

Mark Lane & the assassins

By GEORGE LARDNER JR.

WASHINGTON.

At one of their earliest executive sessions last fall, each member of the House Assassinations Committee was handed for-your-eyes-only inspection a black looseleaf binder about the murders of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.

In keeping with the "sensitivity" of the information it contained, all the members were required to surrender their copies at the end of the meeting.

The press and public have yet to get a glimpse of the secret briefing book. But it was old stuff to Mark Lane, the critic of the Warren Commission and other assassination investigations. He had already been shown a copy in the offices of the then-chief counsel of the committee, Richard A. Sprague.

"I thought it was a remarkable job, in a very short period of time," said Lane. He suggested this may have been partly due to the fact that he himself had given a number of briefings in the course of the committee staff's preparation of the report, a so-called "threshold analysis" of the two murders.

Riding high

Mark Lane, 50, is riding high in the 14th year of his endeavors as entrepreneur, circuit rider and self-appointed revisionist of the Kennedy and King assassinations. His headquarters sits near the Capitol. He was the genial host at a press conference here earlier this month to kick off the promotion for his latest enterprise, with Dick Gregory. It is a book entitled "Code Name 'Zorro': the Murder of Martin Luther King Jr."

Dozens of reporters showed up. Lane held forth with the confidence of a veteran pitchman, presiding over a mockup of the murder scene, labeling the FBI as "prime suspects" in the killing.

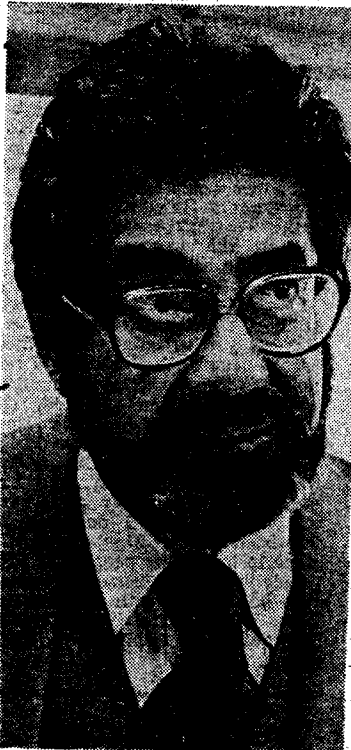
These days Lane operates from a somewhat cluttered four-story townhouse, just across the street from the Supreme Court. His standard of living is modest, he says: a 1968 Volkswagen, three suits and a \$500 savings account.

He gets \$1,000 to \$1,750 for his lecture performances. His Citizens Commission of Inquiry sells copies of his 11-year-old book, "Rush to Judgment," at \$5.95 each, prints of the Zapruder film of the JFK assassination at \$25 a crack and, for the budget-minded, bumper stickers and buttons asking "Who Killed Kennedy? Ask Congress" for 50 cents apiece.

Lane says he gives all his lecture proceeds, \$70,000 in the past two years, to the Citizens Commission, an organization he controls.

Lane moved to Washington in January, 1975 "following the Watergate disclosures and when it became plain to me, for the first time, that Congress might be convinced to conduct an investigation of the Kennedy assassination."

But by his account, Lane seems never to strike it rich: He counters



MARK LANE.

suggestions to the contrary as a confession of the CIA, a line of inquiry suggested by the agency years ago in a memo entitled "Countering Criticisms of the Warren Report."

He also pleads poverty when asked how much he made off the film version of "Rush to Judgment."

Although the BBC once paid \$40,000 for a single showing, reportedly the biggest such fee ever paid in Britain, Lane says he got "not a farting" out of that telecast or any other showing. He maintains that co-producer Emile de Antonia "seized control of the film" before it started making any money.

Lane and writer Donald Freed also wrote the script of another film, "Executive Action," a fictionalized version of the JFK assassination which grossed \$15 million, but the two have been quoted as saying they got "very little" for their efforts.

Before the Kennedy assassination in 1963, Lane was a little-known New York State Assemblyman. After the murder, he wrote "Brief for the Defense" and sought to establish himself before the Warren Commission, first as counsel for the dead Lee Harvey Oswald and then for Oswald's mother, Marguerite.

Then he hit the lecture circuit and in 1966 came out with his first book, "Rush to Judgment." Although one critic estimated that "nowhere near a tenth of Lane's relevant assertions and implications would stand up to careful scrutiny," more than a million paperback copies of the book were sold and more than 125,000 in hardcover.

Oracular figure

Today, Lane has not only helped turn the assassinations, first of Kennedy and then of King, into a thriving cottage industry; he has also become something of an oracular figure for the congressional panel investigating the two murders.

It is no secret that Lane was instrumental in lobbying for the creation of the select House committee as well as in the choice of Richard A. Sprague as its first chief counsel.

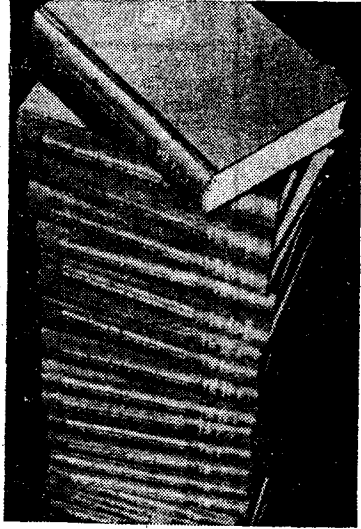
As for his future role in the investigation, Lane said he intends to keep supplying it with whatever relevant information he comes across — although there are indications that he may not know as much as he once said he did.

Writing in a Danish newspaper in 1967, Lane said in a signed article, "I know who fired the fatal shot at President Kennedy." Three years later, in another article, this time in the Los Angeles Free Press, he assured readers that "the CIA killed JFK."

Which is all very strange. Last Sept. 17, after the House had voted that day to establish the Assassinations Committee, someone claiming to be Mark Lane declared firmly on WWDC here that "I don't know who killed Martin Luther King." And then, just last month, on WMCA in New York, someone again purporting to be Mark Lane assured listeners there: "I've never said that the FBI and the CIA were involved in the assassination. I still have not said that..."

Could there be a false Mark Lane?

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Above, the Warren Report; at right, House Assassination Committee members with the gun in the King slaying. From left: Reps. Walter Fauntroy (D-D.C.), Chairman Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), Stewart B. McKinney (R-Conn.) and Robert W. Edgar (D-Pa.).