

Why Another Assassination Inquiry?

NY 11/21/76

By DAVID BINDER

WASHINGTON—On the eve of the 13th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, subpoenas have been sent out in search of new information about his murder and that of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The investigation launched by the newly established House Select Committee on Assassinations is the sixth to be conducted on a large scale by Government officials since the 35th President was killed Nov. 22, 1963.

Why another inquiry? Its origins appear to lie in four quarters: a Congressman who is a self-styled "student of political assassinations," another who genuinely believes in a conspiracy theory, a group of black Congressmen who feel the King murder investigation was a cover-up and, finally, some Capitol Hill investigators who feel there are still unexplained trails. Beyond these motives is a lingering suspicion on the Hill that even if the Central Intelligence Agency's past misdeeds have been largely exposed, parallel misdeeds of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and its long-time chief, J. Edgar Hoover, remain largely unexamined.

Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez, the promoter of the new House inquiry into the Kennedy and King murders, said it was "the summer of 1973—Watergate—when I became inwardly very disturbed, that certain questions became very poignant, that the F.B.I. would destroy documents; and that the C.I.A. was corruptible." Mr. Gonzalez, author of the resolution on Feb. 19, 1975, that eventually gave birth to the new committee, said "Watergate raised to a serious level questions I had suppressed before."

The Texas Democrat, by his own account, has been interested in the Kennedy assassination ever since that day in Dallas when he rode in the motorcade that carried the President to his death. Mr. Gonzalez, who was 47 years old at the time, began

collecting a private file on the murder. He has remained a "student of political assassinations" ever since, adding the King murder, the killing of Robert F. Kennedy and the attempt on the life of Alabama Gov. George Wallace to his interests.

Earlier this year he found an ally in Thomas N. Downing, Democrat of Virginia, who, after viewing an amateur film of the Kennedy assassination, concluded that the shooting was not the work of Lee Harvey Oswald but of a conspiracy. The two Representatives were impressed by the work of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which had exhaustively studied the possible relationship between the killing of President Kennedy and the C.I.A.'s plots to assassinate Cuba's Premier Fidel Castro. That study began with Senator Richard S. Schweiker's statement that the 1964 Warren Commission report would "collapse like a house of cards" when all the evidence was in and ended last June with the less confident conclusion that there were still "promising leads" to be explored.

Representatives Downing and Gonzalez fought to get an investigation of their own approved. The Rules Committee was evenly split for a time. A staunch opponent was B.F. Sisk, the California Democrat, who declared on the House floor on Sept. 17: "Let me urge my colleagues, for gosh sakes, if they have any respect, as I'm sure they do, for the dollars of our taxpayers, let us vote this resolution down." He spoke of "witch hunters" with "some kind of melodramatic desire for the morbid" and observed: "I thought we put this thing to bed a long time ago, but it seems to ever raise its head." Eunice Shriver, sister of the Kennedys was among those condemning the proposal as a "publicity-seeking action."

But new disclosures of F.B.I. coverups in the investigation of Martin Luther King's death breathed new life into the cause championed by Representatives since, adding the King murder, the killing of Robert

tant members of the Congressional black caucus, including Walter Fauntroy, delegate from the District of Columbia, and Ronald V. Dellums, Democrat of California.

Mr. Gonzalez was also persuasive among Republicans, including the influential John Anderson of Illinois, arguing that it was time for a dispassionate Congressional study of political assassinations in this country. "Enough time has elapsed to get an objective and unimpassioned view of the facts," he said. In the end, he and Mr. Downing had 80 co-sponsors.

A distinctive feature of the new investigation is that it will be conducted by a professional investigative attorney, Richard A. Sprague, who handled more than 60 first-degree murder cases as a prosecutor in Pennsylvania. Previous investigations had policemen and lawyers as staff aides, Mr. Gonzalez said, but never a professional prosecutor.

Is there, in fact, more to be learned about such much-discussed and long past events as the Kennedy and King murders? A Capitol Hill official familiar with the Senate investigation that ended last June said last week that "some things are worth pursuing" and that the Senate committee had "poked a pretty good hole in the Warren Commission report."

The official was referring principally to still inconclusive F.B.I. reports about a Cuban agent named Rolando Cubela who apparently worked both for the C.I.A. and Mr. Castro, and about mysterious figures who slipped out of the United States and into Cuba shortly after the assassination 13 years ago.

The latest "new" piece of evidence, indicating that Lee Harvey Oswald was known to have told the Castro government of his murder plan, is a memorandum by J. Edgar Hoover to the Warren Commission. It has been dismissed by Congressional investigators as "insignificant."

David Binder is a reporter in the Washington bureau of The New York Times.