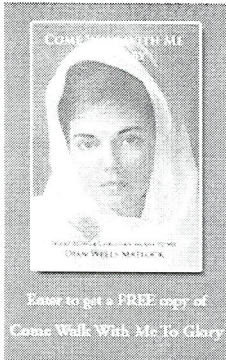




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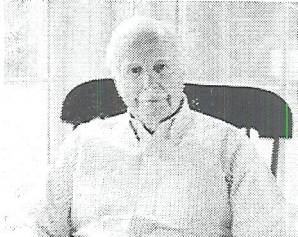
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Howard Willens

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Remembering the Assassination, 50 Years Later

by Clayton Moore on November 22, 2013 | Posted in History


It has been 50 years—almost to the hour—since President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas when I reach attorney Howard P. Willens at his office in Washington, DC. Willens is the last surviving member of the three-person supervisory staff of the Warren Commission and a primary source in the investigation of the assassination.

He is also a vehement critic of the conspiracy theorists who believe that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone.

His new book, *History Will Prove Us Right*, takes its title from a quote by Chief Justice Earl Warren, the Chairman of The President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, now forever known as the Warren Commission. In it, Willens takes readers meticulously through the commission's investigations and beyond, bringing both personal history drawn from his extensive journal, and giving historical context to that awful event.

On this historic day, Willens spoke with *Kirkus Reviews* about his experiences on the Warren Commission. "I guess we should treat it with an appropriate sense of seriousness," he says.

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DIVINITIES, ENTANGLED: EVE OF LIGHT BOOK II
by Harambee K. Grey Sun

"Integral readers will enjoy this ride...through the fever dream sequel to a metaphysical action-adventure." —Kirkus Reviews

With civilization—and reality itself—on the verge of chaotic collapse, Robert Goldner, a secret agent and tormented carrier of a virus granting superhuman powers, confronts interdimensional conspiracies. [Read full review >](#) Advertisement

Let's back up, because there are so many misconceptions about the Warren Commission. What were your goals?

The objectives were stated quite clearly in the brief executive order creating the Commission. It was simply a direction to find out and report all the facts and elements of the assassination and related events. It clearly comprehended the killing of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby and it clearly comprehended the performance of the intelligence and investigative agencies that had any knowledge or concerns around Oswald. I viewed our purview as very broad and everyone else did, too. There was no perception among the members of the commission or the staff that there were any restraints on the direction to investigate as fully as we could.

Where were you when you heard that President Kennedy had been killed?

I was in Washington, DC. I was out having lunch with my boss, who was the head of the criminal division at the Justice Department. It was a late lunch, so we were heading back around 2:30 when we heard about the assassination. It was an extraordinarily shocking and unbelievable moment, particularly when you're in the government under an administration that has generated so much goodwill and enthusiasm. You felt not only the shock to the country but you felt it very personally as well. We reacted strongly and quickly to determine what role the Justice Department could play in investigating the assassination. We started some initial efforts to determine how the FBI was responding and they were, shall we say, incommunicative.

The Attorney General stated immediately that he did not want to see any of the reports that the FBI was generating.

Why would Bobby Kennedy not want to see those reports?

Those kinds of reports are routinely addressed to the Attorney General but this was different. First of all, he was personally aggrieved but he also had family responsibilities, in particular to his brother's widow, not to mention having to direct his attention to the funeral. There was a sense, I'm sure, that he didn't want to be put in the traditional position of having to supervise the investigation of an event that was agonizing to him.

One of the most offensive and surprising developments in the current literature are these people who blame Robert Kennedy for not demanding a reinvestigation of the events around the assassination following the Warren Commission report. I find that truly perverse and unbelievable. Even if one believes that Robert Kennedy had some doubts, we know that he reached out on several occasions to verify the veracity of various reports and he was satisfied. Robert Kennedy was defining his own political career to try to guide the country forward. To say that he should have interrupted all of those efforts because of others' concerns about the Warren Commission's findings strikes me as unfair.

What was Chief Justice Earl Warren like?

He was a remarkable man. I'm not that easy to offend but I do have a problem with some of the criticism aimed at the Chief Justice. He was a great jurist and he took this on with great reluctance. I think he did a great job as to the dedication of time to the investigation, especially since he contributed more time than the other six members put together.

What impressed me about the Chief Justice in the middle of the commission's work was his clear desire to come to a conclusion but also his recognition of the fact that this was an immense fact-finding operation. As the staff was producing draft chapters and circulating them to members of the commission, the Chief Justice decided on his own that the staff was getting out ahead of the commission.

He came into a meeting I was in with a yellow page from a legal pad. He had written 41 questions in his own handwriting. It was very revealing. He said that he wanted the commission to walk through each of these factual issues and then the staff can analyze the evidence. His 41 questions were perfectly sound and they were a terrific way to organize our work. I thought that his sense of engagement was very important.

