Mr. David J. Garrow
Political Science Dept.
CCNY,
New York, N.Y. 10031

11/20/88

Dear David,

Professional historians and political scientists, like those of us you regard as an ignorant rabble to be talked down to, are entitled to your biases and prejudices and preconceptions and, absent self-restraint, are licensed to indulge them as you do in today's Washington Post Book World. But this does not extend to ignorance and your flaunting of your own ignorance. (Please excuse my worse than usual typing; I'm recovering from eye surgery.)

Aside from perhaps the belief that you know all there is to know about anything, what qualifies you to all or any part of:

"...an ongoing fascination- at least on the part of authors and publishers- with the real and imagined minutiae of the Kennedy assassination itself, a fascination that shows no sign of diminution even as the most determined conspiracy theorists flirt with science fiction in their overheated imaginings...To anyone who has followed even in a half-hearted fashion the evolution of the burgeoning literature on John Kennedy's shooting, the sinking feeling that less is known with each passing year - and arriving book- becomes inescapable."

Do you, personally, qualify as the "half-hearted" student of the literature? Your language in this diatribe reflects ignorance, not even half-hearted knowledge. Aside from this, what I have no reason to believe troubles you at all, it is grossly unfair and misleading and in some respects it is false.

What in the world do you mean by "minutiae?" The backbone of history and of law and justice is not what is commonly referred to as "minutiae?" Or is this an ignoramus' way of seeking to put down what he cannot address on the basis of fact and his personal knowledge? Or of seeking to diminish the solid works of years ago by bracketing them with the current nonsense of the Davises and the Scheims? How can the appearance of such junk make less be known when there is what you ignore, solid works of the past?

What do you know of either the Warren Commission, the books about it or what I am confident David Belin largely ignores, what those of us you and he seek to put down have brought to light from official suppression, that entitles you to offer the opinion that Belin is "persuasive" in his defense of his own past that you and he refer to as his defense of the Commission? Do you know enough about Belin to hold an intelligent opinion about him and what he says and has said and done, including in other than his own self-serving version, what he did and did not do on the Commission?

What do you really know, in other than a Belinesque version, enough about "the physical facts of the Kennedy shooting" to say to so large and trusting an audience, not to mention trusting editors, that "for all practical purposes" these "physical facts ... can no longer be disputed?"

I mince no words on this - you lie and it is an ugly, and disgusting lie coming from one of your discipline when in the real context you ignore you are talking about the most subversive crime possible in a society like ours.

What if anything at all do you really know of the physical facts, the actualities, not the self-serving representations of the Belins or his Commission?

Do you know, or is this part of what you seek to dismiss as "minutae," that on the most basic of facts about the assassination, what shots hit who, to this day both the Secret Service and the FBI disagree and as of my last knowledge sneered to themselves about the Commission's version. (And this, by the way, your eminent ignoramus, sir, is the actual theorizing, by the officials' of all levels, as you'd know if you had read and understood the Warren report itself.)

In any translation of your closing words into everyday, dispassionate English, you actually call for an end to critical writing on this subject, this most subversive of crimes, this most dubious official inquiry into what, contrary to the other opinions you offer, turned the world around.

For shame, David! You belittle yourself, you demean your discipline, you Orwellize when more than at any time I can recall, and I've lived a third as long as our country, the people have an urgent need to know what is real and true about so much, including how their government serves them and their system of self-government, really ~~of~~ them freedom.

This outrageous stuff comes with even poorer grace from one whose own work was to a large degree made possible by those he deprecates for without the effort of which you are well aware and to which neither you nor any other professional historian or political scientist contributed in any way, those records would not have been available to you and ~~the~~ others under the Freedom of Information Act. Done by a "conspiracy theorist," was it, David? Some of that "imagined minutiae?" Perhaps "science fiction in their overheated imaginings?"

I'm sorry for you that you are capable of something as indecent, as dishonest, as this is,

Sincerely,

Harold

Harold Weisberg

cc Nina King, Book World editor

Those were solemn. This was less so. This was an irreverent assembly of journalists noting the disastrous demise of King's last great project, the Poor People's Campaign, which had come to ruin only months after his assassination.

