

Free the JFK Papers

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Whatever the merits of Oliver Stone's "JFK," it has focused new attention on unanswered questions about the president's assassination. At its conclusion, the movie pointedly notes that Congress itself is responsible for suppressing much information that could shed light on such questions.

Until recently, release of the congressional records was being blocked by Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), former chairman of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which investigated the murders of President Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in the late 1970s. After a two-year probe costing more than \$5 million, the HSCA released its final report in 1979. It concluded that there was a "high probability" Kennedy was killed as the result of a conspiracy and that the "likelihood" was that King was too.

The HSCA's official report concluded that two gunmen had fired at Kennedy in Dealey Plaza, including one from the famous "grassy knoll" to the right front of the president's limousine. The HSCA did not identify this second gunman. It did identify three persons it considered likely suspects in a conspiracy to

kill Kennedy: former Teamsters president Jimmy Hoffa, and two Mafia figures, Santos Trafficante and Carlos Marcello. Marcello, who was later jailed on unrelated bribery charges, is still alive.

The House committee's investigation, which followed disclosures in the mid-'70s of CIA assassination plots against Fidel Castro and other foreign leaders, was the most extensive investigation of the Kennedy assassination to date. Nevertheless, many students of the Kennedy assassination believe the committee's probe was badly flawed, noting, among other things, that its inquiry focused almost exclusively on the organized crime angle to the exclusion of other possible leads. By its own admission, the committee ran out of time and money before it could answer many of the questions raised by its own investigation. It

passed the buck to the Justice Department, recommending that Justice investigate certain matters the committee had not resolved. But Justice sat on the matter for nearly a decade before dismissing the need for further investigation.

The HSCA's final report succinctly stated

the case for public disclosure of the facts surrounding the murders of Kennedy and King. "It is essential," it said, "not only that persons be able to judge the performance of the executive agencies but that they be able to judge the committee's performance as well. Such is the very essence of representative democracy." Notwithstanding this accolade to openness, the HSCA went out of existence without making any provision for public access to its records. As a result, by letter dated April 2, 1979, the Clerk of the House sent 848 boxes of HSCA documents on its Kennedy-King probes to the National Archives. There, under a House rule, they remain sealed for a period of 50 years. They are now scheduled for release on April 1, 2029.

Realizing the enormous potential significance of these files, the late Rep. Stewart McKinney, a Republican from Connecticut, who had served on the House committee, introduced a resolution in 1983 to make the records public. The McKinney resolution, which was reintroduced in 1985, enlisted 64 cosponsors in the House, including all of the former members of the select committee still

serving except for their chairman, Rep. Stokes. But it was never voted on by the full House and never became law because of the opposition by Stokes.

The McKinney resolution adopted the guidelines that were used to release the Warren Commission's records. Most of the 300 cubic feet of Warren Commission records have been released by the National Archives. While those that remain withheld should be released, they are dwarfed in magnitude and potential significance by the House committee's records.

Stokes opposed release of the House committee's records until only recently, saying that the material it had not published had come mainly from the FBI and consisted of rumors and defamatory material. The first claim is in error. In 1984, G. Robert Blakey, who served as the HSCA's chief counsel, swore in an affidavit filed in federal court that the committee "was not able to publish everything it wanted to publish or which was relevant to the President's assassination, as it ran out of time and appropriations." As to "rumors and defamatory material," the McKinney resolution would exclude such information from release.

Release of HSCA records has been sought not only by students of the Kennedy assassination but by supporters of the Warren Commission as well. Ironically, the KGB in Moscow has now opened its files on Lee Harvey Oswald to ABC News, yet the files Congress accumulated at enormous public expense remain locked up in the National Archives. The keeper of our national history—until the year 2029, William Webster, former FBI and CIA chief, recently said that he knows of no national security reasons for keeping records of the Kennedy assassination secret, and it is clear that the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union have extinguished this justification for secrecy.

It is time to release the House committee's records.

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