

When Is the News Media Going to Catch on?

The National Archives keeps releasing assassination-related records, and the press keeps getting the story wrong.

By Robert Reynolds

Now that we are roughly mid-way between the last release of JFK assassination records from the National Archives, and the next round, scheduled for December 2022, it seems a good time to take stock of the news coverage we have gotten so far.

The good news: the fiasco that marred coverage of releases in 2017-2018 was not repeated. The bad news: coverage was still an embarrassing failure.[\[1\]](#)

Virtually none of the stories this time around accurately conveyed the small amount of new information that was released in December 2021. Instead, story after story about the release of records from the [John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection](#) (JFK ARC) featured long summaries of documents previously described in newspapers and government reports from the 1990s, the 1970s, even the 1960s. These summaries were presented as if they were news. This spectacle occurred in publications ranging from the *New York Post* to *The Washington Post*, from the *Daily Mail* to the *Daily Beast*. Even the venerable AP and that supposed newspaper of record, *The New York Times*, were not immune.

Not every outlet faltered, to be sure. Author [Gus Russo](#), writing for the website [SpyTalk](#), observed that “there doesn’t seem to be a truly new document in the batch, just cleaner, transparent versions of previous releases.” Substitute “open in full” for “transparent” and Russo was correct. Meanwhile, Gerald Posner, author of [Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK](#), told CNN the same thing [during an interview](#), provoking host Michael Smerconish into calling him a “buzzkill.” CNN seems to have listened to Posner, broadcasting fewer decades-old news stories than other outlets.

After eight rounds of releases from the ARC since July 2017, however, the question remains: why did so many news outlets still get the story so wrong, publishing “olds” instead of “news”? The fundamental reason is that they didn’t understand what was new in the releases. Instead, they thought these “secret” documents were all new information.

An old saw in journalism, however, is that a story is no better than its sources. Without excusing the reporters who wrote and the editors who published, a major part of the responsibility

for the latest misleading news quotient must rest with the sources reporters depended upon—the authors and researchers who actually delve through the assassination-related and cold war documents that constitute the collection. They are one of the primary reasons why so many news organizations do such a poor job of explaining what the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is actually doing.

Among the most prominent writers offering skewed, and sometimes self-serving, visions of the documents, are [Philip Shenon](#), author of a 2013 Warren Commission history and numerous articles on the JFK assassination, and [Jefferson Morley](#), author of numerous assassination-related articles as well, in addition to two books on CIA executives prominent during the cold war. Both writers, one an alumnus of *The New York Times*, the other of *The Washington Post*, offer vivid comments on “secret records” at NARA; both are strong advocates of the idea that narrative-altering stories, derived from these supposedly secret documents, remain to be written. They paint a disingenuous portrait for credulous reporters, who dutifully pass it onto their readers.

Shenon

While they write using similar vocabulary, Morley and Shenon have different views of the assassination, and write about redactions and releases from different perspectives.

Shenon is from the “failed investigation” school, which holds, among other things, that ARC redactions exist primarily to hide the incompetence of all the federal entities that investigated the JFK assassination. What these entities missed is never clearly spelled out, but there is a strong odor of some sort of plot in Shenon’s reckoning.

In his most recent take on the JFK records, a December 2021 article in *Politico* entitled “[What’s Missing From the New JFK Document Release](#),” Shenon shied away from identifying specific documents in the December releases that might enlighten us, but he does note that a “skeletal index of secret records” includes documents from the “office files of CIA employees” in the agency’s Mexico City station. To Shenon, the existence of these alleged documents “suggests the possibility that the agency’s spies in Mexico knew something at the time of Kennedy’s assassination that was so explosive, or so embarrassing or incriminating, that the CIA has been determined to keep it secret almost six decades later.” Too bad we don’t learn precisely what documents Shenon has in mind, so that we can watch out for them. This is a strategic omission on Shenon’s part; he will never have to revise or explain what he meant when specific redactions are released in the future.