As a group that had witnessed its spirited, optimistic birth in the Deep South, we were appalled at the slow, gruesome death of the

*Robert C. Maynard, editor of the Oakland Tribune, covered the civil rights movement as a reporter for The Washington Post.*

sus King the man, a question that is with us to this day. Two decades after his death, many people are satisfied in their own minds as to how much of Martin Luther King's ministry was a divine inspiration and how much was historical accident. For those still uncertain, Taylor Branch's new book, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*, offers ample ammunition to keep the debate alive.

In this first of two volumes, Branch has set out on an impressive and ambitious mission: He seeks to place King in the context of his times.

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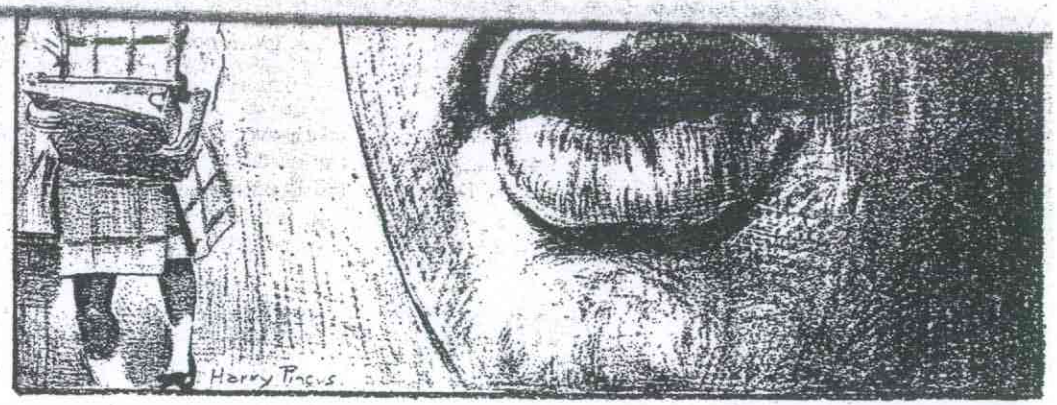


ILLUSTRATION BY HARRY PINCUS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

# John F. Kennedy and the Mythology of Camelot

**By David J. Garrow**

EVERY FIFTH November—1983, 1988—now witnesses a major anniversary of John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas on November 22, 1963. Each anniversary—and seemingly every successive presidential campaign—also witnesses a further burnishing and invocation of the JFK image. Not only does effusive celebration of Kennedy's White House years expand further and further with each new crop of handsomely produced picture books—e.g. *LIFE in Camelot: The Kennedy Years*—but each election year provides a wider and wider range of office-seekers eager to claim some version of the Kennedy legacy as their own.

Five years ago a Gallup poll found that Kennedy was the most retrospectively popular American president. More pointedly, 65 percent of the Gallup respondents said they believed that the United States would have been "much different"—and presumably better—if Kennedy had not been killed. As Robert MacNeil writes in his introduction to *The Way We Were: 1963, The Year Kennedy Was Shot*, "We are mourning our own unfulfilled promise," most particularly "the spirit of hope and optimism that rings through the feelings Americans had, and retain, about that time—and attribute to Kennedy."

The attribution of such roseate remembrances of past hopes and expectations to the Kennedy presidency lies at the center of America's often maudlin and historically blindered celebration of JFK. "Symbols often embody needs that render literal facts irrelevant," Thomas Brown aptly notes in *JFK: History of an Image*, and no reader of Brown's small but eminently useful volume is likely to finish it still believing that Ronald Reagan's was the first "Teflon presidency."

No serious scholar could successfully contend that the actual achievements and policies of the Kennedy presidency account for the tremendous popular regard in which JFK is now held. Instead, as Brown succinctly puts it, "It is the circumstances of Kennedy's death rather than the events of his life that have elevated him to a primary place in the political consciousness of Americans." However, it is not the assassination alone that has stimulated the mythology of "Camelot," but the very premature and sudden passing of that president from the national scene that has allowed his record in office to benefit from Teflon qualities that will long outlast those of the Reagan presidency.

In fall of 1963 the Kennedy presidential record was far from a smashing success. In foreign affairs, the

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*David J. Garrow is the author of "Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference," which won the 1987 Robert F. Kennedy Book Award and the 1987 Pulitzer Prize in biography.*

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# JFK and The Myth Of Camelot

*Continued from page 1*

most notable event had been the incredibly inept military and human debacle at the Bay of Pigs. On the domestic front Kennedy had been largely unable to persuade Congress to pass any truly significant legislative proposals. Politically the 1962 congressional elections had witnessed no notable Democratic or Republican gains, but re-election to the presidency in 1964 appeared safe only if the Republicans would be so kind as to nominate Barry Goldwater.

