THE ALBATROSS FILE
SINGAPORE'S INDEPENDENCE DECLASSIFIED

EXHIBITION GUIDE

The SG60 capstone event and permanent exhibition jointly presented by the National Library Board and the Ministry of Digital Development and Information.

National Library Gallery /
National Library Building, Level 10
100 Victoria St, Singapore 188064

Mon – Sun:
10:00 AM – 9:00 PM
(Closed at 5:00pm on eves of Christmas, New Year and Chinese New Year. Closed on Public Holidays.)

Free Admission

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A. INTRO

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

The Albatross File: Singapore's Independence Declassified Exhibition takes visitors through Singapore's formative moments from Merger to Separation. Based on the book *The Albatross File: Inside Separation*, this introspective experience captures the complex web of events leading to the unexpected separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965.

Designed to deepen visitors' appreciation of Singapore's journey to nationhood, *The Albatross File: Singapore's Independence Declassified* Exhibition is a comprehensive narrative of events organised into bite-sized, interactive experiences. Featuring a dynamic cast of characters, newly declassified documents, and oral history interviews with key players involved in Singapore's founding, the exhibition unveils a fascinating chapter of Singapore's history.

Feel history as you explore, in any order, the exhibition's four stand-alone components – Atlas, Room, Records, ChatBook – and discover the thoughts, emotions, and behind-the-scenes decisions that shaped Singapore's path to independence.

B. KEY PLAYERS

KEY PLAYERS

SINGAPORE

LEE KUAN YEW
Born in Singapore in 1923, Lee led the PAP to victory in Singapore's first election for self-government in 1959. As Singapore's first Prime Minister, he led the negotiations for merger with Malaya.

TOH CHIN CHYE
Born in Perak, Malaya, in 1921, Toh was Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister. He was a key initiator of the Malaysian Solidarity Convention together with S Rajaratnam and initially opposed Separation.

GOH KENG SWEE
Born in Malacca, Malaya, in 1918, Goh was Singapore's Minister for Finance. He helped negotiate the terms of Singapore's merger with Malaya, and later its separation from Malaysia.

E W BARKER
Born in Singapore in 1920, Barker was Singapore's Minister for Law. He drafted the Separation Agreement, amendments to the Malaysian Constitution to allow for Separation, and the Proclamation of Singapore.

S RAJARATNAM
Born in Sri Lanka in 1915, and raised in Seremban, Malaya, S Rajaratnam was Minister for Culture. He was a key initiator of the Malaysian Solidarity Convention, together with Toh Chin Chye. He had initially believed that an independent Singapore was not viable.

DEVAN NAIR
Born in Malacca, Malaya, in 1923, Nair was the Secretary-General of the National Trade Unions Congress (NTUC). He was the only PAP candidate to win a seat in the 1964 Malaysian federal election. After Separation, he remained in Malaysia to form the Democratic Action Party, returning to Singapore in 1969.

OTHMAN WOK
Born in 1924 in Singapore, Wok served as Minister for Social Affairs. A former journalist, he learned that some Malaysian reporters had known in advance of the July 1964 riots in Singapore.

LIM KIM SAN
Born in Singapore in 1916, Lim was the Minister for National Development. He was the first Singapore minister to learn of the Tunku's wish for Separation.

ONG PANG BOON
Born in 1929 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaya, Ong was the Minister for Education. He organised the PAP's campaign in the 1964 Malaysian federal election. He signed the Separation Agreement reluctantly.

JEK YEUN THONG
Born in 1930 in Singapore, Jek was the Minister for Labour.

YONG NYUK LIN
Born in 1918 in Negeri Sembilan, Malaya, Yong was Singapore's Minister for Health.

KWA GEOK CHOO
Born in 1920 in Singapore, Kwa was a lawyer and wife of Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. She helped draft the provisions in the Separation Agreement that guaranteed Singapore's continued water supply from Johor.

MALAYSIA

TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN
Known as *Bapak* Malaysia, the Malaysian Prime Minister (1963 – 1970) decided on Singapore's ouster from Malaysia in July 1965 while he was hospitalised in London.

TUN ABDUL RAZAK HUSSEIN
Razak was Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister. He was Malaysia's chief negotiator for Singapore's Separation from Malaysia.

ISMAIL ABDUL RAHMAN
Ismail was Minister of Home Affairs when Singapore separated from Malaysia. He was involved in the negotiations in early 1965 over possible constitutional rearrangements for Singapore in Malaysia; and took part in the later negotiations for Singapore to separate from Malaysia.

MOHAMED KHIR JOHARI
Khir was the Minister of Agriculture and Co-operatives and the Umno leader responsible for Singapore Malay affairs.

