

Citizens group sues for release of JFK autopsy photos, X-rays

WASHINGTON (AP) — A citizens group sued today for the release of about 200 autopsy photos and X-rays of slain President John F. Kennedy.

Public Citizen filed suit in U.S. District Court against the National Archives alleging that the photographs have been withheld improperly from public view.

The suit was filed a day after the Justice Department said it opposed legislation calling for the release of assassination documents. The bill, which has bipartisan support, excludes the autopsy material to protect the privacy of the Kennedy family.

The National Archives has restricted access to the photos since 1966, when the Kennedys turned over the material on condition that it be kept from public view while the late president's immediate family members are alive, according to Public Citizen.

The lawsuit claims the photographs are government property, and should not be subject to the restrictions of a private family.

"The photos and X-rays were taken by government personnel," said a spokesman for Public Citizen,

Bob Dreyfuss. The Kennedy family restriction "was not a legal or binding provision because these were and always have been government records," he said.

Although some autopsy photos have been published in books on the 1963 assassination, most have never been released. Dreyfuss said access to the material would enable historians to clear up some questions over the source of Kennedy's wounds.

"There are charges about whether some (photos) may have been altered or doctored," said the spokesman for Public Citizen, a consumer advocacy group founded by Ralph Nader.

An assistant in the archives' media relations office said the agency's spokesman could not immediately return a call seeking comment.

The legislation calling for release of the assassination documents had drawn support from lawmakers and top administration officials — including CIA Director Robert Gates and FBI chief William Sessions. But yesterday the Justice Department released a letter opposing it.

Assistant Attorney General W. Lee Rawls wrote that the bill "would severely encroach upon the president's constitutional authority to protect confidential information."

Rawls also raised national security concerns, saying that language clearing the way for the release of CIA and FBI documents could endanger intelligence methods and sources.

If passed, Rawls said, the Justice Department "would give serious consideration to recommending presidential disapproval."

The letter drew a chilly reaction yesterday from Republicans and Democrats at a hearing of the House Government Operations legislation and national security subcommittee.

Under the proposed resolution, the federal appeals court in Washington would appoint a five-member citizen board to review and decide on the release of assassination documents. In cases involving executive agencies such as the FBI or CIA, the president could refuse to release material but only on narrow privacy or national security grounds.

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