

Ford Stands

By George Lardner Jr.
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Despite the crescendo of criticisms in the past 14 years, former president Gerald Ford said yesterday that he still has no misgivings about the findings of the Warren Commission in the assassination of President Kennedy.

CIA assassination plots against Fidel Castro and FBI destruction of evidence notwithstanding, Ford told the House Assassinations Committee that, "To date, I have seen no new evidence that would change my views."

He blamed the distortions of critics, public cynicism toward government and a general unfamiliarity with the commission's work for the disrepute into which it has fallen.

Backed up by the commission's two other surviving members, Ford said: "We believe the report, despite the criticisms of 14 years, was an authoritative document." Speaking for himself, he added: "I categorically deny that the investigation of the assassination was insufficient."

Ford, who was House minority leader at the time of his appointment to the commission, acknowledged that at one point he secretly promised a high-ranking FBI official to keep the bureau "thoroughly advised" of the commission's activities, but he declared that the arrangement lasted for only a week.

Using prepared texts to answer the questions he regarded as the most important, the former president said he offered to keep the FBI assistant director, Cartha DeLoach, informed during the course of an "internal conflict" over the commission's appointment of a chief counsel in December 1963.

FBI memos by DeLoach about the arrangement recently came to light as a result of requests under the Freedom of Information Act.



By James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post

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by Warren Panel Findings

"The DeLoach memos appear to be accurate," Ford said, "but the relationship did not continue during the investigation period of the commission."

Ford confirmed that the commission had not been aware of the CIA's plotting against Castro, which continued even after Kennedy's death, of the destruction of a threatening note from Lee Harvey Oswald to a Dallas FBI agent, or of a number of other items, such as disciplinary actions against 20 FBI agents and supervisors for shortcomings in the investigation of Oswald before Kennedy's murder.

Knowledge of the plotting against Castro "certainly would have required the commission to extend its inquiry into those operations," Ford said, but "I don't think they in and of themselves would have changed the conclusions of the commission."

Similarly, he said he did not think the other things that have come to light would have altered the commission's findings or even changed the course of the investigation.

Midway through his testimony, a loud crash at a door behind the committee rostrum interrupted the hearing. Moments later the public address system failed.

Sitting behind Ford, former commission member John J. McCloy leaned over to the third surviving member, John Sherman Cooper, and said with a grin:

"Sabotage. It's a conspiracy."

Capitol Police said later that a Secret Service Agent had been trying to shut a door to the huge Cannon House Office Building caucus room, despite the fact that it had been left open for a clutter of sound cables.

Under questioning by committee counsel Gary Cornwell, Ford also said the commission, to the best of his recollection, was not told that the CIA

once considered using Oswald as a source of intelligence information about the Soviet Union.

The House committee, Cornwell said, has also turned up indications that "an employe at the Cuban consulate in Mexico City [where Oswald tried to get a visa in September 1963] may have had prior knowledge of the assassination and may have been a member of Cuban intelligence."

"We were not informed," Ford replied.

Cornwell would not elaborate, but he appeared to be referring to a former employe of the Cuban consulate who ducked the committee's investigators when they tried to interview him, and finally refused to speak with them when they located him by happenstance.

According to an informed source, the CIA apparently intercepted an ambiguous conversation by the individual in question, after the Nov. 22, 1963, assassination in Dallas. He reportedly said something to the effect that "we knew it before Kennedy did."

Asked about Cornwell's remark, a spokesman for the Cuban Interest Section here professed surprise. He said committee members and staffers made no mention of the tentatively phrased allegation during either of their two visits to Havana this year.

"Apparently Cuba has to be mentioned daily despite what we say and despite the cooperation we've given," he protested.

In his testimony, former senator Cooper said the commission did have its disagreements, especially over the question of whether a single bullet hit both Kennedy and Texas governor John B. Connally, but this still "did not alter the conclusion of the committee that Oswald was the lone

assassin. . . We did our best. We found what we could at the time."

"We had no 'rush to judgment,'" McCloy added. "I not only feel we had no credible evidence of a conspiracy. I feel the weight of the evidence was against a conspiracy."

J. Lee Rankin, who served as general counsel to the commission, and former attorney general Nicholas DeB. Katzenbach, who had urged that it be created, testified in the afternoon.

A former solicitor general, Rankin said he was shocked and "very much disappointed about some of the things that have been revealed" in recent years.

Times have changed, Rankin observed, but in 1964, he said, "I never believed that [FBI director J. Edgar Hoover] would withhold information or have it withheld from the commission or that the FBI would do that. When I learned they'd known plans for assassination [of Castro] were under way by the CIA, it was quite disheartening to me. With the CIA, it's worse."

Katzenbach told the committee he was "astounded to this day" that former CIA director Allen W. Dulles, who served on the Warren Commission, did not at least tell the other commissioner members of the plotting.

"Perhaps naively, I thought that the appointment of Allen Dulles would ensure that the commission would be told of everything the CIA had in its files," Katzenbach said.

Once again, Ford, in his testimony, expressed no misgivings. He called the late CIA director's presence on the commission "beneficial and not harmful to our investigation." Asked whether Dulles had hindered it in any way, the former president replied: "Not at all."