VT SAMBANTHAN
Sambanthan led the Malaysian Indian Congress from 1955 to 1973. He served as the Minister of Works, Posts and Telecommunications from 1959 to 1971.

TAN SIEW SIN
Tan was President of the Malaysian Chinese Association from 1961 to 1974 and was Malaysia's Minister of Finance from 1959 to 1974.

SYED JAFFAR ALBAR
Dubbed the "Lion of Umno" for his radical views, he became the party's Secretary-General in 1963. He accused the PAP and Lee Kuan Yew of oppressing the Malays in Singapore.

ABDUL KADIR YUSOF
Kadir was the Malaysian Attorney General from 1963 to 1977. Kadir was called to examine the draft Separation Agreement.

MAHATHIR MOHAMAD
Mahathir was a newly elected Member of Parliament when Singapore was a part of Malaysia and crossed swords often with Lee Kuan Yew in the Malaysian Parliament.

UNITED KINGDOM

ALEC DOUGLAS-HOME
Douglas-Home served as the British Foreign Secretary before becoming Prime Minister from 1963 to 1964. He tried to persuade the Tunku to form a coalition government with the PAP in 1964.

HAROLD WILSON
Wilson was British Prime Minister from 1964 to 1970. He tried to stop the disintegration of Malaysia. He also prevented Malaysian leaders from arresting Lee Kuan Yew.

ANTONY HEAD
Head was the British High Commissioner to Malaysia from 1963 to 1966. He made several last-ditch attempts to persuade Malaysian leaders to postpone Separation.

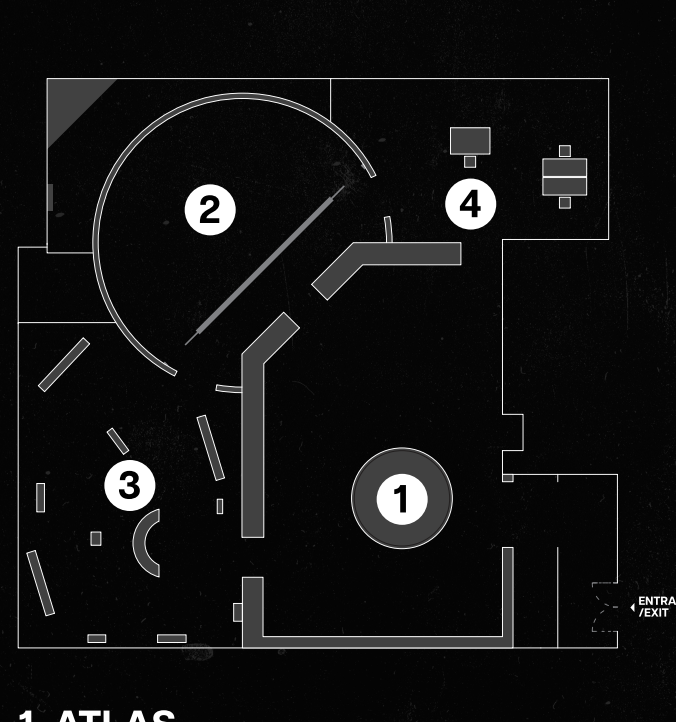
LOUIS MOUNTBATTEN
Mountbatten was the UK Chief of Defence Staff from 1959 to 1965. During his 1965 tour of Malaysia and Singapore, he helped scuttle the constitutional rearrangements that the Tunku and Lee Kuan Yew were negotiating.

INDONESIA

SUKARNO
Sukarno was President of Indonesia from 1949 to 1966. He opposed the formation of Malaysia and waged an armed conflict *Konfrontasi* against Malaysia and Singapore.

C. FLOOR PLAN

OVERVIEW OF EXHIBITION SPACES



1. ATLAS
Track the Singapore story with a comprehensive timeline of events from Merger to Separation, anchored by a dynamic Spacetime Clock tracing movements and decisions towards her independence.

2. ROOM
Witness a dramatised retelling of what went on behind closed doors in the months leading up to Separation, blending archival footage and oral history interviews with cinematic reenactments to bring these moments to life.

3. RECORDS
Hear the voices of key players and examine the official documents and handwritten notes, including declassified Albatross File documents, which offer an intimate perspective into the anxieties and convictions of key players involved in the Separation.

4. CHATBOOK
Find out more through this Generative AI-powered chat service that draws from *The Albatross File: Inside Separation* publication as well as the rich resources from NLB's collections.

