

JFK Assassination: The Final Secrets

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President John F. Kennedy smiles at the crowds lining his motorcade route minutes before he was assassinated on November 22, 1963.(Bettmann / Getty Images)

As Donald Trump strolled through the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts on March 17—marking his territory and advancing his hostile takeover of the iconic cultural monument—he casually announced that 80,000 pages of TOP SECRET documents on JFK’s assassination would finally be released—the very next day. “I don’t believe we are going to redact anything,” the president advised the press pool. “People have been waiting decades for this.”

Indeed, 27 years after a special declassification law known as the John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act mandated the release of millions of pages of investigative and contextual documents—and eight years after the law’s final deadline for full disclosure of the most sensitive of those records—the Kennedy papers are now finally in the public domain, uncensored. Kennedy assassination sleuths, historians, reporters, curious citizens, and, quite likely, foreign intelligence services are now sifting through the final tranches of some 63,400 pages of records that have been haphazardly posted, so far, on the

website of the National Archives Records Administration (NARA). Another 17,000 pages will be added “in the coming days” as they are digitalized, NARA noted in a statement posted on X this week.

So far, none of the thousands of PDF files have yielded any information that would challenge the official historical narrative that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting on his own, shot and killed President Kennedy in Dallas on November 22, 1963. Instead, the smoking guns of history are emerging from granular details of now fully declassified CIA covert operations. The final revelations in the documents turn out to be the CIA’s most guarded of secrets: sources and methods, agent identities and global targets. The unredacted documents name names—of officials, operatives, assets, informants and collaborators. They identify places, collaborating countries, espionage techniques, expenditures, and previously unknown clandestine activities. Those operations include how the CIA manipulated elections in numerous nations, sabotaged economies, plotted to kill foreign leaders and overthrew undesirable governments abroad—while also busily conducting illegal operations at home.

Who knew, for example, that the CIA was secretly spying on Washington’s famous muckraking newsman Jack Anderson? And that in the early 1960s the CIA had almost as many agents working under diplomatic cover as the State Department had actual diplomats abroad? Or that CIA director John McCone conducted furtive “dealings” at the Vatican with Pope John XXII and Pope Paul VI which, according to one of McCone’s aides, “could and would raise eyebrows in some quarters.”

The JFK papers reveal that the Agency was running a massive telephone wiretap operation in Mexico—codenamed Project Lienvoy—out of the office of Mexican President Adolfo López Mateos—who was himself a CIA collaborator and approved the surveillance operations. They identify Mexico, along with 14 other nations whose intelligence services were “assisting us” in covert efforts against Cuba. According to one declassified memo, López Mateos told the CIA station chief that he was “delighted that a decision had now been made to get rid of Castro.” As part of Operation Mongoose, the CIA managed to contaminate an entire cargo shipment of Cuban sugar bound for the USSR “with a chemical used in the process of denaturing alcohol,” according to one Mongoose update. “When this cargo of sugar is refined in the Soviet Union the contaminated bags will completely contaminate the entire shipment,” the secret report continued, “making the sugar unfit for human or animal consumption in any form.” The documents also expose how the CIA financed and orchestrated the 1966 election of its chosen coup-plotting military man, Gen. René Barrientos in Bolivia. They record in greater detail than previously understood how agency operatives financed—at \$10,000 a day—street protests in British Guiana that pushed the liberal government of Cheddi Jagan from power in late 1964.

And those are just a few of the many major revelations they contain.

For Trump, the release of the documents plays well with his conspiracy-minded base, reinforcing suspicions about the so-called “deep state.” This presumably will assist his efforts to purge the FBI and the CIA and bring them under his control, under the guise of restoring public confidence in these national security agencies. This high-profile declassification also allows Trump to claim the mantle of the Transparency President—even as his administration moves systematically and autocratically to erase government databases, gut National Archives staffing, burn and shred federal records, and, overall, reduce public access to information. Given the escalating threat to the public’s right-to-know, the standard of openness set by the release of the JFK papers, and the unique law that made it possible, is arguably more important than the historical content of the documents themselves.

Thank You, Oliver Stone!

Ironically, the declassification of the JFK records is the direct result of the mass marketing of perhaps the most discredited and disreputable of all assassination conspiracy theories—the New Orleans witch hunt conducted by district attorney Jim Garrison and immortalized in Oliver Stone’s popular 1991 movie, *JFK*. Played by Kevin Costner in the film, Garrison originally claimed that the assassination of the president was “a homosexual thrill-killing”—and, on trumped-up charges, unsuccessfully prosecuted a local businessman for the crime; Garrison subsequently expanded his conspiracy pool of alleged assassins to include the CIA and FBI.

Like Garrison’s malevolent and baseless investigation, Stone’s movie was complete fiction. But it generated widespread public outrage over the US government secrecy that continued to surround the Kennedy assassination. A dramatic scroll at the end of the movie noted that, almost 30 years later, millions of pages of CIA, FBI, and other government records related to the assassination remained classified. “Even the records created by the investigative commissions and committees were withheld from public view and sealed,” noted the Executive Summary of the final 1998 report from the Assassination Records Review Board (ARRB) created by Congress in the aftermath of the movie. “The suspicions created by government secrecy eroded confidence in the truthfulness of federal agencies in general and damaged their credibility.”

