

# MUTUAL CONTEMPT

Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy,  
and the Feud That Defined a Decade

JEFF SHESOL



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of the Kennedys, Bobby dwelt in a world "infused by the Almighty with pattern and purpose," as Schlesinger observed. Bobby grasped for divine order and reason. He immersed himself in Greek tragedies, searching for solace, underlining passages with an aggressive curiosity he had not shown as a student. In a work by Aeschylus, he underlined this passage:

"All arrogance will reap a harvest rich in tears. God calls men to a heavy reckoning for overweening pride."

If there was poetic justice, a morality play, to be found in the tragic events of November, Lyndon Johnson, too, searched for it.

In 1975, when Richard Helms testified before another investigatory body, the CIA officer was asked pointedly: Had it occurred to him in 1963 that Oswald might have shot the president on Castro's behalf, if not by his direct orders? "No, I don't recall the thought ever occurring to me at the time," Helms told the panel guilelessly. "The very first time I heard such a theory as that enunciated was in a very peculiar way by President Johnson."

Johnson was in fact full of such theories. The day after John Kennedy's funeral, LBJ stood in the hallway of his house and pointed at a portrait of Diem. "We had a hand in killing him," Johnson said to Hubert Humphrey. "Now it's happening here." Was Johnson merely pointing out a cruel irony, or suggesting some darker connection? Days later, LBJ told Pierre Salinger a story. Like so many other Johnson stories, it was almost certainly apocryphal, but made its point bluntly. This one told of a childhood friend who had misbehaved—and then crashed his sled into a tree and gone cross-eyed. It was divine retribution, Johnson told Salinger, gravely. And perhaps John Kennedy's assassination was, too.

On November 29, 1963, Lyndon Johnson displayed less interest in divine ordinance than in Oswald's possible ties to Cuba. On the phone that afternoon with Hoover, the president wanted to know "whether [Oswald] was connected with the Cuban operation [Mongoose] with money."

"That's what we're trying to nail down now," Hoover told him, but judged the connection unlikely. Oswald, it was already clear, "was strongly pro-Castro, he was strongly anti-American, and he had been in correspondence—which we have—with the Soviet embassy here in Washington . . . and with this committee we call Fair Play to Cuba [sic]." If Oswald was entangled in Cuban affairs, Hoover implied, it was not on our side. That notion was reinforced several hours later by Senator Richard Russell. "I wouldn't be surprised if Castro had something [to do with it]," he told Johnson.

The theory found a ready subscriber in Lyndon Johnson, and he



clung to it. Even years later, LBJ's "inner political instinct," Jack Valenti recalled, was that Castro was behind the killing. Yes, Johnson conceded, the FBI had no evidence to prove it or even to suggest it; neither did the CIA or the State Department or anybody else. But the equation had a concise, appealing logic: "President Kennedy tried to get Castro, but Castro got Kennedy first," Johnson told his aide Joseph Califano. Johnson said "President Kennedy" but he knew it was Bobby who tried to "get" Castro. Ever since the Bay of Pigs, LBJ had blamed Bobby for the excesses of American policy in Cuba.

Several years later, in January 1967, the hornet's nest of allegations was stirred again, to Johnson's great interest. *Washington Post* columnist Drew Pearson met with Chief Justice Earl Warren to pass along a curious rumor: a client of Edwin Morgan, a prominent Washington lawyer, was insisting that the United States tried to kill Castro during the Kennedy years and that Castro killed Kennedy in retaliation. Warren considered the charge serious enough to pass along to the Secret Service, which then forwarded it to the FBI. The FBI called it old news and buried it. Uncharacteristically, Hoover did not even inform the president. "Consideration was given to furnishing this information to the White House," read an internal FBI memo, "but since this matter does not concern, nor is it pertinent to, the present administration, no letter was . . . sent."

But the rumor was in the air, in Washington and elsewhere. In New Orleans, District Attorney Jim Garrison pressed ahead with a sensational case, charging several CIA- and Cuba-connected men with a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy. And Pearson, having been rebuffed by the FBI, now took his story to the Oval Office. Lyndon Johnson was tantalized. On February 18, 1967, speaking on the phone with Acting Attorney General Ramsey Clark, his excitement was evident:

"You know this story going around about the CIA sendin' in the folks to try and get Castro?" the president asked Clark.

"To assassinate Castro?"

"Right. You got that full story laid out in front of you, you know what it is and has anybody ever told you all the story?"

"No," Clark replied.

"I think you oughta have that," Johnson went on. "It's incredible. I don't believe there's a thing in the world to it and I don't think we ought to seriously consider it, but I think you oughta know about it."

As Johnson told it, Pearson had spoken of "a man that was involved [in the JFK assassination], that was brought into the CIA with a number of others, and instructed by the CIA and the attorney general"—Bobby Kennedy—"to assassinate Castro after the Bay of Pigs."

