

JFK ASSASSINATION SYSTEM

IDENTIFICATION FORM

AGENCY INFORMATION

AGENCY : ROCKCOM *Px42*
RECORD NUMBER : 1781000210327

CIA No Objection

copy 12/11/97

Sent to OSD

RECORDS SERIES :
ASSASSINATION FILES

AGENCY FILE NUMBER : A-I(I) INTERVIEWS RE ASSASSINATIONS

DOCUMENT INFORMATION

ORIGINATOR : ROCKEFELLER COMMISSION
FROM : BELIN, DAVID
TO : FILE

NO JCS OBJECTION TO
DECLASSIFICATION: DATE DEC 11 1997

TITLE :
INTERVIEW WITH SECRETARY ROBERT MC NAMARA

DATE : 04/15/75
PAGES : 6

SUBJECTS :
MC NAMARA, ROBERT
CIA
ANTI-CASTRO ACTIVITIES
OPERATION MONGOOSE
ASSASSINATIONS, FOREIGN LEADERS
EXECUTIVE ACTION CAPABILITY
BUNDY, MC GEORGE

The Department of State has no objection to the
release or declassification of this document in full
under the provisions of the JFK Assassination Records
Collection Act of 1992 (PL102-526)

Reviewed on 12 Dec 97 *W*

DOCUMENT TYPE : MEMORANDUM
CLASSIFICATION : U
RESTRICTIONS : ~~REFERRED~~
CURRENT STATUS : ~~P~~

OPEN IN FULL

DATE OF LAST REVIEW : 07/09/93

OPENING CRITERIA :

COMMENTS :

Unmarked, but may include classified information.

COMMISSION ON CIA ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE UNITED STATES

Washington, DC 20500

April 15, 1975

MEMORANDUM

TO : The File

FROM : David W. Belin

SUBJECT : Interview with Secretary Robert McNamara

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Belin: Secretary McNamara, we've had a brief interview in your office on - late this afternoon - which is April 15, 1975, and I have asked you a number of questions and you have given me your best recollection for your answers, and I'd like to get a summary of our discussion on this tape and then send you a transcript for your editing, and then we will either prepare an affidavit or perhaps we will still ask you to come before the Commission, but I understand it is your preference not to testify formally before the Commission, because of the nature of your present job. Is that correct?

McNamara: That is correct. I wish to cooperate with the Commission in every way. If necessary, of course, I would testify before them, but I would much prefer to present whatever information I have in the form of an affidavit.

B: Fine. During the Administration of President Kennedy, you were Secretary of Defense. Is that correct?

M: That is correct.

B: And were you Secretary of Defense commencing at the time of the inauguration of President Kennedy?

M: Yes. Starting January 20, 1961.

B: And you were Secretary of Defense throughout the Kennedy Administration. Is that right?

M: I was.

B: --and into the Administration of Lyndon Johnson.

M: until approximately March 1, 1968.

B: During that time you were personally close with both the President and his brother, Robert Kennedy, is that correct?

M: I was.

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B: And you also were close to McGeorge Bundy?

M: Yes.

B: As I understand it there was what I am going to call a "camaderie" in the relationship among some of the top people in the Kennedy Administration.

M: Yes. That is correct.

B: At any time during the Kennedy Administration did you hear any person ever discuss a plan known as an "executive action plan" which in substance was defined as a capability plan for possibly assassinating any foreign leader?

M: I have no recollection of ^{ever} hearing anyone discuss such a plan.

B: Did you ever hear anyone discuss any particular plan concerning the possible assassination of Castro in Cuba?

M: No. I have no recollection of such a discussion.

B: Did you ever serve in any group known as either the MONGOOSE group or the Special Group Augmented? Does that ring a bell with you?

M: No. You mentioned, if I may refer back to our ^{at} previous conversation, that I was present at least one or more meetings of the Special Operations Group, I believe you called it. I have no recollection of being present at the meeting. I'm not suggesting I wasn't, but I have no recollection of it. I do seem to recall that there was such a group, I doubt very much if I was a member of it.

B: You might have been a participant at one or more of these meetings?

M: I might have been a participant.

B: At any such meetings, did you ever hear anyone discuss as a possibility the question of possibly assassinating Castro or any other foreign leader?

M: No. I should interject here another point I made earlier, as I have no notes -- I did not take notes of any meetings I attended with rare exceptions, and I have no other basis for refreshing my memory and my memory of those

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years is very bad. I'm not saying this to in any way qualify what I am saying except that it is a fact that my memory is poor in relation to the period.

B: I asked you whether or not Robert Kennedy ever had any such discussions with you and you indicated no, is that correct?

M: --indicated two things. First that I have no recollection whatsoever of him ever having discussed assassination of anybody with me--or whatever you called it--the executive --

B: executive action capability --

M: executive action capability. Moreover, it is inconceivable to me that he would have discussed such an action with me because I think he would have felt that it endangered the Presidency and I believe he would have had moral reasons for not supporting any such action by the Government of the United States, and I base both of those points on my appraisal of his evaluation of the Bay of Pigs and the extent to which it weakened the presidency and the ability of the President to govern and his behavior during the Cuban missile crisis when he strongly opposed action which he considered contrary to the moral traditions of this society.

