shooting.

He disclosed during a telephone interview (he's now a New York lawyer) that he and Chief Justice Earl Warren, commission chairman, are acutely aware of a variety of rumors about the assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, and his killer, Jack Ruby.

In fact, said Rankin, the chief justice called his attention to a recently published book which details rumors that John Wilkes Booth was part of a conspiracy to assassinate President John F. Kennedy 100 years ago. (The co-sponsor—Edwin M. Stanton, secretary of war.)

He said that they will go to the FBI, secret service, and possibly local police for additional evidence.

"We certainly will examine all information we can get from local agencies," he said.

Rankin is in the process of hiring "seven or eight" lawyers, plus secretarial help for the investigation.

Although the commission was appointed November 29, only one meeting has been held, and it was mostly a formality. Another session is not specifically scheduled.

Unsaid but apparent was the fact that the commission is comprised of some important and busy public officials, who eventually will have to shove other duties aside if they are to give much time to the inquiry.

They are Senators Richard B. Russell, Democrat of Georgia, and John Sherman Cooper, Republican of Kentucky; Hale Boggs, Democrat of Louisiana, and Rep. Gerald R. Ford, Republican of Michigan; Allen W. Dulles, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and John J. McCloy, former disarmament adviser to President Kennedy.

Rankin said he hopes for a final report by the end

"One of our objectives," said Rankin, "is to develop the factual situation so there is no justification for rumors about the Kennedy assassination in the future. This is important both domestically and abroad."

"We have to establish the negative as well as the positive. We think the answer is probably negative on any suggestion of conspiratorial action, but we have to exhaust the possibilities."

Rankin acknowledged that establishing what isn't true is sometimes difficult and time-consuming, but he vowed to leave no leads untraced.

It will be Rankin's job to sift and present evidence to the commission justifying conclusions that will be accepted by the American public.

He emphasized that "new questions will probably arise" which will require "considerable supplementation" of evidence already produced by the FBI.

That means, he said, that he and other commission investigators will not necessarily confine themselves to facts already dug up.

of April or sometime in May. A partial report may be ready by the end of February, and a summary of the FBI report is likely to be made public before that.

With the FBI report apparently wrapped up for the eyes of the commission only, and with government agencies hesitant to steal any commission thunder, independent investigation is difficult in Washington.

Back in 1950 the old Kefauver crime committee questioned Jack Ruby, according to Joseph Nellis, then assistant to Rudolph Halley, the committee counsel.

Nellis, now a Washington lawyer, remembers that Ruby was interrogated behind closed doors by Halley, now dead, and Lt. George Butler, of the Dallas police department, who was on leave to the committee. Butler cannot be found.

The committee files were eventually sent to the National Archives, where officials refuse access to anyone but government personnel.

They claim they can find no record of the Ruby interrogation, although Nellis thinks notes were made