

M.J. JFK Sessions Stir the Disbelievers

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Washington, D.C. — They come into the House Assassination Committee hearings lugging suitcases of material. They take notes, stare intently at witnesses and charts and photographs and endless reruns of the famous Zapruder film showing President John F. Kennedy's head explode as a bullet strikes.

For years they belonged to a nether world, generally scorned by the serious. But in the skeptical post-Watergate era — with polls showing a majority of Americans doubting the widely disputed Warren Commission findings — they are today at least acknowledged, if not necessarily believed, by establishment politicians.

Loosely defined as the "critical community" they are vehement disbelievers of the Warren Commission Report finding that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.

Within this group, the range of dissent and credibility is enormous.

"We find it extremely uncomfortable being lumped as a group; we like to think we represent the more rational wing," said one member of the Assassination Information Bureau (AIB). About half a dozen AIB members work out of a Washington office crammed with assassination files. They propound their theories at salaries of \$50 a week from private donations.

But Harold Weisberg, long time Warren Commission critic, and author of several assassination books, says "there is not one expert" among the AIB. Weisberg is purposely absent from the dozen or so critics at the hearings.

The former Senate investigator feels the committee is deliberately white washing the evidence by skirting crucial

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questions. He also says of the critics, "There isn't sufficient unity to refer to us as a community. I believe most are irresponsible, well motivated but unsuited, while a large number are either ego motivated or crackpots."

Some will tell you with absolute conviction that the so-called "umbrella man" shown in the Zapruder film shot a poison dart into the throat of the president via his umbrella-weapon. Others list an army of conspirators the size of the Normandy invasion — from J. Edgar Hoover and Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford to right wing Americans and Cubans and the CIA and the Mafia.

"Forget the name Lee Harvey Oswald. He was just a patsy," said one theorist at the hearings. Some see a conspiracy behind everything and contend with arched eyebrows that newspapers do not print their ideas because of organized suppression.

Bullet Is Crucial

The more respectable refuse to dabble in conspiracy speculation but seriously question available evidence

showing that a single bullet passed through Kennedy and wounded former Gov. John Connally in the seat in front of the president. This is crucial to the case because, if it was not a single bullet, one assassin could not have had the time to fire the two shots.

For the next month, these assassination buffs — who like to call themselves researchers — and others following the story will be caught in a curious time warp that both compels and repels many, sifting a 15 year old disaster and the discrepancies surrounding it as if it were yesterday.

The far end of the spectrum is represented by men like R. B. Cutler, a congenial New England architect in white bucks, seersucker suit and bow tie, who has peppered the committee with his drawings and theories.

Cornering one member of the committee at the end of a session last week, Cutler said, "Hi ... I'm the 'umbrella man' theorist." The staffer said, "Oh yes ... I've read all your stuff."

Cutler's material places "the umbrella man" as one of several assassins. "Of course,

he shot the 'flechette' or poison dart from the umbrella as he twirled it," said Cutler. "Not too many people believe that theory."

The mysterious "umbrella man" long has been a subject of discussion. Photographs taken at the time of the assassination show a man opening a black umbrella, although the sun was shining as the motorcade turned in front of the book depository. On the Zapruder film he can be seen moving the umbrella up and down rapidly as Kennedy's limousine passes. At the point when the bullet hits the president, and other spectators dive for cover, several photos show the umbrella man calmly sitting on the curb and being joined by another man. Many "researchers" have alleged that he could have been a signal man for an assassination team. Others see the "umbrella man" as a ridiculous diversion from important evidence.

"That man has been found and has an explanation," said one committee staffer. "He was pumping it up and down to protest Kennedy's father's dealings with pro-Nazi sympathizer Neville Chamber-

lain." (Britain's prime minister at the outbreak of the war was often caricatured as carrying an umbrella.) As his listener stared, the staffer said, "I admit it's subtle," but indicated that the committee believed the explanation.

Talk Fluently

As the critics follow the ins and outs of the testimony, they talk fluently about bullet trajectories and autopsy reports, how long it takes to load and fire a rifle, whether the bullet found on the stretcher was a plant. They mull over evidence they feel points to an assassin shooting from another window, and ponder the Oswald-Jack Ruby connection.

And for some doubters, the hearings ultimately will be a beginning rather than an end. Weisberg, sitting in front of his TV set, already has a mile long list of grievances against the committee.

"The right questions are just not being asked," he said. "They're asking unimportant questions about the rifle scope, ignoring the crucial question: Was the scope mounted at the time of the assassination in a manner that permitted accurate firing?"

"The answer is no. When tested, some of the best shots in the world have been unable to re-enact the shots the way Oswald would have had to make them.

"They never even cared to establish just where the bullet on the stretcher came from — and there was available testimony on that in the Warren Commission report. Darrell Tomlinson, a hospital engineer, said he found it after it was jarred from underneath a stretcher mattress and would have been impossible to have fallen there naturally."