

JOE BIDEN

Biden releases most JFK assassination records – but withholds thousands

All the documents should be made public under a 1992 law, but the administration is declining to follow its letter for the second year in a row.

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Dec. 15, 2022, 1:18 PM PST

By Marc Caputo

President Joe Biden's administration released more than 13,000 records of President John F. Kennedy's assassination Thursday, but it fell short of fully complying with the spirit of a 30-year-old law demanding transparency by now.

With Thursday's action, about 98% of all documents related to the 1963 killing have now been released and just 3% of the records remain redacted in whole or in part, according to the National Archives, which controls the John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection.

The [records](#) include more information on accused gunman Lee Harvey Oswald and his time spent in Mexico City.

But about 4,300 records remain redacted in part – with no record completely blacked-out – according to the agency, and experts say there's no justification for withholding them to protect national security or intelligence gathering.

“We’re 59 years after President John Kennedy was killed and there’s just no justification for this,” said Judge John H. Tunheim, who from 1994-98 chaired the Assassination Records Review Board that was established Under the [President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992](#), which Biden voted for when it passed Congress unanimously.



— John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy in a motorcade in Dallas, on Nov. 22, 1963.

Bettmann Archive

Among the documents that remain largely hidden: 44 related to a shadowy CIA agent, George Joannides, and a covert Cuba-related program he ran that came into contact with Lee Harvey Oswald less than four months before Kennedy was shot, according to calculations made by JFK researchers with the [Mary Ferrell Foundation](#), the nation's largest nonprofit repository of the assassination records, which [sued](#) the administration to make all the documents public. The foundation says the CIA is withholding most of the records at issue.

Many of those Joannides records were never put in the National Archives' JFK collection, according to the foundation's lawsuit, so the lion's share of the suspected records were not released Thursday.

CIA officials dispute the number of Joannides records in their possession, but they confirmed two were scheduled to be released Thursday.

"We believe all CIA records substantively related to Mr. Joannides were previously released, with only minor redactions, such as CIA employees' names and locations," the agency said in a press statement in which it boasted of making "tremendous progress" in releasing records.

"We're talking about over 87,000 documents originally included in the JFK Act collection," the agency said. "And as of today, CIA has completely disclosed more than 84,000 of those to the public without any redactions. That amounts to about more than 95% of those documents, released in full."

Under the JFK records act, all documents related to the assassination were supposed to be released by 2017. But then-President Donald Trump delayed the full publication of all records and ultimately left it in the hands of Biden, who in 2021 delayed full release until Thursday, only to do so again.

Throughout the process, Trump and Biden authorized releases of some information, but those records that remain secret are expected to be the most interesting to researchers, involving government contacts with Oswald.

In a [memorandum](#) explaining the release of records and the withholding of others, Biden noted that the records act "permits the continued postponement of disclosure of information ... only when postponement remains necessary to protect against an identifiable harm to the military defense, intelligence operations, law enforcement, or the conduct of foreign relations that is of such gravity that it outweighs the public interest in disclosure."

But Tunheim said he heard those arguments in the 1990s and does not believe them. Earlier this month, he wrote Biden a [letter](#) urging him to honor the spirit of the law and he referenced

Joannides, who guided and monitored an anti-Fidel Castro group called Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil (Revolutionary Student Directorate) in 1963 that came into contact with Oswald in New Orleans in the months before the assassination, leading some to speculate about CIA-related complicity in the killing.

As Oswald interacted with DRE and became known as an activist who supported President Castro, the Pentagon was formulating a plan called [Operation Northwoods](#) to stage a false flag attack in the United States to blame on Cuba and justify a military confrontation to make up for the aborted Bay of Pigs fiasco two years before.

The foundation seeks those Operation Northwoods records in its lawsuit, as well as records concerning CIA plans to assassinate Castro and a June 30, 1961, memo from Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to JFK to reorganize the agency after Bay of Pigs.

Jefferson Morley, a JFK expert and vice president of the Mary Ferrell Foundation, said a spot check of the Thursday files showed that the memo was still "largely redacted."

"If the CIA can't bring itself to release a document written two years before the assassination – a memo that is obviously critical of the CIA – you have to question their good faith in whether they are complying with the law," he said.

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The records and the CIA's deceit over Joannides' ties to Oswald spans decades and came to light only after the records act began to unearth information about him; Tunheim said the agency misled his board and a previous congressional investigative panel in the 1970s.

But the CIA disclosed none of that information and appointed Joannides as an agency liaison to investigators, which impeded the 1976 House Select Committee on Assassinations investigation, its general counsel, G. Robert Blakey, [told Miami New Times](#) in 2001. Tunheim agreed.

“They said his files shouldn’t be released because it didn’t relate to anything related to the assassination because he wasn’t involved. That clearly wasn’t true at all,” Tunheim said. “His information is highly relevant, and if we had it at the time, we would have released it. And the fact they haven’t released it leads people to think they have something to hide. It just suggests there’s something to hide.”

Tunheim said he doesn’t believe there is a “smoking gun” in the documents suggesting that Oswald was not the gunman who shot Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, in Dealey Plaza in Dallas. Ever since the shooting, a majority of Americans have believed that Oswald was not a lone-wolf gunman, according to Gallup polling and [a poll released last week](#) with the Mary Ferrell Foundation conducted by Democratic pollster Fernand Amandi, a Miami-based consultant and JFK history enthusiast.

His poll also showed that 71% of voters thought Biden should release all of the JFK records, regardless of agency opposition.

“The CIA is putting President Biden in a bad political position that’s at odds with the overwhelming majority of Americans as the poll results reveal,” Amandi told NBC News.

“Calling for further delays and redactions for six decades-old documents around the most important of issues in American history – the murder of a president inside our borders – doesn’t just raise additional suspicions, it borders on tacit admission by the agency that something’s very rotten at the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.”

Rex Bradford, the president of the Mary Ferrell Foundation, said every document release adds a piece of the puzzle of the assassination, but he doesn’t expect a “Star Chamber report that says, ‘OK boys, here’s what happened.’ It ranges from interesting stories part of the assassination context to things that, if you put several of them together, it furthers the story. And for us, Joannides is top of the list.”

Bradford called Thursday’s records release “half a loaf” that failed to provide full and needed transparency.

Bradford discovered 20 years ago that the first recorded conversation between then-President Lyndon Johnson and then-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover 22 hours after the assassination was mysteriously erased. A transcript exists of the conversation – in which Hoover talks about


Oswald traveling to Mexico City before the assassination – but there’s no way to check its veracity.

The Mexico City story is crucial in the JFK assassination because, immediately after the assassination, the idea that this “loner” was in league with Communists in Mexico City panicked officials in Washington and helped drive the Warren Commission response, Bradford said.

The Warren Commission concluded in 1963 that Oswald acted alone in the assassination.

As part of the foundation’s lawsuit, it’s also seeking a document removed from the security file of Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt and it wants the full release of the personnel files of senior CIA operations officer David Atlee Phillips (who told conflicting stories about Oswald’s Mexico City visit); senior Dallas-based CIA operations officer James Walton Moore (who was informed about Oswald’s return to Texas in 1962 and allegedly told a CIA asset that Oswald was “harmless”); and CIA counterintelligence officer Birch D. O’Neal (who controlled the CIA’s Oswald file from November 1959 to November 1963).

Some of those records still had redactions Thursday.

“It’s been 60 years. They’ve run out of excuses,” said Bill Simpich, the attorney who filed the suit for the foundation. “Hopefully, the courts will get them to follow the law and release everything.” 

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