

## BOOK REVIEW

THE PLOT TO KILL THE PRESIDENT. By G. Robert Blakey and Richard N. Billings. Times Books. 428 pages. \$12.95.

By William V. Thomas

## A Brief for the Theory That the Mob Killed JFK

The further it recedes into history, the more John F. Kennedy's assassination resembles the now-you-see-it, now-you-don't murder in the movie "Blow-Up."

As in "Blow-Up," events in Dallas have taken on the grainy quality of an intellectual abstraction. Clues have become symbols of disbelief; conspiracy theories, metaphors for all-purpose evil. At nearly every turn, illusion has erased reality until the only remaining proof that something actually happened is a 30-second home movie and a tape recording of gunfire.

Since 1963, thousands of articles and hundreds of books have been written about Kennedy's death. Few, unfortunately, have succeeded at more than adding on new layers of fiction. The starting point for most literature on the subject used to be the "one-gun" verdict of the Warren Commission. Then in 1979, the government provided another launch pad — the final report of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which offered "acoustical evidence . . . that two gunmen fired at (the) president." Its conclusion: Kennedy was "probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy."

*The Plot to Kill the President*, by free-lance writer Richard N. Billings and G. Robert Blakey, chief counsel for that House committee, tries to explain how the conspiracy worked. In a watered-down version of the congressional report, Billings and Blakey propose that some "rogue elephant" subgroup within the Mafia killed Kennedy and that Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Ruby and dozens of other characters were all part of an elaborate underworld revenge against the government. The authors move in lawyerly fashion from event to event, building a case on interviews, wiretaps and scientific tests. Their aim, they say, is to tie up "loose ends" left by previous investigations. But in key places, many of their own knots come undone.

For one thing, a precise connection is never established between Oswald and the mob figures who supposedly wanted to get rid of Kennedy. In the early 1960s, Mafia leaders

certainly were angry at the Kennedy administration for its stepped-up attack on organized crime. There were threats and curses. But even though Oswald may fit the classic profile of a hit man, there is no proof offered here that gangsters controlled him.

A better argument is made for Ruby's link to criminal elements. Still, his association with any conspiracy to silence Oswald is based purely on circumstantial evidence. Ruby was "stalking" Oswald for two days after the assassination, "ready to kill him" whenever he got the chance. "Ironically, when the opportunity did arise," the authors maintain, "it was so sudden and so dependent on coincidence, that Ruby's act did not appear to be conspiratorial." But to complete their scenario, it had to be. If Ruby was ordered to kill Oswald, someone must have ordered Oswald to kill Kennedy.

Noted for his research into organized crime, Blakey was criticized during the House assassination hearings for directing suspicion towards the Mafia and away from hostile foreign governments and the CIA. In spite of the intriguing questions it poses, *The Plot to Kill the President* suffers from the same tendency. Billings and Blakey flatly dismiss the idea that the Soviet Union had anything to do with killing Kennedy. Similarly, they reject the possibility that Fidel Castro was involved. Although Castro was aware of CIA attempts on his life, that is "not enough," they write, "to warrant an inference of Cuban complicity in the assassination."

The CIA has claimed that "actions" against Castro were halted in January 1963. Yet how was Castro to know? Or if he knew, what guarantee was there they wouldn't be resumed? Did CIA "dirty tricks" prompt Cuban retaliation against Kennedy? As Castro himself put it, when hit squads are trained on the leader of a country, a "bad precedent" is created.

Kennedy was killed, Billings and Blakey believe, because he compromised himself with the Mafia. He used its services in Cuba and accept-

ed other favors as well, then approved the Justice Department's war on organized crime. "It is . . . understood by prosecutors and police," they write, "that there is a line that must not be crossed. You are all right . . . just as long as you do not 'sleep with them,' that is, you do not take favors, either money or sex. The prosecutor or cop or other government official who does cross the line and then takes action against them . . . invites violent retribution." In other words, politicians who employ gangsters as insurance have no insurance against gangsters.

"One of the troubling things about the Kennedy case," Blakey has said, "is that we never had a trial." If one were held based on the evidence here, it's doubtful any convictions would result. Nevertheless, a standard article of faith would likely suffer permanent damage. The noise analysis of tape-recorded gunshots, which Billings and Blakey recount in convincing detail, seems to destroy any notion that Oswald was the only person aiming a rifle in Dealey Plaza. As to what made Kennedy a common target, however, *The Plot to Kill the President* only provides hints.

"Human kind cannot bear much reality," T. S. Eliot once observed. In some respects, that intolerance may explain the persistent belief in assassination plots (although it is generally accepted at this point that Ronald Reagan's assailant was a lone gunman acting for his own private reasons).

But the more we find out about our leaders and what keeps them in power, the more frightening — and more real — conspiracies become. If "murder will out," as this book pre-

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