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July 25, 1985

Honorable Stephen D. Yslas, President
Los Angeles Police Commission
Suite 144-150 Parker Center
150 N. Los Angeles Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear President Yslas:

It has come to my attention that the Los Angeles Police Commission is considering the possibility of declassifying and making appropriate disclosure of police files and other information related to the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy. I write in support of this action.

For several years I have written and researched on the subject of recent American history with particular emphasis on the series of assassinations that occurred in the 1960s and have developed a perspective on the subject that I believe is sound. These violent events are part of the American national experience and as such ought to be given the fullest possible consideration by historians and other professionals who inquire into the structural order of our national life. At the same time the assassinations, and in particular that of Senator Kennedy, played an important role in shaping the decade of the 1960s and influenced American life and thought for many years afterward and as such must be come to terms with by the nation and its scholarly community. Release of the appropriate material would certainly aid in that endeavor.

At the same time I have discovered in my researches that the local police evidence, files, and other appropriate material are utterly essential to unlocking the past on these events. In the President Kennedy assassination they proved to be of inestimable value, enabling the scholarly community to gain fresh and vital perspective on federal documents in the public domain and serving to give the much needed balanced perspective to our picture of November 22, 1963. In the evaluation of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s violent death the Memphis police files are the key to our understanding and a major portion of the scholarly resources we have on this international figure's death. The records on Senator Kennedy stand in this tradition of core sources vital to the understanding.

My credentials include the author or co-author of Weisberg v General Services Administration (1975) a court case on the records connected with the study of President Kennedy's assassination; An Annotated Bibliography of the Assassination of President Kennedy (1973); and the major work on the sources of President Kennedy's murder, the 443 page The Assassination of John F. Kennedy: A Comprehensive Historical and Legal Bibliography, 1963-1979 (1980). In addition my reviews have appeared in the Wisconsin Magazine of History, the Journal of Southern History, and several newspapers. I have lectured nationally on the President Kennedy and Dr. King assassinations and have appeared on several hundred radio and television shows related to the subject. From time to time I have been recognized as an authority on the subject (e.g., Saturday Evening Post, 1975) and I am working vigorously to build an archives here at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point on the President Kennedy and Dr. King murders.

Scarcely a month passes that I do not receive communications from graduate students working on some aspect of the 1960s assassinations. These young people seek to come to terms with the subject in the principles of their respective disciplines but consistently have difficulty with the sources. In the President Kennedy case and to some extent in the Dr. King case I am able to steer them through the rocky waters by directing them to the essential sources and suggesting academic approaches to them. Unfortunately the late Senator Kennedy's study is unusual for the police files have not been released in sufficient quantity to enable these young people to grapple with the subject and derive a respectable conclusion.

Often as a consequence of not having available to them the right kind, or better stated, the full, sources serious researchers fall into the hands of the irresponsible critics or the plunderers of our national grief. These flawed critics offer a seemingly easy out to the researcher, yet when they are provided with complete documentation they shed these false prophets quickly and move into the sources to drive responsible conclusions. I fear that the incomplete record on Senator Kennedy's assassination will lead to many more of these rash and ill-founded books and studies that will do us as a people little good and might twist yet further the understanding of our basic national institutions.

The incompleteness of the Senator Kennedy record is further highlighted by the recent disclosures under the Freedom of Information Act of several thousand FBI records on the case. Now the serious scholar has the federal perspective on the case to tackle, the information of the critics (most of whom are irresponsible) and certain other limited sources. What is missing is the Los Angeles police material. I fear that the FBI records will lead to an inadequate version of what transpired that terrible day and might lead academics into unwarranted and perhaps spurious assumptions.

I of course do not know that it will but I have my experience in the President Kennedy case where this would be the case if Dallas police files were not available.

I believe there will be always a popular interest in the assassination of Senator Kennedy as well as an academic interest. I believe further that this will last as long as the nation endures which ought to be a long time. I recently reviewed a book on the murder of Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Beckett. As America sorts itself out in this generation the desire to study and come to terms with the issues raised by Senator Kennedy's death will, I believe, grow and will need the sources.

Sometimes the concern over correct handling of sources makes an interested party forget one of the marvelous institutions we have developed in the United States to treat with them--archivists. There does exist recognized archival practices to assist in the sifting through of documents and other records to ensure proper release. These professionals are really good and their expertise would be available to you if you decide to release the police materials. I came by my knowledge of archivists the hard way by using archives and have grown to have the utmost respect for them.

I urge you to give this matter your most considered attention. In years to come when America celebrates its tri-centennial your action will still be vital to the understanding of one of the most significant deeds in the 1960s the disruption of the democratic process.

Sincerely


David R. Wrone

Professor of History
History Department
University of Wisconsin-
Stevens Point.
Stevens Point, WI

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