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Who really did kill Kennedy?

Talbot's got his own ideas, seen through RFK's eyes

Reviewed by Dan Cornford

Sunday, May 13, 2007

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Brothers

The Hidden History of the Kennedy Years

By David Talbot

FREE PRESS; 478 PAGES; \$28



To quote from the first line of eminent historian Robert Dallek's recent biography of John Kennedy: "Why another Kennedy book?" And why, one might add, yet another book that focuses on JFK assassination conspiracy theories as well?

David Talbot, founder of Salon.com who was a 16-year-old volunteer in Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign when RFK was assassinated, offers several rationales for his re-examination of the JFK era. First, he believes that new evidence, including his own research encompassing more than 150 interviews, further undermines the conclusions of the Warren Commission Report. Second, he asserts that no book has ever examined the JFK years, and the post-assassination traumas, through the eyes of Robert Kennedy or explained RFK's apparent reluctance to push for a fuller investigation into his brother's murder. Finally, Talbot claims that "missing from the vast body of literature on the Kennedy years ... is a sense of the deep tumult at the heart of the administration."

"Brothers" focuses on two major themes: a detailed though not comprehensive account of the JFK presidency, juxtaposed with the story of his many adversaries and the possible grounds for their involvement in an assassination plot. Talbot rebuts critical assessments of JFK by revisionist historians and also seeks to rehabilitate the Kennedy image after the

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battering it has received by authors such as Seymour Hersh in his scathing book "The Dark Side of Camelot" (1997).

Throughout the book, Talbot stresses the extent to which the Kennedy administration faced political pressure from the extreme right, including elements of the CIA leadership, the national security apparatus (including the military) in general, anti-Castro Cubans and a resurgent wing of the Republican Party led by Barry Goldwater. The author insists that JFK's policies, while not always consistent with his "New Frontier" rhetoric, nevertheless effectively pre-empted and frustrated his opposition. In doing so, JFK incurred the wrath of his enemies and incubated a desire for revenge in many of them.

Talbot is least convincing when he attempts to rebut the claim that JFK was a Cold War warrior. To be sure, he makes an interesting case that America, and especially its military and defense elites, were so consumed by the Cold War that the narrowly elected president had limited room to maneuver. But although a case can perhaps be made that shortly before his death JFK had begun to see the folly of his commitment to South Vietnam, Talbot's account of JFK's Cuba policies largely ignores good historical evidence portraying Kennedy as a die-hard adversary of Communism and is, at times, puzzlingly self-contradictory.

Talbot eloquently recounts how Robert Kennedy was traumatized by the death of his brother. Aside from the enduring shock, RFK's failure to press more aggressively for an investigation into the assassination was due to his marginalization by the Lyndon B. Johnson administration and RFK's hopes that he would be able to launch an inquiry if or when he won the presidency.

With respect to assassination conspiracy theories, some readers may conclude that Talbot and his publisher have overstated the book's originality and that some of its findings are unspectacular, unsurprising and hardly "hidden," in spite of the many interviews the author conducted. Talbot tends to play down, and occasionally ignore, contrary evidence and arguments. In addition, he sometimes attaches too much weight to hearsay and the speculations of those he interviewed, especially some of Kennedy's aging "band of brothers." Nevertheless, the author will convince many not wedded to the Warren Commission findings that the likelihood of a conspiracy to assassinate JFK (and maybe RFK) is significant.

However, Talbot may eventually regret granting so much credibility to the testimony of St. John Hunt, the son of the late E. Howard Hunt, a leading CIA operative in the 1950s and 1960s and one of the Watergate masterminds. Neither father nor son makes the best of witnesses. In his recently published autobiography, "American Spy," Howard Hunt made the dubious and unsubstantiated assertion that Johnson was involved in JFK's assassination. The senior Hunt speculated that the CIA might have been involved, and even mentioned several names, but, according to Talbot, his second wife prevented him from saying anything about his role.

In an interview with Talbot, however, St. John Hunt claimed that his father had confessed to him that in 1963 he had been invited by a group of CIA agents, including Frank Sturgis ("the mob-friendly anti-Castro operative who later joined Hunt's Watergate burglary team") and David Morales, who was involved with the Bay of Pigs fiasco, to join in an assassination plot. At the very least, he says, his father had foreknowledge of a conspiracy. While no source should be dismissed out of hand, especially one so closely linked to one of the few men who may have known it all, St. John Hunt's involvement in the Watergate cover-up (as a teenager, he helped his father get rid of evidence), and his felony drug convictions do not make him the most ideal witness.

Notwithstanding the deficiencies of this and some other sources, Talbot's highly readable, at times gripping book makes the case for releasing the classified documents pertaining to the JFK assassination. Talbot summarizes more compelling and troubling evidence than that offered by St. John Hunt. In particular, questions remain about the role CIA agent George Joannides may have played.

Declassified JFK files reveal that in 1963, Joannides was the agent in charge of one of the most powerful Cuban anti-Castro organizations in Miami, the Revolutionary Students Directorate, or DRE. A few months before JFK's assassination, the DRE had significant contact with Lee Harvey Oswald, and Oswald attempted to infiltrate the New Orleans branch of the DRE. In the course of four intensive investigations of the JFK assassination, however, the CIA failed to divulge information about this connection, or even that Joannides was the CIA officer assigned to manage the DRE, and refused to release important parts of Joannides' personnel file.

Among other things, Talbot's book is an important contribution to a recent and growing chorus of Kennedy authors and researchers, including Gerald Posner, the most oft-cited authority for the "one gunman/no conspiracy" thesis, calling for a reopening of investigations into the JFK assassination or, at minimum, for the CIA to release pertinent, identified documents that might shed light on the subject. In September, on grounds of national security, the CIA successfully thwarted a request for such information. Until it is released, many authors or citizens with an interest in the issue will reasonably speculate that crucial information about the JFK assassination is being concealed.

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This article appeared on page M - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle

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