Shenon also managed to extract an admission from the White House that no final deadline has been set for the full release of everything in the “secret library.” To Shenon, “that suggests some documents— those that threaten ‘identifiable harm’ to national security, according to Biden’s order — could be kept secret indefinitely.” Based on this failure to set a date, Shenon would apparently rank Joe Biden behind Donald Trump, who at least promised (on Twitter) that “he planned to release ALL JFK files someday, possibly if he was elected to a second term.” As Shenon notes ominously, “there has been no similar assurance from Biden.”

This portentous rhetoric is not an accurate description of withholding and redaction practices in the ARC, or for that matter, an accurate paraphrase of Biden’s memo. The nebulous phrase “identifiable harm to national security” that Shenon cites occurs nowhere in the memo.

Instead, the memo accurately cites the JFK Act, which allows postponement of releases based on concrete categories, including: “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.” This language was the very same standard Trump relied upon when he agreed to continued redactions. (Nor did Trump “fail to comply with a legal deadline to make the entire library public.” If true, that would condemn not just Trump, but the US archivist and NARA as well).

Shenon also misleads in a more subtle way. He consistently fails to distinguish between redaction of a single word and the withholding of an entire document (a tactic that Morley excels in as well). There are only 515 withheld-in-full files left in the ARC, and barring amendment of the JFK Act, which provides the legal basis for releasing ARC documents, they will likely stay that way indefinitely. Under the 1992 JFK Act, records like tax returns, documents provided through a deed of gift (such as those given to the JFK Library by author William Manchester), and internal court documents such as grand jury records, are all exempted from release, but there is no exemption in the law for “national secrets” that are “too sensitive to be public.” Biden couldn’t release exempted documents, under the governing law, even if for some misguided reason he wanted to. What Biden can do is review an appeal by any federal entity that wants to continue holding back discrete items and passages in documents that are otherwise mostly open. Yet Shenon persistently insinuates (and Morley too) that there is something illegitimate or illegal, or worse, in having presidents obey the law.

Morley

In contrast to Shenon’s opaque explanations, Jefferson Morley espouses the “CIA complicity” school-of-thought on the assassination, both before and after the act. (One might be tempted to call him the leading exponent, but Oliver Stone would seem to have a lock on that crown). Morley occasionally retreats from this position to something that seems more like “CIA culpability” and closer to Shenon’s views; nonetheless a conspiracy involving the agency is the one consistent thread in all his writing.

This perspective has led Morley to attach enormous significance to the most insignificant redactions. His first response to Biden’s October memo on ARC releases was to declare that the CIA had convicted itself of complicity in the assassination simply by the sheer number of redacted agency documents. Later he retreated to something of a fallback position, emphasizing instead the importance of a small set of records, mostly internal personnel files and so-called “201” files, that were released in 2017-2018. These citations capture an important distinction between Shenon and Morley. For all their similarities in perpetuating the notion of a conspiracy, most likely involving the CIA, Morley will cite specific ARC records in his writings, while Shenon never does.^[2]

The December 2021 releases included 1,491 previously redacted documents, among them many that Morley had previously cited. So what did he have to say about these after their release in full? His most extended discussion appeared in an article for [CounterPunch](#), the muckraking online magazine. But before getting into the details of Morley’s article, entitled “[JFK Revisited: Oliver Stone and the New JFK Fact Pattern](#),” it must be said that *CounterPunch* should have known better.

