

Dear Senator Specter:

As you well know, the Assassination Records Review Board is an independent federal agency created by the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992 charged with overseeing the identification and release of records related to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The Review Board's mandate expires on September 30, 1997.

Despite a record of efficient and cost-effective performance that has resulted in the release of thousands of records from federal agencies and thousands of other records previously in private hands, several factors will prevent the complete and thorough review of assassination records by that deadline.

To begin with, the task assigned to the Review Board was unprecedented. During the drafting of the legislation, the time that would be required to complete the mandate could only be estimated. That estimate turned out to be unrealistic. The three-year timetable provided for in the authorizing legislation failed to account accurately for the complexity of the undertaking or the immense quantity of assassination-related documents. Furthermore, the requirements of the enabling legislation required a long start-up phase. The prohibition against hiring (or detailing) federal employees, combined with the requirement that each staff member receive a Top Secret clearance, caused considerable delay in assembling a qualified staff. The Board was, in effect, not given three full years to do its work.

In addition, the 16 month delay in appointing the members of the Board meant that many agencies had to proceed with the review of their files without the benefit of Board guidance. Unfortunately the agencies had to redo a significant amount of work once the necessary guidance was available.

And finally, lengthy delays by some of the more than 25 federal agencies that currently have assassination-related files have compromised the Board's ability to proceed with its review.

As a result, the Board is seeking a one-year extension of its mandate. The slow start-up in our first year resulted in a budget reserve equivalent to 25 percent of anticipated FY 1998 costs. We estimated that we would require, in addition to the funds carried over, considerably less than \$2 million to continue operations through the end of FY 1998.

The question of whether a one-year extension will be sufficient to complete the record review process is a relevant one. It cannot be answered by the Review Board alone since much depends on the cooperation and efficiency of the federal agencies that process assassination records. Although it is likely that some unreviewed records would remain, the Board is confident that the additional year will permit it to process all of the important federal records and also acquire other important records currently in private hands that should be part of the JFK Collection.

The Review Board is not alone in its conviction that additional time is required to complete its important task. The Board has received numerous passionate pleas from the public to seek an extension, and the agencies that maintain the greatest numbers of assassination records are unanimous in their call for additional time for the Board.

In considering what would be, in our judgment, a premature end of the Board's mandate, it is important to recall the atmosphere of doubt and speculation that gave rise to the creation of the Board in the first place. A too-early termination would generate renewed and intensified doubts about the commitment of our government to release all of the records that relate to the assassination of President Kennedy. Such an outcome would not only compromise the good work that we have accomplished so far, but would also postpone a solution to a problem that will continue to vex our nation for years to come.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter. I look forward to the opportunity to discuss the future of the Review Board with you and I stand ready to provide any additional information that you or your staff may require.

Sincerely,

John R. Tunheim
Chairman