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Assassination Interest Fades

By any reasonable reckoning, the public hearings being held by the House Select Committee on Assassinations should have created a sensation. Many Americans are still skeptical about the official explanations of the murders of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. And the committee has heard testimony from such well known persons as James Earl Ray, Mr. and Mrs. John B. Connally, Marina Oswald Porter, Fidel Castro (on tape), Gerald R. Ford and Richard Helms.

But the hearings, despite their occasional moments of high drama, have attracted less interest than might have been expected. Public attendance in the committee room has been averaging fewer than 50 persons a day, possibly because the testimony by experts on acoustics, ballistics and pathology often is difficult to follow.

Another reason may be that the hearings thus far have given little comfort to conspiracy theorists. Under sharp questioning by committee Chairman Louis Stokes, D.-Ohio, Ray's alibi for the King assassination was shown to lack credibility at several key points. Moreover, the expert testimony relating to the Kennedy assassination has tended to support the Warren Commission's conclusion that the bullets fired at the President all came from Lee Harvey Oswald's rifle—and that three shots were fired, not four.

It is possible, too, that most Americans simply have had their fill of new investigations into and theories about the Kennedy and King assassinations. The sheer volume of detail has been beyond the capacity of all but the most ardent conspiracy buffs to absorb. And the fact that no solid evidence of a conspiracy has yet come to light in either case has led to a widespread feeling that the full truth may never be known.

Certainly, it is difficult to imagine that Americans would react today as they did in 1967 to the flamboyant public investigation into the Kennedy assassination launched by New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison. For months, Garrison held the nation spellbound with his assertions that the assassination had been a conspiracy and that he had "solved" it. But while he claimed to have "the name of every man involved and the names of the individuals who pulled the triggers," he was never able to prove his charges.

Edward Jay Epstein brought a new dimension to the Kennedy assassination case in his recently published book, "Legend." Epstein's research led him to conclude that Oswald probably had supplied the Russians with U.S. military secrets during his stay in the Soviet Union and that he returned to this country as a low-level Soviet espionage agent. However, Epstein said in a New York magazine interview, "I think that the fact that Oswald traces so clearly back to the Russians makes it extremely unlikely that they would have recruited him as an assassin."

Thus, as the House Assassinations Committee works toward the scheduled December release of its report, the original verdicts on the King and Kennedy murders—that Ray and Oswald acted alone—still stand unrefuted. Barring some unexpected bombshell, the committee is likely to reach the same conclusion. There will always be questions about both cases, but the passions they aroused a decade ago are just a memory now.