B: Do you have any other comments with regard to this whole question of possibly assassinating foreign leaders?

M: You told me that you understand a plan to assassinate one or more foreign leaders was in existence for an extended period of time, during 1961-2-3. I said (a) I have no recollection of any such plan, (b) I find it very difficult to believe that if such a plan had existed its existence wouldn't have been known to the top officials of the CIA, and certainly if I had known of it I am positive I would have made my knowledge known to the President, Robert Kennedy, neither of whom obviously can testify now, but to Mac Bundy, to my deputy, Ros Gilpatric, and probably to Dean Rusk, and I would strongly urge that you check those three individuals. In addition, Max Taylor was very close to Robert Kennedy at the time. He was brought in by President Kennedy to examine the decision-making process of the Government that could have led to such a failure as the Bay of Pigs. He was very--Max was very close to both Robert Kennedy and the President at the time. He was very close to the whole

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problem of Cuban relations. He played a major part in the Cuban missile crisis discussions because of his association with the Kennedys and his work with the Bay of Pigs follow-on. So I would urge you to talk to him about this as well. And if Mac didn't know about it, and Max doesn't know about it and Dean Rusk doesn't and Ros (Kilpatrick) doesn't and I have no memory of it, I very much doubt that any such plan was known to the top officials of the Kennedy Administration.

B: Well, assume for the moment that one of those people did know about such a plan, and assume for the moment that the CIA documents show that such a plan might have been directed to be instituted by someone in the White House, who in the White House do you think would have had the authority to institute such a plan?

M: Well, I have said before that I felt the attacks on the CIA -- CIA's covert operations, were unjustified insofar as they assessed the primary responsibilities for those operations against the senior officials in CIA and absolve the rest of the senior officials in the Government of responsibility. I said that because it was my experience that all major CIA operations were approved by a group that subsequently became known as the 303 Group. I don't know what it was called during its early period, which included representatives of the -- the highest level representatives of the Secretaries of State and Defense, as well as the President's Security Adviser.

B: That was Mr. Bundy.

M: That was Mr. Bundy, during the period you are talking about, ~~so that~~ I am almost certain that were an assassination contemplated, which seems to me, as I said, extremely unlikely, if it were contemplated or any action ~~been~~ taken to move in that direction, it would have had to have received the approval of not just Mr. Bundy but other officials at that same level, including my Deputy, I think, and Deputy never would have approved anything like that without discussing it with me.

B: What you are saying--at least if it came through the White House, certainly Mr. Bundy would have known about it.

M: I think he would have both known about it, and I don't believe that he would have approved it by himself. I think it would have been discussed with Dean Rusk and me or my deputy and Dean Rusk's undersecretary.

End

B: And if Mr. Bundy did not know about it, then the only other person in the White House that might have known about it, I assume, would have been the President. Is that a fair statement?

M: That's a fair statement but I think that's extremely unlikely. I can't imagine that anything relating to the CIA operation of this kind would be known to the President and not Mr. Bundy. I never knew of any such thing.

B: So if it would have been known to Mr. Bundy it would have been known to the President. And vice versa?

M: No, nono. I didn't say that. I said I couldn't imagine anything relating to a CIA operation that was known to the President and was not known to Mr. Bundy. I can imagine something with respect to CIA known to Mr. Bundy, not known to the President either because they weren't that important or conceivably because it was thought desirable to protect the President from certain knowledge.

B: With regard to the --

M: If I may -- add one word to that. I can't imagine Mr. Bundy himself supporting assassination. I can't imagine him supporting assassination of a foreign leader, without mentioning it to the President, even though to do so would by that action involve the President. I say I can't imagine him supporting assassination of a foreign leader without the President's knowledge because it is the President who would pay if that action were undertaken and it ever became known. Mr. Bundy recognized, more than the rest of us, the importance of protecting the Presidency as well as a particular president, and particularly protecting his ability to govern.

B: I want to correct one thing on the record. You referred to my statement about one or more assassination plans. The only particular plan of assassination that you and I discussed that I said I knew anything about as to be concrete affirmative plans involved just Castro. I said there might have been indirect involvement in one other area, but the only direct involvement thus far that I know of at this time and that I discussed with you pertained to Castro.

M: Yes, yes, you are quite right.

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B: Anything else you want to add for the record?

M: No, except I'm horrified by the whole discussion, shocked by it and I just hope you will pursue all these leads some of which you may already have--I am saddened by it too.

B: As a citizen I am horrified by it and I am saddened by it, that my country which at one time became the land of the free and the home of the brave would be involved in situations of this kind, but we are trying to find out what the facts are and hopefully it will not happen again.

Thank you very much, Sir.

M: Thank you.

(END OF TAPE)

Robert S. McKeown
signed 3/21/75