What do you believe the FBI was trying to hide in misleading the Warren Commission?

Historical note: James Hosty was the FBI agent assigned to investigate Lee Harvey Oswald in 1962. Oswald later left a threat of violence against the FBI in a note that Hosty destroyed following the assassination. Hosty's name and address were subsequently found in Oswald's address book.

I believe it was incompetence. They did this very clumsy bit early on in deleting the name of Agent James Hosty from their reports. They were trying to not be candid about the fact that Oswald's diary contained Hosty's name. I think they were trying to shield the Bureau from criticism for not providing Oswald's name to the Secret Service in advance of the motorcade.

Hoover testified, falsely, that there was no reason for the Bureau to refer Oswald's name in light of the three interviews they conducted with him. It was such a brazen lie because he had already disciplined 17 agents for their mismanagement of the investigation. That was clearly an effort to deceive the commission into believing the Bureau had no obligation to inform the Secret Service, when in fact Hoover himself had come to the conclusion that the Bureau had mishandled the commission.

I think it was a factor of Hoover's mentality that he treated this like an ordinary criminal matter. He didn't tap into the expertise he had in regard to Cuban exile groups. The Soviet Union arm was engaged only because they were the division that dealt with Oswald on his return to the United States. He got very upset at the detailed nature of our requests. I don't think there's much more to the Bureau's malfeasances than that. The picture with the CIA is more complicated and I'm not sure what is being hidden there.

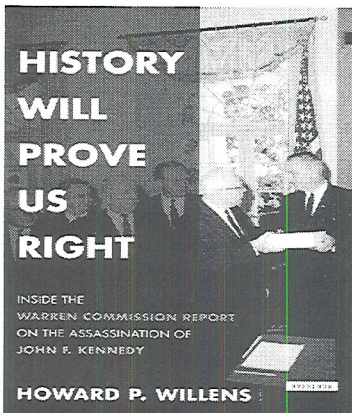
Do you think these intelligence agencies knew enough to justify intervention prior to the assassination?

Absolutely. I think it's quite clear in light of the note that Oswald left at the FBI office. If Hosty had done his job and gone out to interview a person who threatened the FBI with destruction, things might have been different. You would think the first thing to do would be to determine if he was a real threat. I think an interview would have resulted in either a referral to the Secret Service, or Oswald backing off from his subsequent plan to assassinate the President.

The point that gets lost is not only that we could have prevented the assassination if the Bureau had acted in a timely fashion but that Oswald's note to the Bureau—10 days before the assassination—is proof that he had no intention at that time, either as an individual or as a member of a conspiracy, to assassinate the President. He didn't know about the motorcade then, and he got the job at the Texas Book Depository by sheer chance. If you were a member of a conspiracy to assassinate the President of the United States, you wouldn't threaten a law enforcement agency. People miss the last-minute nature of this event, which many find improbable.

The event is so complicated that it must feel to some people like it violates Occam's razor—that the simplest answer is the one that is correct.

That's exactly right, and it's compounded by Ruby's killing of Oswald. That murder denied the public a trial, which is the traditional way in which facts are revealed. People would have been much better prepared to accept the results of a trial, rather than a government report.

**What did it mean to you for Robert Kennedy to publicly express his confidence in the Warren Commission?**

Historical note: in June of 1964, Robert Kennedy publicly praised the work of the Warren Commission and said he believed the assassination was the single act of one man protesting against society.

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I was enormously surprised when he spoke out. There was enormous public interest in Bob Kennedy's opinion. It must have been decided at some point that it was best to speak out. He anticipated the findings. He said in a publicly available letter that the only people he talked to about the assassination were the Chief Justice, (Acting Attorney General) Nick Katzenbach and me. I think the Chief Justice may have had a conversation with him at some point. In any event, I was pleased to see it.

As I recall, you later wound up rebutting Oliver Stone in front of Congress.

In 1992, Willens testified before Congress about the release of assassination records. He followed the testimony of film director Oliver Stone, and Willens made several pointed criticisms of his film JFK.

That was one of my most memorable experiences. Stone published something in the *Chicago Tribune* a few months ago listing eight incontrovertible facts why Oswald was not the assassin and I've written some memos countering each of those "facts" in light of our work and Vincent Bugliosi's investigation and the Select Committee's findings. They have no merit whatsoever.

Do you think the Chief Justice was overly sensitive about interviewing Mrs. Kennedy?

I tend to disagree with the majority staff view on that point. It was one of the points of discussion when I went to meet with the Attorney General in early June of 1964. There were two issues. One was how he wanted the interrogation of his sister-in-law (Jacqueline Kennedy) to go, and the nature of his relationship with the commission. Arlen Specter, a classmate of mine, prepared a very thorough list of 111 questions. I talked about it with Lee Rankin and just said that it was inappropriate. I reduced the questions to about 40.