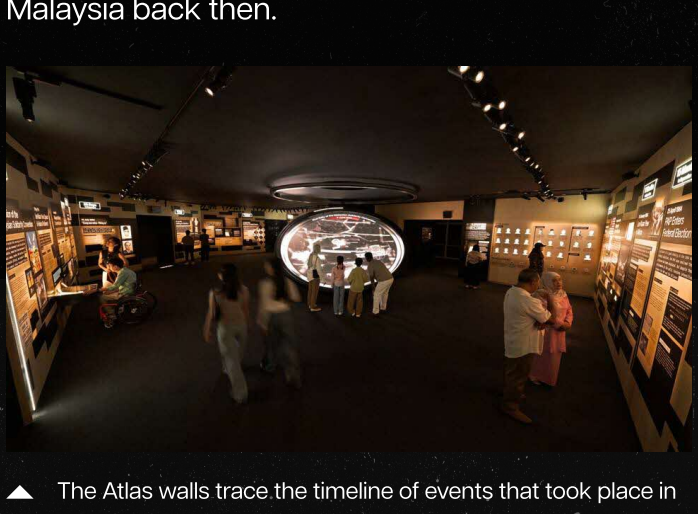
D. ZONE

ATLAS

This section presents the most comprehensive account of the events – the key plots, people and places – that led to Singapore's separation from Malaysia.

Atlas is anchored by a dynamic Spacetime Clock that charts the journey from Singapore's merger to separation through geographical movements of the key players involved. It also features a detailed visual timeline that runs across the surrounding walls.

Approach-sensitive and interactive displays reveal deeper insights into the events and the complex relationship between Singapore and Malaysia back then.



The Atlas walls trace the timeline of events that took place in the months, days and hours leading up to Separation – starting from 23 months prior, right up to the hour before Separation was announced on 9 August 1965.

Learn when Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman started having doubts about keeping Singapore in Malaysia and the various discussions of a looser association which began in late 1964 and continued until February 1965, where negotiations broke down when the British found out.

Then on 27 May 1965 in the Federal Parliament, Lee Kuan Yew delivered a substantial portion of his speech in fluent Malay, without a script. According to E W Barker, Lee's speech was the "straw that broke the camel's back".

See how, through this period, Lee insisted on secrecy, fearing the British would object, and that there could be unrest in Singapore upon learning that Singapore would be out of Malaysia. Find out more about the multiple meetings that took place between the Singapore and Malaysian political leaders before the Separation Agreement was drafted and finally signed.

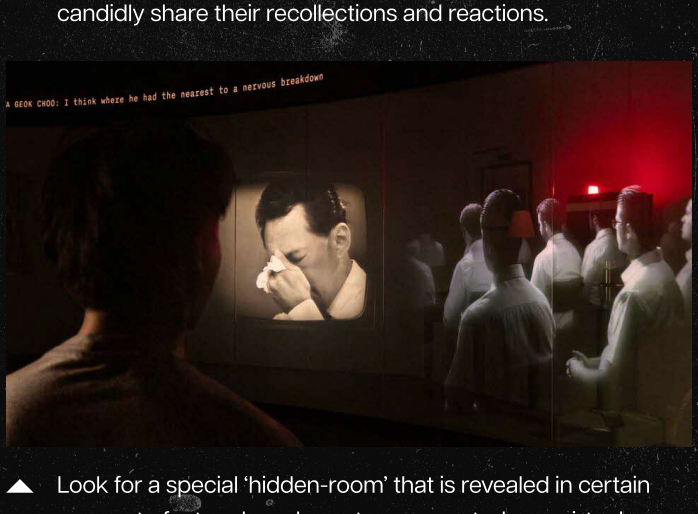
Uncover more to the story by interacting with the different elements on the Atlas walls. See what content is revealed through the approach-sensitive panels and interactive displays that contain hidden details.

D. ZONE

ROOM

Visitors to the Room will witness a gripping 22-minute cinematic experience. Focusing on the pivotal months leading up to Separation, the film provides an introspective and emotional perspective of key moments of the story through reenactments, archival footage, and oral history interviews. Visitors can better appreciate the complexity and gravity of Singapore's separation through scenes depicting the tension caused by racial riots in Singapore and the anguished loss of a political vision, among other momentous events.

Told in nine acts, this cinematic take on the Separation story lets visitors feel like they were in the room when discussions were going on, with these events unfolding before their eyes. Hear key players share their innermost thoughts and outline strategies that led Singapore towards the path to independence. Get a front-row seat to the urgent and secret meetings that shaped the bilateral relationship between Singapore and Malaysia and listen in as Singapore leaders candidly share their recollections and reactions.

