

# Echoes of Dallas: Rankin breaks his silence

Warren Commission counsel admits some witnesses lied

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Public opinion surveys indicate that many Americans continue to have doubts about the official explanation of the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963. Some of the key figures in the government investigations of that tragedy also are having some second thoughts. This is the second of a series of articles based on recent tape-recorded interviews with three such figures. The writer is a Schenectady native who conducted the interviews while working as an investigative reporter in Texas.

By **MARTIN RALBOVSKY**  
Second of Three Articles



**J. LEE RANKIN**

As Warren Commission counsel in 1963.

J. Lee Rankin. He was the chief counsel for the Warren Commission, which was established by President Lyndon B. Johnson to find out who assassinated his predecessor, John F. Kennedy, and why. A former solicitor general of the United States, Rankin was hand-picked by the late Earl Warren, chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court and head of the Warren Commission, to direct the government's investigation into the circumstances of the crime.

Today, Rankin is an attorney in New York City. For nearly 12 years, and particularly since the day the Warren Commission Report was made public on Sept. 24, 1964, J. Lee Rankin had refused to discuss with the media either the Warren Commission Report or the John Kennedy assassination. Recently in a tape-recorded interview, he broke that personal silence, and said:

—That the Dallas police were trying to unload the blame for the assassination

and the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby, on the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

—That certain key witnesses from Texas were not worthy of belief, so contradictory and flawed were their statements and explanations to the commission.

—That if he knew then what he knows now, about the FBI and the CIA, the commission's attitude towards those agencies would have been different, and probably not so trusting.

—That, yes, certain witnesses did lie before the Warren Commission in their testimonies, but that the commission could do nothing about it except print the questionable testimony as it was given and leave it up to the public, and future historians, to catch the falsehoods.

—That it was not his job, as chief counsel, to punch witnesses in the nose and make them tell the truth.

**J. LEE RANKIN:**

"We (the Warren Commission) had a serious problem, as the whole country did, about what was going on inside of the police station in Dallas... in light of the murder there... Jack Ruby, yes... we tried to find answers. But it came down to a question of credibility, and there seemed to be very little of it. The various explanations, for example, of how he (Ruby) got into the police station that morning... why, they were frightful.

"If you look at what people such as (Jesse) Curry (Dallas police chief at the time) said, and study it, it's difficult to find anything you can tie to and rely on... look at all of his testimony, and of his statements, and see all of the problems, all of the conflicts and so forth. It would seem that Curry is scurrying around to try to get some excuse for his personal conduct... so he tries to unload on the FBI. That isn't anything new as far as police work is concerned.

"I always had difficulty myself... with that Curry said, as to how much of it was believable. That's not the commission, that was my own personal problem. And (Jack) Revill (of the Dallas police intelligence division)... I couldn't reconcile what he said to the commission about this statement of his being there in the police file on Dec. 1st, and it being sworn to the following April, and all of that. I could never reconcile all of that in my mind.

"IT WOULD have been different if it were a layman... say, like some of the people we interviewed who were just working in Dallas at the time and had no experience with

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police work, or with the law, or with legal principals or anything like that. But here's a fellow working in the field, criminal intelligence, and then he comes forward and he says disregard this fact that I didn't swear to that until April or May, fellas, uh ... I really did put it in there in December. There's too much involved in his own interest in saying that, you know.

"How do you nail him? You don't ... fella just sticks to his lies. Oftentimes they don't break down, juries and courts will conclude that they're liars anyway. There were certain things ... I don't think even today you can resolve where the truth really is. You don't think Curry and his people were trying to protect their own hides? You've got to look back at that period and Curry's position ...

"All of this occurred while he was there (as police chief) and why did it occur? One of the obvious things the American people were thinking was that Dallas had a pretty poor police operation. He was running from that for years. All he was busy doing was trying to unload it. That you have to take into account in examining everything he said and did. That whole force.

"If (J. Edgar) Hoover were still alive, Curry would still be afraid of saying anything ... he knows he would be nailed right then. A lot of the people who testified looked pretty shabby in what they said. But you have to consider your

sources ... some are not worthy of belief in many instances. I personally felt that way about Curry ... he had an interest in unloading this whole thing on the FBI.

"YOU DON'T have to have a fella say, oh, look ... I was lying all the time. The testimony looks shabby enough. A lawyer can't take a witness and punch him in the nose and make him tell the truth ...

"As for the FBI and the CIA ... well, since Watergate, we know that somebody in the government was in the assassination business. Now I don't question but if we ... if the FBI was like what we now know about it, the attitude of the Commission towards it would have been entirely different. But the American people's attitudes have changed. Mine have changed. I ... I didn't believe this stuff was going on back then ... I didn't believe, I may have been dumb, but I didn't believe our CIA

think you can judge these things in this climate ... you've got to go back to the climate of that time, 1964.

"I'd be interested in seeing how people would investigate the CIA or the FBI if a new Warren Commission were established today ... how would they do it? Look what we're getting now, the CIA investigations. Are they calling agents in to interview them? I don't think so. Where are they going to get the money to bring in a thousand agents for questioning? I don't think anybody can look into those agencies, investigate them, any differently than we did.

"ONE OF THE things we're running into today is that people are coming up now and speaking out on this case because they want the notoriety ... why do they want it? ... oh, my. We had hundreds of 'em. Those volumes are filled with people who wanted the notoriety. To be connected with (the Kennedy assassination) in some way. Any way.

"Now: People who are going to tell the truth, don't wait 12 years to tell it. Not

with a matter of this importance to the country and with their involvement themselves. No, they don't wait that long. Even the day after the report came out there was a basis for them to come forward, to come out with it, if they thought it was the truth. Curry saying today that he isn't even sure that Oswald did it ... why, that's ridiculous. The fact that he waited this long to say something like that reflects on everything he says.

"What a lot of people are doing today is having these second thoughts ... putting down everybody in public life as having the same kind of morality and standards that are involved in present situations or in situations of the last four, five years. People put Watergate, those kind of things, on top of everything now ... they think the entire

federal government has been doing those things all the while.

"But if you told me that, while I was in Washington (as the Solicitor General), that the federal government was taking every private cable and reviewing them, I would say that it was not possible. I'm confident that these things never happened while I was there. But that's how we've sunk to this level. And it's been pretty shabby.

"One of these days, I expect to hear somebody say ... the Warren Commission was really a conspiracy to make Gerry Ford President."