

From: "James Lesar" <jlesar@mindspring.com>
 To: David.wrone@uwsp.edu, Dalcorn@erols.com, bbrody@mindspring.com, jerrycatchall@comcast.net
 Subject: FW: Talbot gets a nice review from Bloomberg
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James Lesar
 jlesar@mindspring.com
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From:
To: Feinmanr@aol.com
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Bloomberg.com



Robert Kennedy Hunts for JFK's Killer in Stirring 'Brothers'

By Celestine Bohlen

June 13 (Bloomberg) -- Hours after John F. Kennedy was shot dead in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, Robert Kennedy, then U.S. Attorney General, launched a quiet investigation into what he believed was a conspiracy. In "Brothers," David Talbot provides new details of that bitter, poignant quest, which ended with RFK's own shooting in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968.

Talbot, founder and former editor of online magazine Salon, doesn't attempt to solve the two assassinations. In fact, his 478-page book is mercifully free of ballistic analyses and "second- or third-gunmen" theories.

Subtitled "The Hidden History of the Kennedy Years," this account transports the reader back to another America -- to a time when the Cold War fed paranoia and racial injustice stoked political passions. The failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 added another toxic element, as CIA operatives and Cuban exiles continued plotting against Castro and, Talbot hints, perhaps against the Kennedys, too.

"Cuba was the Iraq of its day, no more than a swath of sugar cane afloat in the Caribbean, but to the national security elite who determine such things, it was where the forces of good and evil were arrayed against each other," Talbot writes.

Talbot focuses on the why of the two assassinations, instead of fixating on the who and the how. Why, he asks, were the Kennedys so hated by so many powerful people, from Teamsters leader Jimmy Hoffa to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, from U.S. generals to CIA agents, from segregationists to anti-Castro Cubans? The clues to their murders undoubtedly lie at the intersection of these tangled agendas, Talbot argues.

Warren Commission

Publicly, Bobby Kennedy chose not to question the findings of the Warren Commission, which concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the killing, a view upheld in Vincent Bugliosi's new 1,632-page account, "Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy."

Privately, RFK and his associates followed up leads, and kept track of independent investigations, Talbot shows: In February 1967, Kennedy himself placed a call to the home of a New Orleans coroner to check on the autopsy of a key suspect in the conspiracy case built by prosecutor Jim Garrison.

Many Kennedy associates interviewed by Talbot are quoted as saying JFK was the victim of a conspiracy. Kenny O'Donnell, a witness to the assassination, says he thinks the presidential cavalcade drove into an ambush. Richard Goodwin, later a speechwriter for Lyndon Johnson, still believes it was a plot.

"We know the CIA was involved, and the Mafia," he tells Talbot. "We all know that."

'Not Now'

It isn't clear who Bobby Kennedy thought the assassins were. His plan, according to friends quoted by Talbot, was to wait until he became president, which would have empowered him to order the kind of investigation he thought was needed.

"There's nothing I can do about it," he told Goodwin in 1966, according to Talbot. "Not now."

Talbot, who volunteered at age 16 to work on Bobby Kennedy's presidential campaign, doesn't hide his admiration for the two brothers. This is perhaps the book's biggest flaw. In Talbot's view, the Kennedys could do no wrong. Bobby's ties to the Cuban plotters and JFK's links to the Mafia during the 1960 election are all somehow above suspicion.

Where Talbot succeeds is in casting key episodes and players in the Kennedy drama in a new light. He provides a vivid account of JFK's fury against members of the national security establishment after the Bay of Pigs fiasco -- and of their equally virulent distrust of him and his brother.

Age of Deceit

The 1960s, a decade of strong emotions, ended in shattered dreams. Since JFK's assassination, Talbot argues, the U.S. has lost its way.

"From Dallas to Vietnam to Iraq, the truth has been consistently avoided," he concludes. "If a president can be shot down with impunity at high noon in the sunny streets of an American city, then any kind of deceit is possible."

"Brothers" is published by Free Press (478 pages, \$28). "Reclaiming History" is from Norton (1,632 pages, \$49.95).

(Celestine Bohlen writes for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

To contact the writer of this review: Celestine Bohlen in Paris at Cbohlen1@bloomberg.net.

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