Morley's article is primarily a spirited defense of Oliver Stone's new "documentary" on the assassination, in which the [Putin-loving](#) director doubles down on a [KGB-inspired take](#) on the assassination. That such a defense should show up in *CounterPunch* amounts to a striking repudiation of the late Alexander Cockburn, a founding editor of *CounterPunch*. Cockburn was writing his "Beat the Devil" column for *The Nation* magazine when Stone's feature film *JFK* slouched into American movie theaters in 1991, like some vision from William Butler Yeats. And Cockburn was among the first prominent left-wing writers to call out and prove the film was crap, in two columns entitled "[J.F.K. and JFK](#)" and "[In Defense of the Warren Commission](#)." When Stone and two of his sycophants [wrote to *The Nation*](#) to complain, Cockburn replied, "These letters, fraudulent in the case of [Oliver] Stone, flatulent in the case of [his supporters] [John] Newman and [Philip] Green, offer a fitting résumé of the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of the *JFK* sponsors and their claque, not the least of whose vices is their voracious consumption of valuable time and space." Thirty years later, though, Cockburn's journalistic heirs willingly gave much space to Morley's defense of Stone's rough new beast, thereby suggesting it was worth their readers' time.^[3]

When Morley finally gets down to brass tacks about the December releases in his article, he presents a careless rehash that makes his knowledge of documents and releases appear suspect. He spends much space discussing two CIA cables from October 1963; they are worthy of attention because "for the first time in 58 years, these two messages were completely declassified."^[4]

These two cables are actually well-known documents, even to modest assassination researchers. They were first released by the CIA in redacted form in 1976. Cable 5 is from the Mexico City station (MC) to CIA headquarters (HQ) in Langley, Virginia. It informs HQ that someone, who identified himself as Lee Oswald, called the Soviet embassy in Mexico City (MC had a tap on the embassy's telephones). Cable 7 is from HQ to MC. It informs MC that this caller was probably "Lee Henry Oswald." HQ has a "201" file on Oswald (despite having got his middle name wrong), and they proceed to give MC some basic background on Oswald.^[5]

Tracking these cables in the JFK collection is unusually complicated. They come in multiple redacted versions, multiple copies of each redacted version, and multiple releases of every copy of each redacted version. Morley has not kept track of any of these nuances. The only elements in cables 5 and 7 redacted after 1999 were names on a note attached to cable 5 and a routing sheet attached to cable 7. These small redactions were agreed to prior to 1999 by the [Assassination Records Review Board](#) (ARRB), the federal entity responsible for collecting and releasing JFK records in the first place. Otherwise the ARRB mandated the release of all the information in the cables, overriding the CIA's objections. Subsequently, in 2017-2018 the CIA released the attachments to both cables, but only in some of the copies. This careless inconsistency was corrected when the attachments in all copies were released in December 2021.^[6]

Morley is thus flat wrong, and in at least two ways. First, the cable texts were released in full in the 1990s. Second, the cable attachments were released in full four to five years ago. No new information from these two cables appeared in December at all.

Morley is also wrong about the significance of the attachments. These were originally redacted to protect the identities of two officers at the MC station: Herb Manell, head of the Soviet section, and his wife Barbara, a contract employee who wrote cable 5. Those interested in the complicated story of how Oswald came to the station's attention in the first place, may, of

course, be curious about the Manells, but these attachments are of limited usefulness. Far more important, useful, and interesting are the 1978 depositions the Manells gave to the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA). Once heavily redacted, in 2017-2018 both Manell depositions were released in full.

HSCA took depositions from almost everyone who signed off on the cables, including Charlotte Bustos, author of cable 7; Alan White, deputy chief of the MC station; and John Whitten, who was head of the Directorate of Plans's Western Hemisphere Division Branch 3. Their depositions amount to hundreds of pages, and the two cables are a primary focus in all of them. Morley's *CounterPunch* article mentions none of this, and instead, tries to attach monumental significance to scraps of paper. This sadly misrepresents both the current state of the JFK collection and the significance of newly released text.

