

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

*Post 7/27/92*

## *Privacy and the JFK Files*

In the July 22 editorial "The JFK Assassination Files," The Post offered a provocative interpretation of legislation that would accelerate the review, declassification and release of documents relating to President Kennedy's assassination.

The Post asserted that most of the materials in question are to be found in several presidential libraries. In fact, most are agency records and files created by House and Senate investigators.

Within the libraries, the materials range from the official records of the Rockefeller Commission on the Central Intelligence Agency to the routine personal papers of many associates of presidents Kennedy and Johnson, to the diaries and reflections of those most affected by President Kennedy's assassination. Most of these records are already open for research or will be in time. The key question is how and under what circumstances.

The records of the Rockefeller Com-

mission are not the issue. The status of those records has been discussed at length, and the records have been made available time and again for official inquiries and will be made available again. The focus of the amendment and much of the public's attention is the small amount of personal materials housed in the libraries and still under restrictions requested by the donors and agreed to by the government. These small collections contain the personal observations and recollections of those close to the events or close to the individuals involved.

We at the Archives have testified that many of these materials have been opened to government inquiries, and I have pledged full support and assistance in working with donors on this latest effort.

Disclosure to ensure the public that there are no "secrets" is a laudable goal. But this goal must be balanced against the privacy rights of the donors and the long-term impact on historical

sources. These materials would never have been recorded or transferred to the Archives' custody if the authors felt that Congress or another authority could throw them open to public scrutiny without some level of donor control. The purpose of the amendment exempting donor materials is not to protect "secrets" but to protect rights. Those who would legislate away the privacy rights of donors are in the curious position of arguing that government can only win the trust of the public by betraying the trust of individual donors.

America's presidential libraries were created to preserve the historical record for scholars and to share that record in time with the American public. Every presidential library boasts rich veins of primary material, much of it given with the understanding that reasonable time restrictions would apply, if only so that nothing in the documents could be used to embarrass living persons. If Congress abrogates lawful agreements, it will not only empty the vaults of future libraries, it will risk the destruction of confidential or revealing accounts of history in the making. While instant release might provide a field day for tabloid journalism, it would be a severe loss for history.

As archivist of the United States, it is my job to safeguard America's documentary heritage. Perhaps, just for once, the cynics and conspiracy theorists could accept the stated reason for the amendment because it is the right thing to do.

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