

Assassinations Probe: No Big Revelations

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WASHINGTON—Despite a tedious, expensive and far-ranging investigation, a blue-ribbon congressional committee has uncovered no significant evidence of conspiracy in the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King, according to dozens of sources interviewed by The Times.

Black leaders, in and out of the government, were principally responsible for creation of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, reflecting a strong belief among blacks that James Earl Ray did not act alone in the assassination of King.

But the committee has developed little about the King murder not already known to Tennessee law enforcement agencies or anything substantial not known to the Warren Commission years ago about the Kennedy slaying.

The assassinations committee is split into two subcommittees, one focusing on Kennedy, the other on King.

Interviews and examinations of committee records by Times reporters show that the committee and its investigators have labored mightily to unearth evidence of conspiracies in both murders—but to no avail.

During its 20-month-long investigation, the committee has:

- Spent almost \$5 million on staff salaries, travel and expenses and wages for consultants, including ballistics, forensic and medical experts.

- Interviewed upwards of 1,500 witnesses, including some "kooks."

- Examined voluminous documents, some hitherto secret, dealing with prior investigations of both assassinations.

- Expended extensive effort rechecking old leads discredited by prior investigators and ensuing after what conspiracy buffs—most particularly attorney and author Mark Lane—call "new evidence."

Some of the "new evidence" has turned out largely to be an assortment of flimsy rumor, distortion and plain untruth.

Witnesses interviewed often have termed some committee investigators

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"bumbling" and "naive." Some appear more interested in justifying their salaries than in pursuing the investigation, according to such witnesses, including Alabama author William Bradford Huie, who said he told one investigator:

"If you're going to waste the taxpayer's money, here are a couple of leads to follow. There's nothing to them that I didn't find out nine years ago." Huie said the investigator "went chasing off after them."

"The thing that is frustrating to the staff (lawyers and investigators) is that they haven't found that smoking gun. They just are not able to find that smoking gun. I'm not saying it's not out there," said Donovan Gay, the committee's \$38,500 chief researcher from its inception in September, 1976, until early this year. He said he left the job because his talents were no longer being fully utilized by the committee.

Gay, a conspiracy advocate, was one of the committee's top administrators for almost a year-and-a-half and said he still maintained contact with some staff members.

The committee, headed by a tough law-and-order chief counsel, Robert Blakey, of Cornell University, apparently will resolve at least some of the questions about the assassinations that have fueled conspiracy theories for years.

Blakey, as has been his custom and as he has instructed staff members, declined to comment on the investigation.

However, it is known that Blakey sees the importance of the investigation as going far beyond supplying a

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simple answer to the single-killer or conspiracy question.

It is understood that he regards the committee's job as being one that will furnish a broad range of recommendations about the investigations of future assassinations, if they occur, and the conduct of federal agencies, including the FBI, CIA and Justice Department during such times.

But clarifying unsubstantiated rumors and exaggerations by conspiracy buffs may turn out to be the committee's principal service to the American public.

This was confirmed, in effect, by a committee member, Rep. Harold E. Ford, Democrat from Memphis, where King was murdered.

Ford is a member of the congressional Black Caucus, which exerted pressure that led to the committee's creation in September of 1976. He said in a recent Memphis interview:

"I'm very pleased at the way the committee is moving. In the latter part of July or August, when we open up to the media, I think the American people will be pleased as well. . . . We are going to close it out, lay the facts before the American people."

Ford placed emphasis on the phrase "close it out."

It remains to be seen, however, if Americans will be satisfied with the committee's findings. The body's final report is due Dec. 31.

At least 80% of the public believes the possibility of a conspiracy in both assassinations exist, polls show, and the percentage may be even higher among blacks and young people.

Almost from its inception, the committee has been under great pressure to produce conspiratorial evidence to justify its existence.

Toward that end, during the early months, said Donovan Gay, the former chief researcher, "we put out a report containing unsubstantiated evidence. It was not fabricated, but it certainly was exaggerated."

The pressure was so intense, said Alvin Lewis, a Philadelphia lawyer

who served in the first several months as the committee's deputy counsel, that "we began looking for a conspiracy."

The pressure came implicitly from such black leaders as Coretta King and one of King's close aides, U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young—black leaders who got the committee off the ground and who are wedded to the conspiracy theory. Conversely, pressure also came from skeptics in the House who fought creation of the special committee.

As early as 1977, Rep. Robert E. Badham (R-Calif.) took note of the super secrecy in which the committee works and its early promises of major revelations when he said:

"When are we going to have some meat hung on the bones of the assassination committee report, or when are we going to be advised in either closed or open session of what the committee had done, or when are we going to bring this to a close . . ."

In March, he said that despite committee subpoenas, extensive travel, employment of numerous consultants and an impressive organizational chart, "we have nothing on which we can determine any sort of justification for keeping this committee going."

