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JFK files hit national nerve

Critics join backers of conspiracy theory in seeking release of assassination files

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WASHINGTON — Robert Blakey is trying to do with a few simple phrases what he failed to accomplish with \$5.5 million, a staff of hundreds and more than two years of work in the late 1970s: solve the mur-

der of John F. Kennedy. As the former staff director of the House Assassinations Committee, Blakey is writing the legislation that should open up not just the 900-odd sealed boxes of his committee's files, but hundreds of thousands of secret documents from the CIA and other government bodies as well. Blakey is no fan of Oliver Stone, whose motion picture "JFK" has driven

official Washington to wits' end with its contention that Kennedy's death was a coup d'etat. But he gives the filmmaker credit for provoking a historic reaction from a defensive US government. Determined to show they have nothing to hide, the very apparatuses Stone has vilified are enlisting in his crusade. Like a wildfire on the prairie, the director's cry to "Free the Files" is echoing through archives from Wash-

ington to Dallas. Like Romanians and Russians before them, the American people are about to get a glimpse of their own secret Cold War history. "This movie is evil; it distorts the truth," said Blakey. "But maybe we can draw good from evil and make something come of it." Even Stone and his fellow critics do not expect to find a conclusive "smok-

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JFK questions hit national nerve; pressure is building to open files

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ing gun" that will shatter with finality the Warren Commission's findings that Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone assassin.

Yet specialists on all sides of the debate predict that the JFK files will reveal fresh evidence of Oswald's mysterious relationships with the CIA and the FBI; explicit details of the CIA's involvement with organized crime figures; further proof that FBI and CIA officials acted to mislead the Warren Commission and other investigators, and additional support for the House committee's finding: that Kennedy "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy," most likely by Mafia leaders.

And surprises may be in store. One way or another, America's view of the assassination may never be the same.

"This is a national nerve," Stone said. "We have a right to those files. They got them in Romania. They got them in East Germany. . . . Why this almost Orwellian state that does not trust the American people with the truth of its own history?"

"Until we know our history," Stone asked, "How the hell can we move forward with our lives?"

"JFK," the cause of all the controversy, remains a grim fascination. Before ending its run in the discount bins of video stores a year or more from now, Stone says his tale of conspiracy will be seen by 60 million Americans.

Two more major films are due to follow: "Libra," a life of Oswald based on the Don DeLillo novel, and "Ruby," about the alleged assassin's assassin with proven ties to organized crime, who stalked Oswald and shot him.

In the best of times, the national capitals of culture and clout view each other from across the Republic with the wariness of scorpions in a bottle. Because they cannot control it, nothing scares Washington's elite like a full-fledged Hollywood assault on the national zeitgeist. And nowhere is that clearer than in the case of the Kennedy files.

Why the rush to open the files? Politicians here point to the case of Sen. Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, who served as a young lawyer on the Warren Commission. In "JFK" he is singled out as the author of the magic bullet theory, which it calls "one of the grossest lies ever forced on the American people."

With conservatives displeased by some of his votes and women upset by his televised inquisition of Anita Hill, Specter had enough obstacles in his campaign for reelection. When Stone's movie prompted angry questions and political assaults back home in Pennsylvania, Specter quickly joined 13 former Warren Commission staff members to urge all government agencies, including the CIA and the FBI, to open their files.

David W. Belin is another former Warren Commission counsel who, like Specter, energetically defends its investigation. Since 1975, Belin has fought unsuccessfully in court to open the government's files - insisting they will squelch for good the cottage industry of conspiracy theories. Belin was met with indifference from successive administrations whose institutional loyalties and secrecy he could not overcome. Blakey, despite his stature as one of the nation's most respected critics of the Warren Commission, was similarly frustrated.

Then Stone began to barnstorm the nation, calling on Congress to unseal the records. The director's aides passed out campaign buttons: "JFK. Free the Files." Protesters picketed the National Archives. Find a movement, and a congressional resolution is soon to follow: political self-interest made attitudes change.

"The integrity of the government is being called into question," said Blakey. "The politicians here in 1992 were mostly not around in 1979, and certainly not here in 1963. Thirty years has passed. It's history now. They see no reason to put up with accusations about their integrity."

Former Presidents Gerald Ford and Richard Nixon joined House leaders in a call for open files. Bowing to the pressure, Rep. Louis Stokes, a Democrat from Ohio who chaired the Assassinations Committee, announced that he will introduce a joint resolution in Congress to open all government files on the assassination and ordered Blakey to draft it. Dallas officials opened their secret archives to the public. On Friday, Robert Gates, the director of central intelligence, said the CIA will process its files for public consumption.

While expressing some pain at the memories revived by Stone's film, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy has signaled his family's acquiescence to the release of the government's secrets. In conversations recounted by former Kennedy aides Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Richard Goodwin, the late Robert Kennedy expressed his opinion that the Warren Commission report was inadequate - indicating to Goodwin that he suspected organized crime might have had a role in the murder. Since his brothers' deaths, Sen. Kennedy has avoided picking sides between the contradictory findings of the Warren Commission and the House committee. He calls the Warren report the "most responsible" investigation but says he "respects" other conclusions as well.

James H. Lesar, the co-founder and president of the nonprofit Assassination Archives and Research Center here, finds it all too good to be true. Lesar worries aloud that a joint congressional resolution covering the entire government - which requires hearings and votes in both the Senate and the House and runs

the risk of a presidential veto - is a more dangerous route than opening the House committee files through a quick housekeeping vote that involves neither President Bush nor the Senate.

But Blakey thinks he has a window of opportunity, and he wants to shoot the works: "I know what's in our files. There is nothing. If we dissipate the force of the movie on opening our files, nothing good will come of it and we won't get what I want to get: the Department of Justice, the CIA and others."

Lesar's other worry is more mundane. Aside from 27 volumes of public evidence, the House committee left at least 848 boxes - like most else surrounding the assassination, the number of boxes is a matter of dispute and may be more than 900 in the National Archives. Add some 300,000 pages from the CIA. And some 250,000 pages from the FBI. Plus the Office of Naval Intelligence. The Secret Service. Mafia wiretaps. And the congressional and presidential commissions that investigated the CIA assassination plots.

The nation may be looking at 1.5 million to 2 million pages, Lesar says - 750,000 from the House committee alone. The archives charges 33 cents a page for photocopying. "Where am I going to get a quarter of a million dollars?" he asked.

Critics of the official version are looking with special relish to the release of several groups of records:

- A 300-page report by the House committee staff that challenges the CIA's version of Oswald's 1963 trip to the Cuban and Soviet embassies in Mexico City. With some cause, critics have long argued that the man identified by the CIA as Oswald was an imposter.

- Thirteen hundred tapes the FBI made of Mafia kingpin Carlos Marcello in New Orleans during the same period the House Assassination Committee was naming him as a likely participant in an assassination plot.

- The Church committee files. In 1975, a Senate committee chaired by the late Frank Church reinvigorated conspiracy theories by revealing that the CIA had extensive dealings with Mafia leaders as part of plots to assassinate Castro and kept the information secret from the Warren Commission.

"I'll be first in line," said Dan Moldea, the reporter who first documented the Hoffa-Marcello-Trafficante theory in 1978. "I think the Church files contain dynamite on the CIA's involvement with the Mafia."

- The KGB files. Blakey hopes to have Congress and Bush call on President Boris Yeltsin of Russia to make public the KGB files on Oswald.

"If you think Oswald was a CIA agent - and I don't - you would never look to the CIA files to prove it," said Blakey.