

MEMORANDUM

April 19, 2017

TO: Anna K. Nelson

CC: David G. Marwell

FROM: T. Jeremy Gunn

SUBJECT: February 3 Memo on LBJ Library

David has given me your February 3 memorandum about the LBJ Library and asked me to respond. We appreciate your taking the time and trouble to prepare and send your thoughts. The staff always appreciates it when Board members take the time to provide us with insightful comments and suggestions.

I would like to offer some thoughts in response to your memo, particularly your query “does the staff really think that our mandate includes proving (or not proving) the ideas of Oliver Stone?” and your conclusion that the “plan [to review Vietnam files] should be discarded.”

I was not sure whether your comment about Stone was a rhetorical question or whether you really are concerned that the staff may be motivated by Stone’s ideas. To the extent that you really were asking, I can assure you that Stone’s opinions did not play a role, directly or indirectly, in designating the Vietnam files for review.

There were, in fact, several reasons why we designated the Vietnam files. (By the way, *prior to receiving your memo*, I would have thought that you would agree with the following explanation.) It certainly has been our goal to seek out records that illuminate the broad historical issues surrounding the assassination. I have not thought that it would be productive, as it seems your memo is suggesting, that we seek only records that might narrowly and legalistically be described as “assassination records.” In short, we thought we should examine the historical context rather than try to relate documents to theories of the assassination.

To be more specific, we designated the Vietnam files for two principal reasons. The first reason was to determine whether there are still-classified documents that would help to reveal whether the assassination of President Kennedy had an effect on what is probably the most important foreign policy issue since World War II: the Vietnam War. As you know, far better than I, the question whether JFK would have made the same decisions in Vietnam as LBJ was a contested issue long before Oliver Stone made his movie. Robert McNamara, in his recent book, finally addressed the issue in print. (He, by the way, personally recommended to me that we attempt to secure and declassify records that would illuminate this important historical question. Other members of the public also have urged us to review Vietnam records.¹) John Newman's *JFK and Vietnam* -- which was written before the Stone film (and before Newman became interested in the Kennedy assassination), makes his argument that there was a significant difference between the positions of the two Presidents and his argument is based upon analysis of NSAMs, records from the Honolulu Conference, and other records of the type for which we have requested access.

It is my *personal* opinion that Newman "over reads" the texts and that they do not support the weight of analysis that he gives them. (I would be interested in your recommending any good reviews or criticisms of the Newman book.) But in the course of examining Vietnam documents at the JFK Library, I have been struck by the significant differences in how JFK approached the issue in November of 1963 and how LBJ spoke of it in December. JFK's references to Vietnam were couched in terms of uncertainty and he seems to have been deeply ambivalent about what should be done. Thus Newman, to my mind, is incorrect in concluding that JFK had decided to effect a total withdrawal. LBJ, however, had no ambivalence. From the very beginning, he used the term "win" to describe strategy for Vietnam. I am unaware of JFK's having employed that term with respect to the role of the US. LBJ used it in his first cabinet meeting and repeatedly thereafter. To me, this is an important historical issue that is directly relevant to the Kennedy assassination. I think that any steps that the Board can reasonably take to illuminate the positions of the two men should be considered a significant contribution to the historical record.

¹I am attaching a copy of a letter from Professor Galbraith at the University of Texas. We had prepared a draft response stating that we would be reviewing Vietnam records, but I will hold back our response until this issue is resolved.

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The second reason was to seek any possible records related to the assassination of Diem. It was not clear from your memo whether you had considered this issue or not. I seem to recall (though I haven't gone back to check), that Stone does mention the Diem assassination. For me, however, I think that we should pursue it regardless of what Stone says. As I recall from the last meeting, you raised -- correctly I thought -- questions about assassination attempts against Lumumba. Although there are differences, at least as the record now states, between the CIA's alleged role in the Lumumba and Diem assassinations, I would not think that it is appropriate to let our current understanding of the record affect what records we review.² If you disagree, I would be interested in hearing your views.

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In addition to this general response to your memo, let me suggest a few more specific points that you may wish to consider.

First, the only Vietnam records that we would be reviewing are those that: (a) are still classified, (b) pertain to major policy issues or the Diem assassination, and (c) are within a relatively narrow time-frame (1962-65). With the government-wide declassification efforts on Vietnam, it is our presumption that there will in fact be relatively few records that we will need to review. Moreover, it should be clear, we would be reviewing the files only for the purpose of determining whether they contain assassination records. Thus I do not anticipate a major expenditure of time, but I would not know for sure until looking at the files.

Second, it has been our understanding that the Board wanted the staff to identify records that would help enhance the historical understanding of the assassination. This is why we have pursued records related to Cuba, Mongoose, and organized crime. These records have not been pursued to prove or disprove theories -- but to give a documentary context to the assassination. If you think that these broader contextual issues should not be part of the Board's mandate, I think it would be better to raise the issue before the Board as a whole and to consider narrowing the Board's guidelines on what constitute assassination records.

Third, and related to the second, we had understood (perhaps incorrectly) that the Board was pleased that we had been able to obtain declassification of a broad range of Cuba records at the JFK Library.

²As an aside, Evelyn Lincoln, in a manuscript that will be released shortly by the JFK Library, draws an indirect link between the Diem assassination and the JFK assassination.

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I do not understand why it would be appropriate to arrange for the wholesale declassifying of Cuban records, but not even to look at Vietnam policy records.

Fourth, Steve Tilley has told us in the past that he advised all agencies -- before the Review Board was even named -- that they should identify records that might show a policy difference between JFK and LBJ on Vietnam. I think that it might look peculiar to some to see that the Review Board took an issue off the table that previously had been on the table, particularly if it was taken off the table in reaction to Oliver Stone.

Finally, it is not clear to me why *Vietnam* was singled out as a Stone issue. Stone places significant emphasis not only on Vietnam, but on Mongoose, the CIA, and Cuba. I assume that you still continue to believe that we should pursue those types of records that also are relevant to Stone's theories, but your memo leaves me somewhat uncertain about this. *With regard to the 1962-64 period*, Cuban-related records are much more extensive and complicated. Should we abandon our efforts on Cuba because of the potential volume of records?

The staff very much wishes to follow the guidance of the Board -- and if the Board thinks that these records should not be reviewed, we will notify the LBJ Library to take them off the list. Because I had understood that the records slated for review were the type of records that the Board wished us to review to determine whether they contain assassination records, I would feel uncomfortable about taking them off the list unilaterally.

The best interim solution appears to me to have the staff conduct a quick review of the records in Austin to determine exactly what the scope and volume of the still-classified records is and then to make a report to the Board. We could obtain your further guidance at that point.

Please let me know whether you think that this issue is one that should go to all of the Board members for discussion. We could send both your memo and mine to all of the Board members and see if they think it would be appropriate to discuss it at the next public meeting.

I hope you have a nice weekend and I look forward to seeing you next week.