

March 18, 1997

Mr. Kevin Binger
Majority Staff Director
Committee on Government Reform and Oversight
House of Representatives
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Binger:

I would like to take this opportunity to discuss the future of the Assassination Records Review Board, the independent federal agency responsible for the review and public release of records related to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

The Review Board has accomplished much in its first two years, but still has a great deal of important work to do. The Board, which is scheduled to cease operations at the end of fiscal year 1997, is recommending that it be extended for one additional year to complete its work. The members of the Board hope that Chairman Burton will be supportive of this recommendation. A copy of our FY 1996 Report sets out the basis for the recommendation and was recently sent to the Chairman. I have also enclosed a two-page summary of the Board's work to date and what it would accomplish with an additional year.

The Board has been engaged in the review and release of records related to the assassination of President F. Kennedy since June 1995. To date, the Board has acted to transfer nearly 10,000 documents to the National Archives and Records Administration for inclusion in the JFK Collection. At the end of 1996, the collection totaled approximately 3.3 million pages and was used extensively by researchers from all over the United States.

By the end of this year, the Board anticipates the completion of the review and processing of nearly all of the assassination records that have been identified by federal agencies, with the important exception of the remaining records of the FBI and the CIA. The overwhelming majority of previously redacted information has been made public.

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Unfortunately, it is impossible for the Board to complete its work within the original three-year timetable set by Congress. Although well-intentioned, the time frame was unrealistic for an unprecedented project of this magnitude. First, there was an 18-month delay in the appointment of the Board, a delay that caused agencies to fall far behind the pace envisioned by the law. Second, there was a protracted start-up caused by certain statutory restrictions placed on the Board's operation including a prohibition against hiring (or detailing) federal employees. Third, a significant amount of time and resources had to be devoted to locating and renovating space suitable for the storage of classified materials. Most important, despite deadlines, many of the agencies have not yet completed their review of the records, an obvious and necessary precursor to the Board's review.

An additional year will permit the Review Board to finish its task by completing: (1) the so-called Sequestered Collections, the huge and critically important collection of records at the CIA and FBI that were requested by the House Select Committee on Assassinations (well over one-half million pages must be reviewed by the agencies and released or forwarded to the Board for review); (2) the remaining records of all federal agencies and Congressional committees; (3) the search for additional records held by government agencies, private individuals and local governments (some of which have been identified, but not yet acquired); and (4) the continued search for the assassination records of a number of foreign countries. We are confident that the tasks can be completed in one additional year.

As you may be aware, the Review Board was conceived as a means of eliminating uncertainty and speculation about the content of government files relating to the assassination of President Kennedy. A premature termination of the Board will surely generate intensified doubts with the general public about the government's commitment to release all information that related to the assassination of President Kennedy, as well as renewed speculation about the conduct of our government and its institutions and personnel. If appropriate closure is not reached now, the identical issues will likely have to be addressed again in the future—at perhaps an even greater cost. The recommended additional year will allow for an orderly and confident conclusion of the important task of finishing the review of all records.

As a result of the Board's necessarily protracted start-up, it has a budget carryover of \$500,000 in no-year funds from its first year, a sum that would fund a full quarter of its continued operation. The Board would consequently require \$1.6 million of additional funds to operate for one more year.

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Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter. We are prepared to provide any additional information that may be required and stand ready to answer any questions that the Chairman or you may have for us. Please do not hesitate to call me at (202) 724-0088.

Sincerely,

David G. Marwell
Executive Director

Enclosure