

The Assassination Records Review Board: Progress Continues

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Chair

Assassination Records Review Board

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Introduction

Since the last time I communicated with the research community through Open Secrets, there have been many more positive developments for the Assassination Records Review Board. I would like to take this opportunity to describe the Board's recent activities and give you a sense of what the Board will be doing in the coming months.

Proposed Definition Guidance on "Assassination Records"

The Review Board's most important initiative to date has been the proposed definition guidance on an "assassination record." Our goal in drafting the proposed definition guidance was to follow the clear Congressional intent that the definition be broad and go beyond the records of the Warren Commission and the House Select Committee on Assassinations. When the definition guidance is finalized, federal agencies will have clear guidance on what records they are responsible for producing to ensure that the American public has a complete record of the assassination.

After receiving input from the research community and others at the October 11, 1994 hearing in Washington and through correspondence, the Review Board published the proposed definition guidance in the Federal Register on February 8, 1995. A 30-day comment period, until March

10, 1995, gave interested parties the opportunity to provide the Board with comments. The proposed definition guidance was also sent to everyone on our mailing list.

The Board received nearly 30 comments from members of the research community and representatives of federal agencies. At a public meeting on March 7, 1995, several people testified before the Board about the proposed definition guidance. The written comments and the oral testimony are being carefully reviewed by the Board and staff. A final definition guidance will be published in the Federal Register after all of the input has been considered. Members of the research community will be notified and provided with a copy of the final version. The Review Board and the staff appreciate all those researchers who provided us with written comments and testimony. This type of cooperative dialogue is precisely what the Congress envisioned when drafting the law which created the Review Board.

Public Meetings and Hearings: From Dallas to Washington to Boston

At the time of my last message to you, we were planning our second public hearing, in Dallas, Texas. The Review Board conducted the hearing on November 18, 1994. We heard testimony from 19 witnesses who provided us with a broad range of information related to the existence and location of assassination records. Several people who were in Dallas for the ASK conference attended the hearing, as well as many representatives from the local and national media. Because it is the Board's job under the law to ensure that there is as complete a record of the assassination as possible, the most useful information that the Board received in Dallas was specific information on records that are known to be held by federal agencies, as well as specific leads on the possible existence and location of other assassination records.

While in Dallas, the members of the Review Board also took the opportunity to visit Dealey Plaza and tour the Sixth Floor museum, located at the site of the former Texas School Book Depository. All of the Board members found the visit exciting and a worthwhile use of our time.

The Review Board has subsequently conducted two additional public meetings in Washington, D.C., on December 14, 1994 and March 7, 1995.

I would also like to note that during our early March visit to Washington, the Review Board met with representative from the CIA, NSA, and the Secret Service to discuss their obligations under The President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act. We intend to meet with representatives from all of the relevant federal agencies to ensure compliance with the Act.

A Review Board public meeting is scheduled for March 24, 1995 in Boston, Massachusetts. Several historians and members of the research community have been asked to testify on the identification and location of assassination records. The Board will also discuss finalizing our proposed definition guidance on "assassination records," and receive an update from the National Archives on the JFK Assassination Records Collection. The public meeting will be another important opportunity for the Board to conduct official business outside of Washington and to hear from experts who reside in the greater Boston area. Details of the March 24th public meeting have been provided to members of the research community and the media in advance of the trip to Boston.

While in Boston, the Review Board is scheduled to visit The John F. Kennedy Library on March 23rd, to meet with Library representatives.

Discussions are to focus on what records at the Library should be included in the collection of assassination records.

Reviewing the Assassination Records

The Review Board and staff are anxious to begin the review of documents in earnest. The Board has preliminarily reviewed a limited number of Warren Commission documents that have not been made public and do not require review by an other federal agency. In addition, members of the senior staff have reviewed documents of the House Select Committee on Assassination which have remained closed. Our goal is to begin making decisions on the release of documents in the late spring or early summer. We are pleased that members of the research community have provided us with a significant volume of information and leads regarding the existence and location of assassination records. All of that information is being carefully evaluated and reviewed by the staff in an effective and efficient manner. It will take time and we request your patience as we go through this process.

An Update on the Review Board Staff and Offices

I would like to give you an update on the staffing of the Review Board. In addition to the five members of the Board, all of us private citizens representing the legal, historical, and archival professions, serving in a part-time capacity, we are currently supported by a senior staff consisting of an executive director, a general counsel, a chief of review and analysis, an administrative officer, and a press and public affairs officer. In addition to the senior staff, the Board currently employs eight analysts, two administrative support personnel, and a part-time computer specialist. The Board has either made offers to or plans to hire the following additional personnel: three investigators, two additional administrative

support personnel, and ten additional analysts.

The Board is pleased to announce that the staff has moved out its temporary quarters and into the permanent offices. The address remains the same, Assassination Records Review Board; 600 E Street, NW; Second Floor; Washington, D.C. 20530), as does the telephone number, (202) 724-0088.

A Closing Thought

I would like to leave you with one closing thought on the importance of the Review Board's work. The disturbing phenomenon of public mistrust in our government began to increase considerably after the assassination of President Kennedy and is tied to the widely held perception that the government has kept important facts from the American people about the motives and actions of its institutions and personnel. A poll in late 1994 showed the percentage of Americans who "trust the government in Washington" has dropped from 76 percent in 1964, shortly after the death of President Kennedy, to 19 percent today. We believe that the Assassination Records Review Board has the opportunity not only to make publicly available records that may clarify the facts surrounding the assassination, but also, along the way, the opportunity to reverse this trend of mistrust and to redefine the meaning of, and the need for, secrecy in government.

As always, we encourage members of the research community to contact the Review Board if have information regarding the location or existence of assassination records. We will continue to make every effort to keep you apprised of the Board's activities.