That much was known on Nov. 22, 1963. However, any one of several things now known would have, if revealed in 1963 or at any point during the later life of a non-assassinated John F. Kennedy, ended the Kennedy presidency and left the ex-president with a historical reputation inferior to that of Richard M. Nixon, among others. The two most damaging examples will suffice. Revelations of any part of the Kennedy-supported CIA assassination plots targeted at Cuba's Fidel Castro likely would have had as severe a contemporaneous political impact as Watergate had on the Nixon presidency or the Iran-contra scandals have had on Reagan's. Second, even if the Mafia's extensive involvement in those government-sponsored plots had not on its own been enough to generate calls for impeachment or resignation, revelation of an incumbent president's extensive sexual involvement with a top hoodlum's girlfriend—Sam Giancana's Judith Campbell—certainly would have. Looked at with the cold retrospective eyes of history, the assassination in Dallas may well have saved John Kennedy from a

FROM "JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY AS WE REMEMBER HIM"

*John F. Kennedy with his daughter Caroline*

*The books discussed in the accompanying essay include some of the following works, all of which have been released or reissued in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.*

**LIFE in Camelot: The Kennedy Years**
Edited by Philip B. Kunhardt Jr.
Little, Brown. 319 pp. $40

**THE WAY WE WERE**
**1963: The Year Kennedy Was Shot**
Little, Brown. 189 pp. $16.95

**JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY . . . As We Remember Him**
Edited by Joan Meyers
Running Press. 241 pp. $24.95

**KENNEDY: 25 Years**

realm of motive, both for Oswald and for Ruby. To picture Ruby as a possible operative of organized crime, given Ruby's background, is not at all difficult, although to explain Ruby's actions in the period Nov. 22-24 as those of a conspiratorial hit-man is difficult if not downright impossible. Similarly, to picture Oswald as motivated by political, e.g., pro-Castro desires, rather than by nonideological idiosyncrasies, is also easily possible in light of Oswald's quixotic history as an émigré to the Soviet Union. To tie Oswald to *any* conspiratorial sponsors,

of Richard M. Nixon, during office. The two most damaging examples will suffice. Revelations of any part of the Kennedy-supported CIA assassination plots targeted at Cuba's Fidel Castro likely would have had as severe a contemporaneous political impact as Watergate had on the Nixon presidency or the Iran-contra scandals have had on Reagan's. Second, even if the Mafia's extensive involvement in those government-sponsored plots had not on its own been enough to generate calls for impeachment or resignation, revelation of an incumbent president's extensive sexual involvement with a top hoodlum's girlfriend—Sam Giancana's Judith Campbell—certainly would have. Looked at with the cold retrospective eyes of history, the assassination in Dallas may well have saved John Kennedy from a political destruction that would have been extraordinarily painful and embarrassing.

JOHN KENNEDY is of course not the only major figure from the 1960s whose reputation in death has far exceeded his popularity while alive or his likely popularity had he lived. The same is equally true for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who at the time of his death was widely viewed as both dangerously radical on the question of Vietnam and as increasingly less influential within black America, and for Robert Kennedy, who at the time of his assassination was struggling both to evade responsibility for the FBI's recently revealed wiretapping of the just-deceased King and to quell the resurgence of "bad Bobby" analyses that followed from his entry into the 1968 presidential campaign only after Eugene McCarthy had all but toppled Lyndon Johnson. For MLK, death in Memphis resulted in a sudden enshrinement in American history that would have been most unlikely had he survived through the late 1960s and into the 1970s, never mind until the present day. For RFK too, popular history's symbolism has been kinder than would have been in the case had he failed to capture the Democratic nomination from Hubert Humphrey in 1968 or had he failed to win out over Richard Nixon.