Badham's remarks from the floor of the House reflect the view of many colleagues and persons interviewed by the committee or its investigators that its work has been a dud, at least as far as shedding new light on the killings.

Others who were much more closely involved with the murder victims are critical for different reasons.

Ambassador Young said, "I've been satisfied all along that nothing much would come out of the committee

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If the committee achieves anything, Young said, it would be to alert the nation to errors made by investigators following the Kennedy and King killings.

Skepticism among persons interviewed by the committee or its investigators is widespread. Many who have had both minimal and extensive exposure to committee questioning say they have been asked nothing that indicates investigators are onto anything new.

These persons range from principal witnesses of a decade ago, such as William D. Paisley, who sold the white Mustang to Ray in Birmingham, to three writers responsible for books which claimed Ray acted alone in assassinating King: William Bradford Huie, Gerold Frank and George McMillan.

Huie told The Times, "The committee is a shameful concession to the conspiracy racket."

Huie said he told one committee investigator: "You can run that machine (tape recorder) the next 20 hours and I'm not going to be able to tell you anything I haven't said and written over and over." The author said the committee had around 24 hours of tape recorded interviews with him.

Ray, Huie insists, was "driven by the most insistent of all motives which drive human beings to commit

murder. The yearning of the nobody to be a somebody."

Huie, like author Frank, was prepared to write a book dealing with a conspiracy to slay King, and early material supplied him by Ray.

Frank's book, as a matter of fact, was to be entitled "Conspiracy: The Story of the Men who Planned and Carried out the Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr."

"I would have made a lot more money on the book if I had been able to prove a conspiracy," he said in an interview.

Both Frank and Huie said committee investigators had spent long hours talking to them. Frank said of them: "I gather they did not believe it was not a conspiracy."

McMillan, who spent six years on his book, not only has talked with investigators but he has been summoned here for questioning by committee members. "My feeling," he said, "is that the committee is going to end up answering rumors, instead of giving a careful narration of the facts."

Ray's first American attorney after his arrest in London, following the shooting, a man he telegraphed from an English jail cell asking for help—Arthur Hanes, of Birmingham—also has been interviewed at great length by committee investigators. He said he also turned over his extensive files and they were not returned for a year.

Hanes, an ex-FBI agent who has defended a number of Ku Klux Klansmen in Alabama, calls the committee investigation "a boondoggle and a farce and a waste of taxpayers' money."

"Their approach," he added, "indicates they have nothing, absolutely nothing. They are rehashing all the old things they knew a long time ago. They have not added one fact of evidence I did not know two months after I was in the case, not one pertinent fact of evidence. Not one damned thing."

Doubt about the investigation's usefulness exists even within the committee membership itself, according to one recent witness before the King subcommittee, former Memphis detective Ed Redditt, a black. Redditt claimed that during his testimony a congressman, whose name he does not remember, testily said: "We wasted \$2 million on this."

Redditt's testimony was particularly jarring to the conspiracy constituency's position because it upset a distorted version of his role. That version was that Redditt had been King's personal bodyguard on the day of the assassination but was manipulated away from his post two hours before the shooting.

This meshed with the conspiracy tapestry and was accepted as further

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evidence that King was the victim of a finely wrought plot.

(As a black police officer, Redditt said he had encountered hostility in his own community from blacks who resented his surveillance of the civil rights leader. He was removed from his post in a fire station across from the Lorraine Motel after he reported threats on his life, but his surveillance partner, Willie B. Richmond, remained at the post.)

Mark Lane, the attorney-author, insists information he gave the committee about Redditt was "very powerful stuff" in support of conspiracy. Redditt said that during his testimony one congressman told him, "You are the basis for opening (the committee's) investigation."

But Redditt told Times reporters he had corrected the version perpetuated by conspiracy buffs during this testimony. He said he told the committee he was not King's personal bodyguard and that even before being removed from his post, he was 180

feet from the Lorraine Motel where King later was shot.

He was merely keeping King under surveillance, he said, and, during a recent interview with WMC-TV in Memphis, he insisted there was "no way, no way" he could have protected King from 180 feet away.

The distorted version, Redditt conceded, circulated because he never got around to downgrading it before he appeared before the committee in March. He said he "apologized" to the committee for not clarifying his role earlier. He claimed what he had said earlier had been taken out of context by "people who write books overnight."

In an interview at his Tennessee prison, Ray dismissed another favorite theory advanced by the conspiracy buffs: that he was too ignorant and unsophisticated to have fled unaided to Europe via Canada, assembling four aliases and various passports along the way.

"I got those passports myself, nobody helped me with those," Ray told Times reporters in the presence of his newest attorney, Mark Lane. As with the Redditt theory, many conspiracy buffs have also pushed the version that Ray could not have operated alone in Canada.

He insisted, however, that obtaining the documents in Canada was not complicated, and he dismissed the aliases by saying, "I don't know where I got all those aliases, but I probably got them out of a magazine or the phone book."