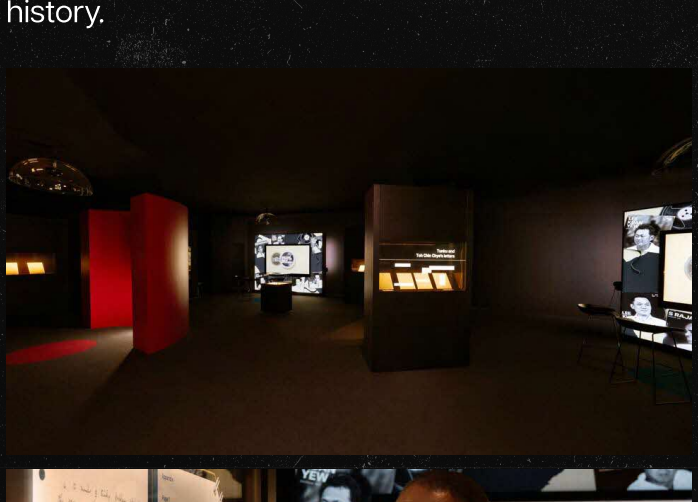


Look for a special 'hidden-room' that is revealed in certain scenes to feature key characters presented as a virtual presence on set.

D. ZONE

RECORDS

Featuring three listening booths and eight artefact showcases, this interactive section deepens visitors' understanding of Singapore's political situation in the years leading to Separation. The listening booths, featuring exclusive oral history interviews, invite visitors to tune in to the voices of key players behind these momentous events. Also on display are documents from key moments in the Merger and Separation story. In addition, interactive glass surfaces provide more opportunities for visitors to delve deeper into the official memorandums, draft papers, and even handwritten letters that have left their indelible mark on Singapore's history.



In December 1964, Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, who had started to seriously consider hiving off Singapore from Malaysia, asked Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to prepare a draft paper to clarify what Singapore would settle for. A set of three documents – two draft papers and a Cabinet Memorandum prepared by Lee – reveals how negotiations focused on defence, foreign policy, and the common market.

Lee's argument was that Singapore would make cash payments to the Malaysian defence and foreign affairs budget only if she were represented in the Malaysian Parliament. Lee described the two options for Singapore he intended to present to the Tunku: for the PAP to stay in the Malaysian Parliament but not participate in politics outside Singapore; or complete autonomy, with contribution in kind to the common defence of Malaysia. Visitors can scroll through these very documents presented on interactive screens and delve into highlighted annotations to uncover background details that provide insight to the challenges faced by the Singaporean political leaders.

In this section there is an exhibit that holds a major revelation. Look out for a page of Goh Keng Swee's oral history transcript with Lee Kuan Yew's handwriting. When Lee was preparing to write his memoirs in the mid-1990s, he read this transcript and wrote: "*1st time read on 22 Aug 94 5.40 pm in office*" in the margin. What did Lee discover after 29 years that he felt the need to record this moment? The fact that it was Goh, not the Malaysians, who had suggested in a meeting with Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak on 15 July 1965 that Singapore and Malaysia go their separate ways, and that Goh had "never pressed Razak for a looser re-arrangement" as Lee had asked Goh to do.

D. ZONE

CHATBOOK

Welcome to your personal research station – here, interactive stations powered by generative AI give visitors the opportunity to engage more deeply with the exhibition's content as well as multi-modal materials from the collections of both the National Library and the National Archives of Singapore.

Interactive terminals guide users in asking questions and exploring the exhibition's rich archival materials, which include sources such as government documents, oral history interviews, video clips, photos, newspaper articles and more. ChatBook then generates a response that draws together documents and interviews – providing an investigative experience on Singapore's merger and separation.

Navigate your own way through history. Ask your burning questions and let ChatBook generate the answers. Explore rich resources – some recently declassified – from Singapore's archives and let the words, photos, and audio-visual elements come together to tell a fuller and more nuanced story.

A 'lite' version of the ChatBook lets younger visitors satisfy their curiosity – aided by simplified text, larger fonts, and even a friendly character on screen.

E. ESSENTIALS

FURTHER RESOURCES

Exhibition website:
https://exhibitions.nlb.gov.sg/thealbatrossfile/about/

The Albatross File Timeline:
https://exhibitions.nlb.gov.sg/thealbatrossfile/timeline/

The Historical Context: Merger
by Tan Tai Yong

The Historical Context: Separation
by Albert Lau

National Archives of Singapore website:
https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Presented by
nlb Inspiring Discovery
MINISTRY OF DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT AND INFORMATION

Launched as part of
SG 60

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NATIONAL archives SINGAPORE
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