

Dear Congressman:

I am writing to seek your support for an issue that is important to me. The Assassination Records Review Board has indicated that it will require an additional year to complete its work. As you know, I worked hard to get the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act passed in 1992. I believed then that it was important to assure the American people that its government was not keeping information secret that was relevant to the assassination of President Kennedy. I believe now that that goal continues to be important and continues to deserve the support of Congress.

When we drafted the legislation, we believed that the task would take three years. Although that estimate was based on the best available information, it turns out that the Review Board will need more time. It should not surprise us that additional time is needed to complete this important task since we were venturing into uncharted waters with this legislation. There was no way to know for sure what problems of scale and complexity the Review Board would encounter. To be sure, the beginning of the enterprise was not smooth sailing. The Board was not appointed until 18 months after the legislation was signed into law, leaving the agencies to define for themselves the universe of records that should be processed under the act, and to speculate as to the kind of evidence that would be needed to sustain the postponement of the release of assassination-related information. Consequently, once the Review Board was in place, agencies needed to revise a considerable amount of work.

Moreover, in our effort to create a truly independent agency, we imposed certain strictures on the manner in which the Review Board could operate. Unlike other temporary agencies, the Review Board could not hire or detail experienced federal employees, but rather had to hire new employees who had to undergo background investigations and be cleared at the Top Secret level.

In addition, the Review Board had to locate and renovate space that was suitable for the storage of classified material. All of these administrative tasks stole valuable time from the allotted three years. The effect of this necessarily protracted start-up was that the Board could not begin an effective review of records until the third quarter of its first year.

The review Board believes that in order to protect important national security secrets and safety concerns for informants and agents, the agencies need to have every reasonable opportunity to present evidence to the Review Board about the importance of the redacted information. This process, which is an important component of the JFK Act, has been extremely time consuming for both the agencies and the Review Board. Although the Review Board could have acted much more swiftly by not affording the agencies the opportunity to collect and provide evidence, the Review Board would have thereby neglected its duties to make informed judgments.

Despite the slow start and unforeseen obstacles, the Review Board has accomplished much in the past two and a half years. Nearly ten thousand previously secret government documents are now more fully available to the American people. Significant collections of private records have been donated to the National Archives thanks to the efforts of the Review Board. Most important, the Review Board is within striking distance of completing the review of all identified assassination records. It would be a terrible shame to halt the effort before it has a chance to

achieve success.

I understand from the Review Board that there is broad support within the agencies for an extension, and I have no doubt that the public will be passionate and vocal in their advocacy for this action.

Clearly, as the ranking Democrat on the Treasury Postal Appropriations Subcommittee, you will need to consider the issue of an extension for the Review Board in the context of other competing claims. In approaching this issue, you should be aware that a result of the Review Board's protracted start-up was a budget carryover of no-year funds from its first year that would be sufficient to fund a full quarter of continued operation. The Review Board would consequently require only \$1.6 million of additional funds to continue operating for one year.

I fear that if we do not reach appropriate closure on this important issue now, we will simply need to address it again in the future. I think it is important to recall the atmosphere of doubt and speculation that gave rise to the creation of the Review 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. We would not simply be back where we started; we would be in a far worse place indeed.

Sincerely,

Louis Stokes