Ray's brother, Jerry, his closest family member, made a similar revealing statement earlier to Times reporters.

Asked if James Earl Ray's escape to Europe via Canada after the assassination had not been difficult, Jerry Ray replied:

"James said that was the easiest part of it all." He declined to elaborate.

James Ray continues to insist he was financed during the year between his escape from a Missouri prison and the assassination by a "Latin-type" named Raoul. Ray and Lane claim to have finally identified a photograph of this man.

"There's no name connected with it (the photograph)," Ray said. "It may just be a common criminal." Ray added that he did not want to discuss the matter in detail.

The committee, author McMillan and others believe, is seeking to connect Ray's brother, Jerry, and other members of the family, into some sort of conspiracy directly or indirectly.

And they believe the committee has attempted to connect him to J.B. Stoner, a racist and anti-Semite who lives in Marietta, Ga., and supports Jerry Ray with "walking around money," as the latter put it.

During the interview in Tennes-

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see's Brushy Mountain Prison, James Earl Ray said:

"They're emphasizing investigating me and various (Ray) family members."

Beside Jerry Ray, another brother, John, a sister, Carol Pepper, and Stoner were questioned extensively by the committee behind closed doors here.

Last month, the committee chairman, Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), reported to the full House that he was dissatisfied with both John Ray and Carol Pepper's "recalcitrancy."

"Should Carol Pepper and John Ray continue to assert a convenient lack of recollection," added Stokes, "the committee may have no choice but to bring these actions either to the attention of the court for disposition under its civil contempt power or before the House for certification of contempt of Congress."

Both Stokes and Walter Fauntroy (D-District of Columbia), chairman of the King subcommittee, which appears presently to be the most active of the two, declined to speak with Times reporters.

The Kennedy end of the scrutiny, it is understood, is winding down, while

Interviews for this article were conducted in Birmingham and Hartselle, Ala., Memphis, Atlanta, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Houston and Los Angeles.

sources close to the committee suggest that the King phase remains "a live investigation."

The life and times of the committee have not been easy.

A macabre joke among staffers is that they know one thing for certain: neither Kennedy nor King committed suicide.

Congress only reluctantly gave birth to the committee. There were fears of stirring up more controversy and dissension in the country about the assassinations. The committee has budgeted \$5.5 million for its two-year investigation, and a staff of 115.

The bulk of the money has gone into salaries—\$1.3 million in 1977 and \$2.4 million in 1978.

In 1978 it has budgeted \$300,000 for travel, \$132,000 for consultants, and \$25,000 for witnesses plus other expenses.

The committee has charged with four tasks by Congress. Who was the assassin or assassins? Did he or they have any aid? Did the U.S. agencies adequately perform their duties in the investigations? Given the evidence the committee has uncovered, should its duties be extended?

But before it could even assemble a staff, in 1976, the committee was in trouble. According to one early top administrator, there was pressure from Congress to come up with evidence of a conspiracy before the committee was a month old. "So we

began looking for a conspiracy," instead of conducting a straight investigation, Al Lewis said.

The first chief counsel, former Philadelphia prosecutor Richard Sprague, was fired seven months after he was hired. His critics said Sprague was too publicity-minded, too abrasive and wanted too much money and too big a staff.

Many black leaders felt the committee was seriously crippled after Sprague's departure, because he meant to include the FBI and CIA in his investigation. The present chief counsel said the FBI and the CIA have cooperated with his investigation.

When Sprague left, there was a 60% turnover of staff members. The financing of the committee then, in late 1976 and early 1977, was so tenuous it was hard to get typewriter ribbons and envelopes, one former staffer noted.

Unlike Sprague, Blakey clamped a secrecy lid on the committee's work which upset some congressmen and staff members.

In an apparent effort to justify its existence, the committee revealed some tantalizing tidbits about its work in a January, 1978, report to Congress.

The report noted that the committee was involved in some projects which "have never before been undertaken to evaluate available evidence concerning the assassinations."

"In other cases," it added, "advances in scientific technology will allow issues to be analyzed in significantly greater depth and detail than was possible at the time of the assassinations."

Part of this process involves "photo enhancement," or identifying "individuals not readily recognizable in a photograph." Such work in the past, for example, has resulted in a theory that there were three men with a rifle in the bushes in front of the Kennedy car in Dealey Plaza in Dallas.

The committee reported it was also utilizing another new technique, "to trace outward from the President the trajectory of the bullets which struck him. This approach to determine the trajectory of the bullets has not been attempted previously."

A new acoustics test also is being used to determine the number, direction and timing sequence of the shots fired in Dealey Plaza by means of a computer printout of decibel frequencies, the report said.

"An acoustical analysis of the Kennedy assassination has not been conducted by an official investigating body," the report said.

At one point, the committee called in a number of conspiracy buffs to get their ideas. It has never called in the anti-conspiracy buffs for a similar session.