

The Assassination Records Review Board: The Pace Continues to Quicken

by

John R. Tunheim

Chair

Assassination Records Review Board

Introduction

The pace continues to quicken for the Assassination Records Review Board and there is a lot to report to the research community about in this Open Secrets update. I would like to outline highlights of our recent work which set the stage for the next phase of our work: the release of assassination records.

Definition Guidance on "Assassination Records" is Finalized

On May 3, 1995, at a public meeting in Washington, D.C. the Review Board unanimously adopted the final definition guidance on an "assassination record." The definition guidance will be published in the Federal Register following the completion of the Office of Management and Budget's review. We will also send copies to everyone on our mailing list.

Prior to finalizing the definition guidance, the Review Board carefully studied and considered all of the comments which were received from the research community and government agencies. The comments received included both technical and substantive suggestions, many of which were incorporated into the final definition guidance. I am pleased that members of the research community were active participants in our effort to develop the definition guidance. The type of involvement which we saw from the research community is exactly what the Congress intended with the

passage of The President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992. On behalf of the Review Board, our thanks to all of you who offered your comments.

I am confident that the definition guidance which we developed will serve the Board, the government agencies and the American public well during the course of our work. The aggressive guidance which the Review Board has provided will ensure that government agencies have a clear idea of how we define the universe of assassination records and will understand their responsibilities.

Public Meetings and Hearings: Boston in March; New Orleans in June

In addition to the public meeting on May 3, 1995, at which time the Board finalized the definition guidance, the Board has continued to conduct public hearings in other parts of the country. This is part of a concerted effort by the Board to allow the American public to see us at work outside of the Nation's capital.

A public meeting at the State House in Boston, Massachusetts on March 24, 1995 was well-attended by members of the public and the media. The meeting was televised in its entirety on WGBX-TV, the PBS station in Boston. A diverse group of witnesses offered helpful information on the existence and location of assassination records. The following witnesses testified:

Philip H. Melanson; Political Science Professor at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth and the author of Spy Saga: Lee Harvey Oswald and U.S. Intelligence, published in 1990;

Priscilla Johnson McMillan; History Professor at the Harvard Russian

Research Center. She is the author of Marina and Lee, published in 1977. McMillan interviewed Oswald in the Soviet Union in 1959.

Dick Russell; author of the 1992 book The Man Who Knew Too Much.

The book focuses on an alleged intelligence agent named Richard Case Nagell and his alleged knowledge of the assassination of President Kennedy.

Richard Trask; author of Pictures of the Pain: Photography and the Assassination of President Kennedy, published in 1994.

George Michael Evica; author of And We Are All Mortal: New Evidence and Analysis in the Assassination of John F. Kennedy, published in 1978.

Edgar Tatro; a long-time researcher who teaches a college course on the assassination of President Kennedy.

The Review Board and several staff members also met with representatives of The John F. Kennedy Library during our trip to Boston. At a day-long meeting at the Library, the Board received detailed briefings on the various collections of documents. In addition, we had a preliminary look at records which we anticipate will be included in JFK Records Collection. We intend to send a team of Board analysts back to the Library to begin the review process in the very near future.

A Review Board public meeting is scheduled for June 28, 1995 in New Orleans, Louisiana. The meeting will begin at 10:00 a.m. at the Old U.S. Mint building auditorium, located at 400 Esplanade Avenue. Witnesses

scheduled to testify include New Orleans District Attorney Harry F. Connick and Dr. Michael Kurtz, Professor of History at Southeastern Louisiana University and author of Crime of the Century. The Board is seeking information on assassination records that may exist in the New Orleans area and should be part of the JFK Records Collection. As always, the Board encourages members of the research community to offer their expertise on records in which we should be interested, whether located in New Orleans or elsewhere.

The Experts Meeting

On May 16, 1995, the Review Board and staff conducted its first roundtable meeting of experts at our Washington offices. This meeting was an attempt to supplement our public hearings and use another vehicle for the Board to take advantage of the vast expertise of members of the research community. More specifically, this particular meeting was meant to blend individuals from past official government investigations with researchers that would result in a fruitful discussion. Those who attended the meeting, in addition to Review Board members and staff, were:

Robert Blakey; former Chief Counsel and Staff Director of the House Select Committee on Assassinations.

David Garrow; author of The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From "Solo" to Memphis and an expert on the inner workings of the FBI.

Paul Hoch; coauthor of The Assassinations: Dallas and Beyond.

James Lesar; attorney and President of the Assassination Archives

and Research Center.

David Lifton; author of Best Evidence and currently working on a book on Lee Harvey Oswald.

John Newman; author of JFK and Vietnam.

David Slawson; former Assistant Counsel on the Warren Commission.

This experts meeting resulted in many useful suggestions on what records should be in the JFK Records Collection and where many of them may be located. The Review Board will now seriously consider having another experts meeting to benefit from the expertise of other knowledgeable individuals. As previously noted, we encourage researchers to write to us with comments and suggestions on the existence and location of records. Every correspondence is read and carefully evaluated. We are actively pursuing many leads with agencies about which researchers have written to us.

Deciding on the Disclosure or Postponement of Assassination Records

The Review Board will begin voting on the release or postponement of documents during the course of the next several weeks. These determinations on specific assassination records signal the beginning the next phase of our work. We have carefully set the stage for getting to this point by building our staff, setting up our offices, developing the final definition guidance, getting valuable input from the research community, holding public hearings and meetings with government agencies.

As members of the Assassination Records Review Board, we take our responsibilities seriously and intend to fulfill our mandate as articulated in The President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992. The votes the Boards will take on what assassination records will be released to the public go to the very root of why we exist. It is an exciting time and an enormous historical responsibility goes along with it. We readily accept this challenge and hope that you, as members of the research community, will continue to work with us as we seek to ensure the existence of as complete a record of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy as possible for the American public.