Indeed, the public uproar generated by the film over this inexplicable lack of transparency mobilized Congress to pass the “JFK Act” in 1992. This unique law mandated the review and release of all documentation related to the murder of the president and empowered an independent five-member board with jurisdiction to force top secret records into the public domain.

Under the supervision of the ARRB, the FBI, the CIA, the Secret Service, the White House, and all other relevant government and law-enforcement agencies spent four years locating, reviewing and releasing vast files of documents, including those accumulated by prior federal

and congressional investigations, relating specifically and broadly to all direct and indirect aspects of the assassination. By the time the ARRB submitted its final report to President Clinton and closed its doors, over 5 million pages had been declassified, under the act.

But many of those pages showed blacked out redactions of information—mostly sources and methods—and several thousand documents were withheld in full on national security grounds—particularly by the CIA and FBI. For those deferred records and still redacted pages, the Kennedy Assassination Records Act contained a specific mandate: With few exceptions, the agencies were required to process and declassify them in full—*unredacted*—by October 26, 2017.

Trump's Deferral

When the deadline arrived for the final and full release of the JFK papers, Donald Trump had been president for eight months. During that time, a bureaucratic battle played out behind the scenes, with NARA officials pressing the CIA and the FBI to comply with the JFK Act, and officials there pushing back on the lack of time to fully review the records, and the need to keep secret names and places to protect agents and informants from retribution. Even NARA itself accepted the need to redact personal information in some of the documents—such as social security numbers. In a letter to Trump one month before the deadline, NARA chief archivist, David Ferriero, advised the President that some 211 documents contained social security numbers of living persons, the release of which “would cause an identifiable harm to law enforcement by increasing the possibility of identity theft and related crimes.” For those documents, NARA requested “continued postponement of records in the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992.”

As an assassination conspiracist himself—who can forget [Trump's bizarre claim](#) during the 2016 election that Senator Ted Cruz's father was linked to Oswald—one of Trump's many promises during the campaign was to assure the final release of the Kennedy documents. “The long-anticipated release of the #JFK files will take place tomorrow,” he tweeted on October 25. “So interesting.”

Some 2891 records were indeed released pursuant to the legal deadline. But some were redacted, and hundreds more were withheld in their entirety. “Based on requests from executive offices and agencies the President has allowed the temporary withholding of certain information that would harm national security, law enforcement, or foreign affairs,” [NARA stated in a press release](#). In a [recent interview with Sean Hannity](#) on Fox News, Trump admitted that he had yielded to arguments presented by then-CIA director Mike Pompeo that there were certain secrets the CIA had to protect. Trump gave the agencies a six-month extension to further review the JFK records; at the end of that period, he postponed full compliance of the JFK Act for another three years, until 2021.

Popular

By then, of course, Joe Biden was president. On his watch, further records were released uncensored in 2021, 2022, and 2023. But Biden also accepted the arguments of the CIA and FBI that certain records, and portions of others, needed to remain secret for the sanctity of national security.

For the discerning researcher, the extraordinary nature of this week's release reveals what kind of final secrets the CIA was determined to safeguard. The CIA did not want the American public to know that it was spying on US journalists; it did not want Mexicans to know that their president had actively collaborated in one of the agency's biggest and most effective telephone tap operations; it did not want citizens in Canada, Britain, Israel, Holland, France, Spain, Italy, Greece, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile to know that, in the early 1960s, their government's intelligence services secretly assisted CIA espionage operations to overthrow Fidel Castro in Cuba; it did not want Bolivians to know that covert cash had bought and paid for the election of a CIA-chosen candidate in the mid 1960s. Nor for Parisians to know that 123 "diplomats" in the US embassy in the early 1960s were, in fact, undercover spies. But now we know.

Maximum Transparency?

These are just a handful of hundreds of revelations contained in the JFK records; as reporters and historians comb through the records, many more will undoubtedly surface, lifting the shroud of secrecy that has kept this history hidden for decades. Simply stated, they provide the American public with a far greater understanding of what has been done in our name, but without our knowledge. And they remind the global community of the myriad abuses of power the United States has committed in the past—and is certainly capable of in the future.

Trump officials are already trumpeting the significance of the final declassification of JFK records as proof of the president's commitment to truth and transparency. "I think it's a great move," Robert Kennedy Jr. told reporters when Trump issued his directive to release the rest of the JFK papers on January 23. "[We] need to have more transparency in our government and he's keeping his promise to have the government tell the truth to the American people about everything." The president "is ushering in a new era of maximum transparency," the director of national intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, claimed this week.

Given Trump's open assault on access to information over these last two months, nothing could be further from reality. Yet, by fully implementing the JFK Act, Trump has, perhaps inadvertently, established a historic precedent for full disclosure of classified documentation. That is a standard of transparency and accountability to which he, too, must be held. Someday Congress will pass a DJT Act to fully expose the misconduct of the Trump era, and the secret side of the dark history we are living today will be fully revealed.



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