Thomas Brown says with reference to the Castro plots and the Mafia connections that "the most salient aspect of the revelations was their lack of lasting impact on the Kennedy image," and that conclusion, in light of both the Gallup statistics and the oncoming flow of reverential picture books, is quite indisputable. Coupled with it, however, has been an ongoing fascination—at least on the part of authors and publishers—with the real and imagined minutiae of the Kennedy assassination itself, a fascination that shows no sign of diminution even as the most determined conspiracy theorists flirt with science fiction in their overheated imaginings of corpse-tampering and Lee Harvey Oswald look-alikes. To anyone who has followed even in a half-hearted fashion the evolution of the burgeoning literature on John Kennedy's shooting, the sinking feeling that less is known with each passing year—and arriving book—becomes increasingly inescapable. Hoping to stem this devolutionary path is David Belin, former executive director of the Rockefeller Commission's inquiry into CIA misdeeds and a counsel to the Warren Commission, whose basic conclusions about the Kennedy assassination Belin persuasively defends.

For all "beyond reasonable doubt" purposes the physical facts of the Kennedy shooting can no longer be disputed. Kennedy was indeed killed by Lee Harvey Oswald firing from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository; no other shots were fired at his car; there was no "second gunman." Similarly beyond dispute is Jack Ruby's killing of Oswald two days later.

Where questions can be asked is in the realm of motive, both for Oswald and for Ruby. To picture Ruby as a possible operative of organized crime, given Ruby's background, is not at all difficult, although to explain Ruby's actions in the period Nov. 22-24 as those of a conspiratorial hit-man is difficult if not downright impossible. Similarly, to picture Oswald as motivated by political, e.g., pro-Castro desires, rather than by nonideological idiosyncrasies, is also easily possible in light of Oswald's quixotic history as an émigré to the Soviet Union. To tie Oswald to *any* conspiratorial sponsors, however, and especially to any possible organized crime sponsors, as is the current popular rage, has so far not been done in any persuasive fashion and is unlikely ever to be done. Counsel Belin forthrightly puzzles over the still undetermined possible relevance of Oswald's September 1963 trip to Mexico City, but he acknowledges that neither the Warren Commission nor the House Assassinations Committee—nor anyone else—has offered a fully convincing explanation of Oswald's motive. As often is the case, questions of intent are the most difficult to answer, and with regard to the rifle shots of Nov. 22, 1963, perhaps the time has more than come for us to acknowledge that they never will be satisfactorily answered.

The popular mythology of "Camelot" and the popular appetite for unproven—and unprovable—conspiratorial explanations for John Kennedy's death in Dallas now seem destined to enter the long-term annals of American history, the facts notwithstanding. John Kennedy's thousand days in the White House were not the golden age of American presidential leadership any more than Nov. 22, 1963, witnessed the greatest conspiracy in history or the Mafia's most stunning "hit," but until we commit ourselves to a more critical and less simple-minded rendering of our history, we are destined to be saddled with reverential picture books and bizarre conspiratorial tracts. ■

*John F. Kennedy with his daughter Caroline*

FROM "JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY AS WE REMEMBER HIM"

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**THE WAY WE WERE**
**1963, The Year Kennedy Was Shot**
Edited by Robert MacNeil
Carroll & Graf. 256 pp. $39.95

**JFK: History of an Image**
By Thomas Brown
Indiana University Press. 160 pp. $19.95

**FINAL DISCLOSURE**
**The Full Truth About the Assassination of President Kennedy**
By David W. Belin
Scribners. 249 pp. $19.95

**CONTRACT ON AMERICA**
**The Mafia Murder of President John F. Kennedy**
By David Scheim
Shapolsky. 480 pp. $19.95

**JOHN F. KENNEDY**
**And a New Generation**
By David Burner. Edited by Oscar Handlin
Little, Brown. 189 pp. $16.95

**JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY**
**. . .As We Remember Him**
Edited by Joan Meyers
Running Press. 241 pp. $24.95

**KENNEDY: 25 Years**
By Theodore C. Sorenson
Perennial/Harper & Row. 781 pp.
Paperback, $10.95

**'LET THE WORD GO FORTH'**
**The Speeches, Statements, and Writings of John F. Kennedy**
Selected and with an Introduction
By Theodore C. Sorenson
Delacorte. 433 pp. $25

**MAFIA KINGFISH:**
**Carlos Marcello and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy**
By John H. Davis
McGraw-Hill. 580 pp. $19.95

**ONE BRIEF SHINING MOMENT**
**Remembering Kennedy**
By William Manchester
Little, Brown. 280 pp. Paperback, $16.95