

MEMORANDUM

April 13, 2017

TO: FILE

cc: T. Jeremy Gunn, Eileen Sullivan

FROM: Manuel E. Legaspi

SUBJECT: Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (the *Johns Committee*) of the Florida Senate (Wrap-up Memo)

On Monday, 21 July 1997 I visited the Florida Senate offices in the Capitol Building, Tallahassee, Florida, to review the original, unredacted records of the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, commonly known as the "Johns Committee." A full summary follows.

Summary of Activity

At 0815 on 21 July 1997 I met with Faye Blanton, Secretary of the Florida Senate, and Charlie Frier, Senate Staff, in Ms. Blanton's office at the State Capitol Building (Suite 405, The Capitol, Tallahassee, FL 32399). Ms. Blanton had me sign the agreed-upon form allowing me access to the confidential Johns Committee Records, and made a copy of my Review Board credentials. She then informed me that Mr. Frier would be assisting me in reviewing the records. Mr. Frier, who was the principal officer involved in the 1993 limited release of the Johns files, was instructed to assist me with the review and copying of records, and to remain with me the entire time to ensure that no unauthorized activity took place.

Over the course of one and one-half days I systematically examined all of the confidential files of the Committee. Several boxes of files were determined to be of an entirely unrelated nature and therefore not completely reviewed. In addition, I took one trip to the State of Florida Archives (R. A. Gray Building, Capitol Complex, Tallahassee) to determine the nature of the files that have already been released to the public.

History of the Johns Committee

The Florida Legislative Investigation Committee was created in 1956 by an act of the Florida Legislature (ch. 31498, Laws of Florida, 1956) for the purpose of "(making) investigations of the activities in this state of organizations advocating violence or a course of conduct which would constitute a violation of the Laws of Florida." Taking its name from State Senator (and one-time Chairman) Charley Johns, the Committee ended operations in 1965.

Modeling itself after the U.S. House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), the Johns Committee investigated a wide range of organizations and individuals involved in activities thought to be either illegal or inconsistent with the general moral standards of the State of Florida. The files of the Committee indicate that the primary focus of the investigative staff was revealing (and, to a lesser degree, removing from public life and even prosecuting) alleged Communists, Civil Rights activists, peace activists, racist organizations (such as the Ku Klux Klan), and homosexuals. Major investigations included an examination of the financial holdings of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the presence of Communists on the faculties of a number of Florida universities. Correspondence received by the Committee indicates that their efforts were supported throughout the state. In addition, Committee investigators received assistance from various state and local entities throughout the United States.

In 1993, the Florida Legislature approved a law (Ch. 93-405, Laws of Florida, 1993) which, among other things, allowed for a *partial* release of the investigative files of the Johns Committee. While the act granted the public access to many investigative files, it also ensured that the privacy of individuals investigated by the committee was protected.

According to Mr. Frier, the passage of this law attracted great interest throughout the state of Florida, especially from members of the news media.

ARRB Interest in the Johns Committee Records

Acting on leads provided by JFK assassination researchers, the ARRB contacted the Florida State government seeking access to the Johns Committee files. Several researchers felt that there was a good possibility that files related to the assassination were still withheld by the Florida Senate. In particular, the Review Board was interested in identifying files relating to pro- and anti-Castro organizations, as well as information on extreme right-wing groups such as the National States Rights Party and the Ku Klux Klan.

General Description of the Records of the Johns Committee

Organization of the Records

The confidential (still-protected) records of the Johns Committee are kept in a locked storage room on the fifth floor of the Senate Building. There is a total of 41 10"x12"x15" boxes of records, including one box of photos and one box of audio tapes. The nineteen boxes of files which were released to the public via the Florida State Archives are kept at the R.A. Gray Building in Tallahassee.

Records held by the Florida Senate

The first observation that I made regarding these records was that the files held by the Senate are not organized in any comprehensive manner. Although the Secretary's staff compiled an index of the withheld files in 1993, this index is not accurate -- while the boxes *are* numbered, the numbers do not correspond to the index, nor does the numbering system reflect any subject groupings of the boxes (i.e., groups of numbered boxes do not pertain to a single investigative subject). However, groups of folders within a box generally covered the same subject matter.

Most boxes contained a number of document types including (but not limited to) internal memoranda, outgoing correspondence, investigative files, administrative files, transcripts of testimony, and staff notes. Approximately 21 of the boxes contained files reflecting a mix of investigative subjects. The other twenty boxes contained files that were on completely unrelated subjects (e.g., files regarding investigations into the finances of the NAACP and the sexual practices of certain individuals). While I did not review these files in detail, I did go over them in a general manner to ensure that nothing within our purview resided in those boxes.

The subject matter dealt with in the one box of audiotapes was not determined due to a lack of any labels or descriptions on the tape boxes.

The contents of the box of photographs were reviewed, however, I was unable to find anything even remotely associated with our mission.

Files held at the State Archives

The transfer of releasable records to the State Archives was did not follow correct archival procedures. Documents were never individually catalogued by the Senate, instead, the Senate simply delivered to the Archives a large group of records that could be released to the public. The Senate did not retain copies of most of those files. (However, it did appear that on occasion, when multiple copies of documents existed in the original files of the Committee, one copy was delivered to the Archives while others were kept in the files at the Senate. It is my opinion that this was not done by design.) Furthermore, Mr. Frier informed me that the once the records reached the Archives, their employees indexed and organized the records according to their own criteria.

In contrast to regular National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) procedure, where the original copy of a redacted document is always kept on file and never marked, many Johns Committee files which were released in part were given to the State Archives with portions blacked out *on the original documents themselves*. On most of the documents reviewed, a reader could see right through the back ink markings to read the "redacted" information.

In essence, the handling of these documents created two *distinct collections that share some similarities*.

Assassination-related records in the Johns Committee Files

Although both collections contained information on groups such as the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, anti- and pro-Castro activity, and far-right organizations, a review of the files at the Archives reveals that most of the information on these subjects has already been released in full. Documents that were redacted in part at the Archives that I was able to find in the Senate files revealed information only remotely related to the assassination. A complete examination of the files at the Senate indicates that most of the documents related to JFK issues represents information already in the public domain (such as articles of incorporation for different organizations, and publications of such organizations as the Fair Play for Cuba Committee).

The only documents that I found that are even tangentially related to our mission are:

- An interview in mid-1964 with an anti-Castro activist whose name has been linked to various conspiracy theories (the assassination of President Kennedy was not discussed);
- General information on various anti-Castro Cubans (including name lists);
- Internal correspondence regarding the Fair Play for Cuba Committee in Florida, and the group's involvement in other "subversive" activities; and
- A document on the Fair Play for Cuba Committee dated 26 Nov 1963 which mentions the assassination in passing.

It is my judgement that the redacted information in the records of the Johns Committee provides no material information on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Accordingly, I believe this matter should be closed.