



'news focus'—by tom tiede

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# Still keeping JFK murder data under wraps . . .

WASHINGTON (NEA) — It has been almost 20 years since John F. Kennedy was murdered on a street in Dallas, yet it doesn't seem that long at the National Archives. Many of the federal records of the assassination are kept in the archives, and their presence has been frozen in time.

The bloodstained clothes the president wore are packed in boxes. The gun that is said to have been used is preserved and operable. The recollections and testimonies of more than 500 people have been committed to microfilm, and so have the gruesome details of medical and ballistic reports.

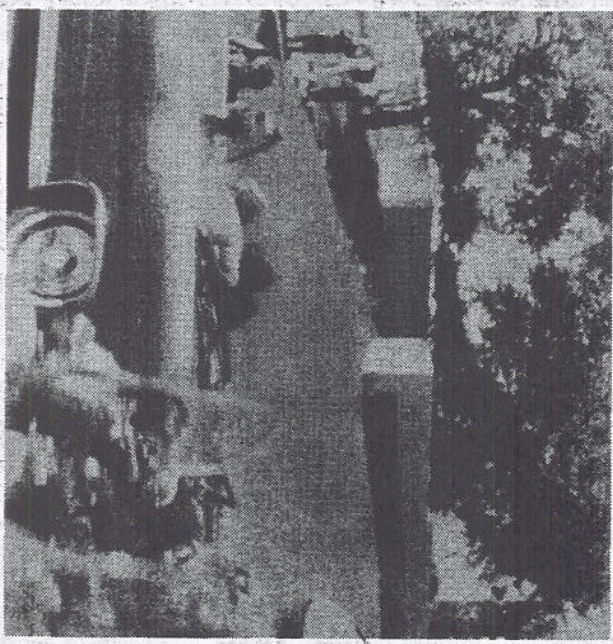
Indeed, it all seems like yesterday at the archives. The numbing horror and the assault on the senses have not aged. The tape-recorded sound of gunfire is just as unreal, the frame by frame moment of impact has not changed, even the newspaper headlines seem to be as shocking as ever.

And there is one other thing that's the same.

The murder records are still publicly incomplete.

The National Archives has 300 cubic feet of assassination material. But it's not all available to the general population. Despite the passage of two decades, and the arguments of journalists and researchers, the government continues to withhold about 10 percent of the official record.

The archivists say that is a relatively trivial percentage. And other federal officers fully concur. The official position is that most of the truly important records are open for inspection, and none of the other documents have any significant bearing on the facts of the



THE ASSASSINATION of President Kennedy in Dallas in 1963 is still a topic of U.S. secrecy. The federal government continues to withhold about 10 percent of the official record.



murder.

But critics of the secrecy disagree. They have argued for years that people have a right to see all of the files, and to make up their own minds about their significance. What's more, the critics insist that there are any number of secret records that may have an impact on the case.

The autopsy X-rays, for example. They were taken in the Dallas hospital, shortly after the president died, and they are said to show the precise nature of his wounds. Researchers say the X-rays are critical to the assassination study, yet few people outside government have seen them.

Hundreds of people have tried to see the X-rays. Historian Michael Kurtz is one of them. He is the author of the book "Crime of the Century," and he had to write it without examining the most important evidence of the crime. Dr. Kurtz asked to see the X-rays, but he was flatly turned down.

"It's unfair," he grumbles.

It may likewise be suspicious. Kurtz says the presidential group that investigated the assassination in 1964, the Warren Commission, used the X-rays to conclude that Kennedy was shot by a lone gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald. But Kurtz and others believe there was a conspiracy to kill the president.

The film then is vital to the debate. Kurtz says it might even resolve the question once and for all. If the X-rays show that the murder wounds were substantially what they were said to be, then the Warren Commission's judgment is strengthened; if not, the American public deserves to know.

So Kurtz and other researchers think the secret records in the archives should be declassified. And they say that goes for secrets being held in other corners of the government. The archives is only one agency withholding data; a string of other offices here is doing it as well.

The FBI has a mountain of assassination material, for instance, much of it classified. The State Department, the

Johnson is the archivist in charge of the Warren Commission material. He says that, besides tax records, the secret files contain information relating to national security, to confidential sources, to inter-agency law enforcement, and to the commission's off-the-record executive conferences.