"I've heard that much," Clark said, "I just haven't heard names and places."

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"I think it would look bad on us if we'd had it reported to us a number of times and we just didn't [investigate]," the president told him. He instructed Clark to develop "a file that protects you, [so] that you don't just look like they report these things to us and we just throw 'em overboard and say, well, we don't like 'em, and they're not what we want to hear, so we're not gonna do anything about it.

"But anyway," Johnson continued, the American-sponsored assassins "had these [cyanide] pills and they were supposed to take 'em when [Castro] caught 'em. And they didn't get to take their pills, so he tortured 'em, and they told him all about [the plot]—who was present and why they did it. So he said, Okay, we'll just take care of that. So then he called Oswald and a group in . . . and [Castro said] go set it up and get the job done."

The president was certain he'd heard the story two or three times before, from sources other than Pearson, but their names escaped him. "They were reputable people," he insisted, "or they wouldn't have gotten in here." Still, Johnson cautioned, "I credit it 99.99 percent untrue, but . . . y'all oughta do what you think oughta be done to protect yourselves."

Why Ramsey Clark and the Justice Department needed to protect themselves was not entirely clear; if any official body would be held accountable for not pursuing the story, it was not Justice but the FBI. Johnson seemed less interested in providing cover for Clark than in passing along a salacious rumor. He was particularly titillated by Robert Kennedy's role in the alleged caper-gone-awry. On the evening of March 2, LBJ took a call from his old lieutenant, Texas Governor John Connally, and the two men traded confidences on the subject.

Connally passed along a secret report from a man claiming to have seen Garrison's files in New Orleans—files "proving" Castro had sent four separate teams of assassins to kill JFK. One or two teams had been picked up in New York and grilled by the FBI and Secret Service; but another, consisting of Oswald and three accomplices, had skirted the trap and made it to Dallas.

In this scenario, a slight variation on the one Johnson told Clark, Robert Kennedy's role was especially damning. Connally's source claimed that after the missile crisis JFK and Khrushchev cut a deal to leave Castro in power. About six months later "the CIA was instructed to assassinate Castro, and sent people into Cuba. Some of them were captured and tortured," Connally reported. "And Castro and his people . . . heard the whole story . . . that President Kennedy did not give the order to the CIA, but that some other person extremely close to President Kennedy did.

"They did not name names, but the inference was very clear," Connally said. "The inference was that it was his brother."



LBJ's interest was piqued. "This is confidential, too," Johnson told the governor, belying the fact that it was, indeed, confidential. "We have had that story, on about three occasions. The people here say that there's no basis for it. . . . I've given a lot of thought to it. . . . I talked to another one of our good lawyers [who] evaluated it pretty carefully and said that it was ridiculous." Hoover, too, deemed the Garrison story "a phony."

What LBJ found hard to swallow was not Bobby Kennedy's culpability—that seemed likely enough; it was that anyone really knew what Castro was thinking.

"But," Johnson added, "we can't ever be sure."

In fact, Johnson was so reluctant to concede that "there's no basis" to the story that he continued to badger the FBI for a full investigation. On March 17, presidential assistant Marvin Watson told Cartha "Deke" DeLoach, the FBI's White House liaison, that "the president had instructed that the FBI interview Morgan [the lawyer] concerning any knowledge he might have concerning the assassination of President Kennedy." DeLoach demurred, arguing that Morgan did not want to be interviewed, and the FBI certainly did not want to do business with the "publicity seeker" Garrison. But the president's wishes were clear. "Under the circumstances," DeLoach reported glumly to his seniors at the Bureau, "it appears that we have no alternative but to interview Morgan and then furnish the results to Watson in blind memorandum form."

The interviews yielded no great insight into JFK's murder. But the renewed allegations of the attorney general's plots against Castro only further convinced LBJ of Bobby's complicity. Bobby "had been operating a damned Murder Incorporated in the Caribbean," Johnson told Leo Janos of *Time*. The plots remained classified information—they were never mentioned to the Warren Commission—but the president began dropping hints to friendly reporters. And however strongly Johnson professed not to believe them, he was fascinated by and took delight in repeating rumors of Bobby's role in this circle of conspirators. If these stories made it to Hickory Hill, Bobby would have to wonder how much Johnson knew.

By 1967, Lyndon Johnson was not alone in questioning the Warren Commission's account of events. But the president's attachment to this particular conspiracy theory was rooted less in its merits than its trail of blame—back through layers of CIA agents and Cuban exiles, through obscure schemes and counterschemes, to the desk of Robert F. Kennedy.

As vice president, Johnson had sat through those cabinet meetings and listened as Bobby browbeat yet another beleaguered bureaucrat. The RFK that Johnson remembered was not the cautious consensus-builder

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