Assassination Records Review Board Final Report
Introduction

Americans often point to November 22, 1963, the date of the tragic assassination of President John F. Kennedy, as the moment in American history that marked the beginning of the public's loss of confidence in its government. The millions of Americans who watched Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK* were willing to believe, as the film portrayed, that the U.S. government conspired to cover up the truth about President Kennedy's death.[i] At the end of his film, Stone appeared on the screen and informed the moviegoing audience that the U.S. government had yet to release millions of pages of records relating to the assassination. In that speech, Stone identified one of the problems that he believed contributed to the continuing decline in public confidence in government--secrecy.

Stone's idea--to release previously secret assassination-related information--made sense to the American public and ultimately to Congress and the President. In the wake of Stone's film and in response to the public's requests that the government open assassination records, Congress passed the *John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992* ("JFK Act"). The Act had one purpose: to release assassination records.

The JFK Act represents a radical departure from the manner in which the federal government identifies and processes secret records for release to the American people. It established an independent citizen board--the Assassination Records Review Board--that was unconnected with previous investigative efforts. The Act granted the board unprecedented authority to identify, secure, and release assassination records held anywhere in the federal government. Given sufficient time, resources, and inter-agency cooperation, Congressional sponsors of the JFK Act anticipated that the Board might release as many as two million pages of unreleased assassination records still held in disparate agency files. The Review Board completed its work and, as the JFK Act envisioned, the burden is now on the American public to review approximately 4,000,000 pages of assassination records that make up the John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection ("JFK Collection") at the National Archives and Records Administration ("NARA").

Congress charged the Review Board not with reinvestigating the assassination of President Kennedy, but with opening records that Congress determined the American people had a right to see. To borrow a phrase from a contemporary culture shaped in no small measure by the events of November 22, 1963: the truth may or may not be out there, but at least the records should be. Once records are available, the American public can draw its own conclusions about what happened in Dealey Plaza, and why. As one key proponent of the JFK Act (and former Warren Commission staff attorney) testified during legislative hearings on the Act: "It is very important to put it all out there and let the chips fall where they may."[ii]

This Final Report of the Assassination Records Review Board details the Board's extensive work in fulfilling its statutory mandate. The JFK Act, however,

necessitates that the Review Board's report be different from reports of other assassination-related commissions and committees. Previous assassination-related commissions and committees were established for the purpose of issuing final reports that would draw conclusions about the assassination. Congress did not, however, direct the Review Board to draw conclusions about the assassination, but to release assassination records so that the public could draw its own conclusions. Thus, this Final Report does not offer conclusions about what the assassination records released did or did not prove. Rather, it identifies records that the Board released and describes the processes and standards that the Board used to release them. The Board believes that its most substantial contribution has been to enhance, broaden, and deepen the historical record relating to the assassination. The Review Board recognizes that the public will ultimately judge the work of the Review Board on the substance of the records placed in the JFK Collection.

The first two chapters of the Report describe the Review Board and its establishment. Chapter one describes the context in which Congress passed the JFK Act and briefly introduces some of the records that Congress directed the Review Board to examine and release if appropriate. Chapter two describes how the JFK Act worked both to enable and to delay the Review Board's start-up. Chapter two also explains the Review Board's first challenge -- defining the statutory term "assassination record"-- so that its search for records would be broad enough to ensure public confidence in the Board's work but narrow enough not to consume Board time and resources on unrelated documents.

Chapter three explains how the Review Board interacted with a very interested American public. Chapter three outlines the ways in which Review Board members and staff worked with members of the public to develop policy and seek records.

Chapters four through eight of the Report describe the heart of the Review Board's work -- the identification and release of assassination records. Chapter four explains how the Review Board developed a review process that would ensure consistent review of an enormous volume of records. Chapter five describes in detail the standards that the Review Board established for the release or, in some cases, protection of federal records. Chapter six lists the numerous requests for additional information and records that the Review Board made to federal agencies to ensure that it did not leave important stones unturned. Throughout its brief history, countless individuals and groups made requests of the Board for specific information. The Board had to respond to these by asking whether meeting these requests would yield additional documents. Chapter seven describes the Board's quest for additional information and records, albeit from non-federal sources, and thus expands upon chapter six. Chapter seven also describes the types of assassination records that the Review Board sought from state and local governments as well as foreign governments. Chapter eight provides details about the cooperation, or lack thereof, that the Review Board received from each federal agency with which it dealt, outlining

in detail the Review Board's "compliance program."

The last part of this report consists of the Review Board members' conclusions and their recommendations to the President, to Congress, and to existing and future federal agencies. The Board recognizes that for decades to come the federal government will continue to face the challenge of finding the most efficient way to declassify its records, an activity this Board believes is essential to maintaining our freedom. Although the problems caused by government secrecy are magnified in the context of the assassination of a President in which there is great public interest, these problems are indeed present throughout the federal government. The remedies for excessive secrecy can be universally applied with positive results.

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ENDNOTES

i. A November, 1993, Gallup poll found that, thirty years after the assassination, 81% of the American people believed there has been an official cover-up regarding President Kennedy's death. Cited by Anthony and Robby Summers in "The Ghosts of November," *Vanity Fair*, December, 1994, p. 88.

ii. Senator Arlen Specter, Hearing Before the Committee on Governmental Affairs, United States Senate, One Hundred Second Congress, Second Session, on S.J. Res. 282, *The Assassination Materials Disclosure Act of 1992,* p. 23.