

# House Finally Passes JFK Bill, But Obstacles Remain

**JFK** the movie is out on videotape; **JFK** the bill — designed to quiet conspiracy theorists — is stalled in Congress.

Hours before recessing for August, the House approved a bill to release the government's secret records on President John F. Kennedy's 1963 assassination. But it retained controversial provisions that the Senate had skirted.

Even so, House passage was a long-awaited moment. When supporters introduced the legislation five months ago amid the publicity generated by Oliver Stone's movie "JFK," they had hoped to put it on the fast track. It didn't happen that way.

"Little did I expect that this issue would draw so much interest, elicit so much controversy and demand such a tremendous amount of time from so many different committees, offices and federal agencies," said Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, during floor debate Aug. 11. The bill (H J Res 454) was passed by voice vote the next day.



Stokes

Stokes, chairman of a special panel that reopened the investigation in the 1970s, sponsored the legislation with Sen. David L. Boren, D-Okla.

The holdup is a crucial difference between the House measure and the version passed by the Senate (S 3006) on July 27. (*Weekly Report*, p. 2250)

The dispute: who will appoint the independent board that will decide which records to disclose. Both measures call for filtering the millions of pages of closed congressional and executive-branch documents through the panel. The board would withhold any material that jeopardized national security or intruded greatly on someone's privacy.

The original legislation would give the power to appoint the board members to a special court division — the same division that names independent counsels. The Justice Department objected strongly, saying the board was

an executive-branch agency and should be named by the president.

The Senate compromised and passed a bill that would let the president choose the members with Senate confirmation. The House Government Operations Committee made a similar change in its version.

But House Judiciary, which shared jurisdiction, held fast. The dispute played into a larger battle over the constitutionality of the court's appointment of independent counsels. And Judiciary Chairman Jack Brooks, D-Texas, reportedly believed compromising in the JFK bill would set a bad precedent.

In floor debate Aug. 11, Brooks rose to say the court division should name the board members to avoid "any appearance of conflict of interest." And, he noted, the Supreme Court upheld the selection procedure as recently as 1988.

Brooks got his way in the final

House measure: The judicial branch won the right, putting the House bill at odds with the Senate version.

The House bill changed two other controversial provisions Judiciary had added: a disclosure exemption for records given the government under a deed of gift and a waiver of restrictions on how much the National Archives could charge for copies of the documents.

Opponents said the gift limit would leave the seal on all the secret documents in the presidential libraries; the provision was cut back considerably in the floor version. The fee waiver was dropped, meaning the National Archives will have to abide by Freedom of Information Act limits on the cost of copies to the public.

The measure would release a huge collection of materials, including books, papers, maps and tapes collected by the FBI and CIA, and boxes of research by the many panels created to look into the assassination, including the Warren, Rockefeller and Church commissions.

Supporters hope the chambers can resolve their differences quickly when they return, or else the end-of-session rush and election pressures will overwhelm the movement. □

## ETHICS

### Task Force Formed On Post Office

The House ethics committee Aug. 11 appointed a task force to investigate whether the panel should open a full inquiry into possible wrongdoing at the House Post Office. The task force held its first meeting, behind closed doors, Aug. 12.

A House Administration Committee task force spent five months investigating the post office before its three Republicans and three Democrats issued separate findings July 22. The House voted the same day to turn over the reports and the task force's secret files to the ethics panel, officially the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct. The reports said that the post office was mismanaged and plagued by a flawed patronage system and that it doled out questionable perks to members that, in the view of Republicans, may have been illegal.

(*Weekly Report*, p. 2147)

The reports did not resolve the most serious allegation from the post office scandal — that members' campaign or office funds were converted to cash through transactions disguised as stamp purchases. The Justice Department is investigating that matter.

In its statement, the ethics committee stressed that it had not initiated an official preliminary inquiry — the first step of a full-blown investigation — and that no individual member was under scrutiny.

The ethics task force will be headed by Matthew F. McHugh, D-N.Y., who ran the committee's investigation of members' overdrafts at the House bank and has announced his retirement. Also on the task force will be Democrats George "Buddy" Darden, Ga., and Benjamin L. Cardin, Md., and Republicans Jim Bunning, Ky., Jon Kyl, Ariz., and David L. Hobson, Ohio.

Meanwhile, Kweisi Mfume, D-Md., was added to the full ethics committee on Aug. 11 to replace Gary L. Ackerman, D-N.Y., who resigned the panel July 28 amid allegations that he leaked information about its House bank probe. (*Ackerman, Weekly Report*, p. 2248) □

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