

Note: This letter was never delivered.

January 27, 1997

The Honorable Louis Stokes  
House of Representatives  
Washington, D. C. 20515

Dear Congressman Stokes:

I am writing to you because of your early and continued support for the efforts of the Assassination Records Review Board. As you know, the Review Board's mandate expires on September 30, 1997, and I want to bring you up to date on where we stand.

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 all 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 resulted in a necessarily protracted 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 even 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. Many

of these agencies are now, finally, devoting the necessary resources to their responsibilities under the JFK Act.

For all of these reasons, the Board believes that it is necessary to seek a one-year extension of its mandate. A by-product of the slow start-up in our first year is a budget reserve equivalent to 25 percent of anticipated FY 1998 costs. Consequently, 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 appropriate. It cannot, however, 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 to locate and acquire other significant records currently in private hands that should be part of the JFK Collection. An additional year will mean that thousands of additional records related to the assassination will be available to—and not hidden from—the American people.

Significantly, 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 is confident that the agencies that maintain the greatest numbers of assassination records would support us in our call for additional time.

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 could 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 occupy 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