Johnson is a ruffled man, somewhat laid-back, and he doesn't act as if he's sitting on any deep dark revelations. He says he has his own opinions about the assassination, but he suggests he also agrees with the original findings; in any event, he couldn't release the archival secrets if he wanted.

Johnson reviews the classified records periodically, but he has no authority to act on them. If he thinks a document may be ready for declassification, he sends it to the agency from which it came. The agency makes the decisions, and the archives waits. "It can be a slow process," Johnson says.

It can be for sure. The National Archives has been waiting for some declassifications since it was founded in 1934. It has collected 1.3 million cubic feet of records, including 15 million pages of classified documents, and some of the latter pile is said to have been secret since the First World War.

Well, nobody knows that for certain. But there are definitely secrets from World War II. It wasn't too long ago, for instance, that a document concerning a 1944 "aerial bolo" was declassified; the bolo was a half-baked scheme to use a big slingshot to, ah, shoot down German buzz bombs.

The aerial bolo was made public after about 30 years behind the padlocks. And Johnson suspects that most of the remaining Warren Commission secrets will be released in a like period of time. If so, it means that people who want to see a more complete assassination record may have to wait until 1994.

Secret Service and the CIA have similar papers of their own. One guess is that there are at least a dozen agencies in Washington that are keeping assassination records in hiding.

Many of the secrets are being kept indefinitely. Some of them may never be revealed. Marion Johnson, an official at the National Archives, says documents that are protected by specific legislation, such as income tax records, cannot by law be released and will probably remain secret forever.

And they may have to wait even longer to see the autopsy films. Johnson says the X-rays are classified under different arrangements. The government has allowed the Kennedy family to make decisions about the pictures, and some officials think the family may want to hide them permanently.

That decision would naturally outrage assassination researchers. Many journalists and writers think it would violate the traditional democratic doct-





John Kennedy was killed as a result of a conspiracy that may have involved U.S. government complicity. That's why government investigators tried to cover it up. Weisberg says the FBI was principally involved; it broke the law to hide the facts.

"I'll give you an example. The Warren Commission said one of the bullets entered Kennedy's neck, and came through the center of the knot on his tie. That was the angle they said that proved Oswald fired from the window of the book depository building. It was their big argument.

"But, actually, the bullet didn't go through the center of the knot. The FBI made it look that way, to support the government's case. The real hole was a little off angle, and so the FBI undid the knot and retied it. It was illegal, of course; but they put the hole in the center."

Weisberg says he has dozens of other examples of FBI manipulations. And that's why he wants the wraps taken off all the records in the archives. He believes the secrets on the whole will support his contentions, and force the government to reinvestigate the Kennedy murder, this time honestly.

But that may be wishful thinking. The odds are not good it will happen. The government has resisted all calls to take a second look at the assassina-

tion, and it doesn't seem to be weakening now. One officer in Ronald Reagan's White House says a new investigation would be "just asinine."

As for the classified records, the White House officer says the secrecy is probably for the best. "If the autopsy shots were released," he explains, "they would be printed in detail in every lurid publication in the country. That wouldn't be freedom of information; it would be tasteless exploitation."

Besides, Washington authorities doubt the secret records would resolve anything even if there was a full disclosure. Rather, they might only refuel the conspiracy theorists. "Folks like Harold Weisberg are single minded," says a Secret Service agent, "they can't be budged by the facts."

And what are the facts? People who have seen the bulk of the records in the National Archives, classified and unclassified, say the evidence is simply overwhelming that Oswald, and Oswald alone, shot the president. That's another part of the historic incident that hasn't changed over the years.

rine of full disclosure. "If we want to get to the truth," says writer Harold Weisberg, "all the records should be made public as soon as possible."

Weisberg is 70 years old, and a kind of elder statesman in the macabre industry of assassination literature. He has written six books on the subject, including "Postmortem." He was one of the first researchers to sue the government in an effort to win the right to look at classified records.

He says he is still fighting for freedom of the information. Because the government can't be trusted. "I'm glad I live in this country," he says. "In other places I'd be arrested for trying to uncover secrets. But the fact is that our government has lied to us about the assassination."

Weisberg says the government never proved that Oswald shot the president. And it has cavalierly discounted the evidence of a conspiracy. He says the Warren Commission set out to document a preconceived verdict, and afterward it tried to hide the real truth in the secret archives.

The writer says the real truth is that