

Justice Department urges withholding JFK files

Letter to House panel reverses Bush policy

By JOHN DIAMOND
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Legislation to release Kennedy assassination documents hit a snag Tuesday as the Justice Department, reversing Bush administration policy, came out strongly against the proposal.

Assistant Attorney General W. Lee Rawls said in a letter made public Tuesday that the proposed House-Senate resolution "would severely encroach upon the president's constitutional authority to protect confidential information."

Rawls also raised national security concerns, saying that language clearing the way for the release of CIA and FBI documents could endanger intelligence methods. And he said the bill would leave law enforcement and executive branch deliberations open to public scrutiny.

"We strongly object to the resolution in its current form," Rawls said. If passed, the Justice Department "would give serious consideration to recommending presidential disapproval."

Until Tuesday, top ranking Bush administration officials — including CIA Director Robert Gates and FBI chief William Sessions — had supported the legislation, saying they would cooperate in making public thousands of secret documents relating to the 1963 slaying of Presi-

dent Kennedy.

Rawls said the Justice Department is "sympathetic to the concerns" of the public about the assassination and is drafting an alternative version. But the department's bill would broaden the president's power to withhold information and increase his control over the review process.

Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., chairman of the House Government Operations Committee, said the letter from Rawls arrived Monday evening, the night before the committee's legislation and national security subcommittee met to consider the bill. He said Justice Department officials declined to attend the hearing. Gates was also invited but could not attend.

Under the proposed resolution, the federal appeals court in Washington would appoint a five-member citizen board to review and decide on the release of assassination documents. In cases involving executive agencies such as the FBI or CIA, the president could refuse to release material but only on narrow privacy or national security grounds.

By opposing the legislation, the Justice Department goes up against a wave of public pressure that followed the movie "JFK." The Oliver Stone film offered a government conspiracy theory of the assassination and sharply criticized the continued concealment of documents.

Stone, who testified at Tuesday's hearing, said afterward that, "the Justice Department has now set itself up against this process, as has President Bush."

4/24/92

WEDNE



AP/JOHN DURICKA

Oliver Stone (right), who directed 'JFK,' talks with Frank Mankiewicz, former press secretary for Robert F. Kennedy, during hearings before the House Government Operations Committee on the Kennedy Assassination.