Morley's tendency to read major significance into minor redactions is habitual and egregious. An [earlier article](#) about the 2021 releases discussed a document that has a lengthy portion still being withheld in full—and for good reason. It lists Cuban political prisoners and the names and addresses of their relatives in the United States. Morley at one point insisted this redaction had great significance for assassination researchers. More recently, [he has admitted](#) the list is not relevant, but nonetheless maintains that [other redactions](#) in this document might have dramatic and relevant information about the assassination (namely, concerning anti-Castro activists Carlos Bringuier and Carlos Quiroga). Don't put money on this shell game.^[7]

[Tweedledum and Tweedledee](#)

Between these two—Shenon and Morley—whose views should the reader take with a larger dose of salt?

Morley's predilection for making silly assertions about CIA records that still have blacked-out portions certainly requires extra caution from the reader. And his defense of Oliver Stone, which is tantamount to embracing Jim Garrison's perversion of justice, is another stain on his blotter.

But otherwise it's a toss-up. While Shenon may be more shrewd and careful about being contradicted outright, both authors are heavily vested in their narratives regardless of the facts, and promoting, subtly or otherwise, their own agendas. Both are steeped in journalism tradecraft, exploit their past credentials, and give good quotes. Both know that reporters who call them up are invariably just looking to crank out a story, impatient and/or under pressure to move on to the next one. The reporters know little to nothing about the assassination or the records, and care even less. Similar inclinations apply to editors, from *Politico* to *CounterPunch*, who simply want to publish a timely article and are pleased to receive one.

Seven months from now NARA is scheduled to release another tranche of JFK documents. Some may be of interest to persons still looking into the assassination. But to expect major revelations from the few remaining partly-classified documents is, in a word, absurd. The cumulative information from millions of records already released in full cannot be upended that easily.

But don't expect to hear that from either Shenon or Morley.

Robert Reynolds is a professor at National Chi Nan University in Taiwan. This article is a sequel to the author's [December 2021 article](#) on redactions in the JFK Collection. He blogs about the records at jfkarc.info.

[1] For the poor quality of 2017 coverage, see Max Holland, "[Much Ado About Nothing](#)," *The Weekly Standard*, 18 December 2017, and Dale K. Myers, "[Scraping the Bottom of the Barrel](#)," *Secrets of a Homicide*, 28 October 2017.

[2] For an extended discussion of the personnel and "201" files that Morley cites, click [here](#).

[3] Alexander Cockburn, "Beat the Devil," *The Nation*, 6/13 January 1992 and 9 March 1992. Letters-to-the-editor taking issue with the columns, along with Cockburn's reply, appeared in the issue of *The Nation* dated 18 May 1992.

[4] Assassination researcher W. Tracy Parnell had an interesting [blog post on 5 January 2022](#) regarding Morley's *CounterPunch* article. Parnell discussed issues also raised in this article and several others besides.

[5] The cables were part of an earlier release under the Freedom of Information Act and are sometimes referred to as the "JFK FOIA Documents." The two cables are actually numbered 5-1A and 7-2, abbreviated in this article as cable 5 and cable 7.

[6] For a longer discussion of these cables click [here](#).

[7] Morley also has a marked tendency to conflate documents he himself wants with records in the ARC collection, viz., his years-long pursuit for the personnel record of George Joannides, a CIA officer who was the agency's liaison in 1963 to a Cuban student association that was anti-Castro, the [Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil](#) (DRE), and who later represented the agency when HSCA was pursuing its investigation. More than one researcher has come across documents that they argue might be relevant to some aspect of the assassination. Is it possible to get these documents included in the ARC, decades after the closure of the ARRB, and subject to the ARC standards for redacting or withholding information? There has been some litigation that has suggested the answer is no, but lawyers are now gearing up for another try. Successful or not, there is a clear line between "in the ARC" and "not in the ARC," and one should not look forward to seeing Joannides documents in the next ARC release in December 2022. NARA cannot release what NARA does not have. See Vincent Bugliosi, [Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy](#) (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), Endnotes CD, 148-149 for a discussion of the JFK Records Collection Act vs. the FOIA, with comments from attorney James Lesar and Steven Tilley, NARA's liaison to the ARRB.