

W. J. Johnson - 12/11/81 - "Task Force" - Civil Division

Ms. Madelyn Johnson (Attn. Ms. Kornblut)
FOI/PA Office
Civil Division
Department of Justice
Washington, D.C. 20530

9/4/81

Dear Ms. Johnson,

Your letter of August 29 refers to your inability to locate any records pertaining to a JFK assassination task force and the fact that no records referring to it were disclosed to me by the Civil Division. You ask for copies and also make seemingly reasonable presumptions I address below.

It is not now possible for me to make the search necessary to locate what I have already sent to the Department. I have medical and resulting physical problems. But within the Department the appeals office and probably Ms. Phyllis Hubbell there can provide you with copies and with an account of the searching they did after receipt of my appeal. If they cannot please let me know and I will make the search and send you a copy or copies.

Mr. Shea failed in his search for the reason indicated in your letter, he regarded the "task force," the Department's words, as a formal structure. It was not. It was, rather, informal and entirely unpublicized. I knew about it contemporaneously but I then had no proof that it was regarded as a task force or called that.

Toward the end of 1968 and in early 1969, when Jim Garrison was District Attorney in New Orleans, he filed suit in Washington, D.C., for certain records and other things for use in his case, Louisiana v. Clay Shaw. Prior to the hearing before then Judge Charles Hallack, there was a certain amount of disenchantment within the Civil Division. As best I now remember what then came to my attention from the Civil Division side, this centered around the existing records on the autopsy and the report of a panel of experts who had been convoked in secret and had prepared a report that had been kept secret by the Department, which convoked the panel. Please believe me when I say that no competent lawyer who is impartial can read and analyze that panel report without the deepest concern and apprehensions. I would prefer not to be more specific in identifying my source, but believe me, it was an "inside" source, in a position to know. One think that I remember is a Department expedition to the office of the Maryland State Medical Examiner, Dr. Fisher, who had been panel chairman. As I recall, this was on a weekend. He more or less whipped the doubters into ranks again.

Carl Bardley handled that matter, assisted by Irving Jaffe and others whose names I do not now recall. (They shared offices.) Maybe David Andersson was involved. I think he should be asked. I think a secretary was named Mrs. Cavacini.

Defense of the Garrison suit was only one function of the task force, but those

not inconsiderable efforts were, clearly, Civil Division functions. The records of the cited litigation should provide more leads.

I think another lawyer involved was Joseph Hannon.

Mr. Shea was looking for a formal structure and a formal report, although I told him I did not expect there was either. If he looked for what did not exist, naturally, he would not find it.

This was an informal unit, of members from different components, whose function was to defend the official conclusions about the assassination.

In his writing after he left the White House, John P. Roche, who had been LBJ's intellectual in residence, took credit for some if not all of those functions being assigned to the Department.

I have read a great number of pages of pertinent Department records and I assure you that there never was any consideration of anything asked, stated or suggested by any concerned citizen or Member of the Congress. There was boilerplated non-response, with responsibility for making it at various time divided between and shifted between various components.

One of the problems today is this history, of inflexibility and total refusal to consider anything other than the official "line."

These are records of considerable historical interest and importance now. Perhaps there is now no embarrassment over the manner in which the function was handled. The function, it is clear, was defending this official line.

I do not mean that no such attitude exists today, for it does, but not with the identical information.

All of the records generated are not in the records - have been provided. It appears to be probable, I think, that where they were filed they were filed under a different subject and that the members of this informal group kept additional copies, more or less as kicklers, in anticipation of future needs. Even after the retirement of Mr. Bardley and others the needs continued, for the official account of the crime still is not credited by very many concerned people, without any manifestation of any official willingness to consider any of the substantial information that was always available to officialdom.

I'd appreciate it if you could make an additional search after making inquiries of those who might have some knowledge and might not be unwilling for the records to be disclosed.

Sincerely,

Harold Weisberg