If you read the testimony, there are a couple of paragraphs where she describes what she experienced and how she reacted and then says, "That's all I remember." At that point, the Chief Justice felt that was enough. It lasted about nine minutes. Arlen described it as worthless and I disagree with that conclusion. I don't think a piercing cross-examination would have elicited new facts or anything else of value. My feeling is that it was a reasonable treatment of the witness.

What do you make of the allegations in Phillip Shenon's *A Cruel and Shocking Act* that Bill Coleman was sent to Cuba to interview Fidel Castro in the summer of 1964?

I have considerable reservations about this disclosure. The first time I ever heard of it was in Shenon's book. I have to question whether this happened during the Warren Commission. The Chief Justice was strongly of the opinion that we should not deal in any way with Castro's Cuba. In particular, he was opposed to even a diplomatic approach, specifically through the Swiss government, to obtaining the documents reflecting its treatment of Oswald's application for an in-transit visa. David Slawson and I went forward anyway. With the guidance and support of the CIA, we prepared a request to get those papers and they did come in due course.

The point is that the Chief Justice, in my opinion, would never have authorized a response to a request from Castro for a meeting. I also don't think Coleman would have done it without his approval, unless there was presidential involvement. President Johnson was scrupulous about not interfering with the work of the commission. Given the White House's refusal to intervene and Warren's opposition to any direct contact with Cuba, I think if this happened, it happened in 1967 after President Johnson learned for the first time that there had been a history of assassination plots against Castro.

As a result of that disclosure, the Chief Justice expressed his surprise that there were assassination plots that we were never informed about during the commission's tenure. That disclosure might have triggered a request to Castro to explain himself. If that had happened, it would have been natural for the President to single out Bill Coleman, who was well-known to the White House, or for the Chief Justice to recommend Bill Coleman because of the personal relationship he had with Castro decades earlier. If this happened in 1967 under White House orders, it would account for the lack of records anywhere else in the government about this event. That is more speculation than I usually engage in, though. If it happened, kudos to Bill Coleman.

You note in your conclusion that the commission failed in one respect: to address and put to bed the conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination.

Historical note: In 1979, the United States House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that a fourth shot was fired at the President from the grassy knoll based on dubious acoustic evidence, and that the President was probably killed as the result of a conspiracy.

And then I ask: was it ever achievable? I do get the question, "What would you have done differently?" I am offended that we were not told about the Cuban assassination plots. I can understand the position of Richard Helms and the professionals. But I do feel comfortable with our investigation of Oswald and Ruby at the personal level. I think the Select Committee did a

good job in investigating the CIA's records on Oswald. I gather that the Assassination Review Board did unearth a few more CIA documents and there's a widespread suspicion that most of the withheld documents might be CIA documents. But I don't think there's anything we could have done at the time to answer the conspiracy theories.

I have repeatedly said, and the Select Committee basically confirmed our findings, that there was no credible evidence of a conspiracy by the usual suspects, including the CIA, FBI and the mafia. They relied on acoustic evidence to leave themselves a window of doubt. It was convincingly rebutted but it's still cited. Unfortunately, the Select Committee is still widely viewed as having found a conspiracy theory that challenged the Warren Commission's findings.

Do you think this issue will ever be put away?

We said there was no credible evidence but we recognized that more evidence might come in, and it did come in. It was analyzed and subsequent investigations reached findings similar to ours on the Warren Commission. With the passage of time, there might be more acceptance of our findings. But we're also seeing a new generation of conspiracy theorists. Some of the old-timers are declining in numbers but they're being replaced. The debate goes on.

Clayton Moore is a freelance writer, journalist, book critic, and prolific interviewer of other writers. His work appears in numerous newspapers, magazines, websites and other media. He is based in Boulder, Colorado.

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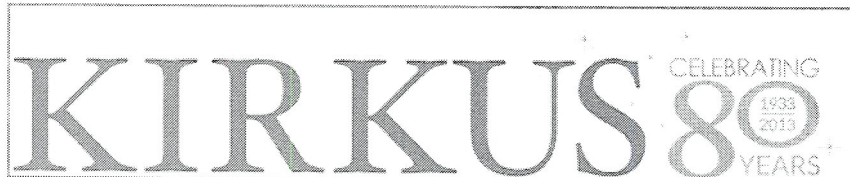


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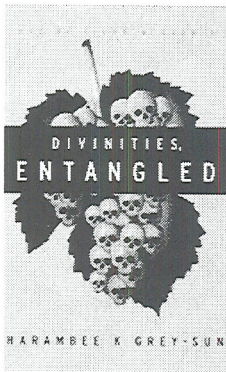
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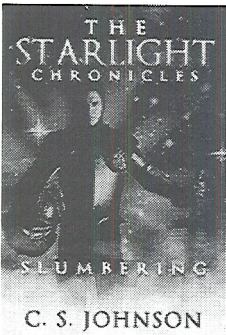
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