

A Second Assassination

The Dark Side of Camelot
by Seymour M. Hersh.
Little, Brown, 498 pp., \$26.95

Garry Wills

I am ready to believe nine bad things about John Kennedy before breakfast—until Mr. Hersh adds a tenth, and that makes me begin wondering about the first nine. The more charges he adds to the score, the more I feel I should be subtracting from it. He tells us so many unbelievable things he says we never knew that we begin to doubt all the things we thought we knew. If Hersh will just write two more books about Kennedy, I could end up as starry-eyed about the man as any Sorensen or Schlesinger.

The Giancana Connection

Take the whole long saga of mob leader Sam Giancana. The Church Committee established in 1975 that the CIA tried to use Giancana's mobsters to assassinate Fidel Castro. (The mob had lost gambling interests to Castro's government.) But Hersh says that the Kennedys had an earlier and continuing tie with Giancana, who stole the Illinois vote for Kennedy in 1960. The foundation for a Kennedy-Giancana alliance was laid in Prohibition days, when Joseph Kennedy was—Hersh maintains—engaged with gangsters in rum-running. Many have believed this of Joseph Kennedy over the years, but Hersh adds no solid evidence for that belief. He quotes X saying that gangster Y, years afterward, talked of working with Kennedy. He tells us that anyone who owned the Merchandise Mart in Chicago had to know what the gangsters were up to. It is not an implausible theory, though it remains a theory, since Hersh lacks documentary proof, here, of the sort he brings to bear on Kennedy's father-in-law, John F. Fitzgerald, who stole his election to the House of Representatives in 1918.

But if one believes, as Hersh says he does, in Joseph Kennedy's close ties with the mob, how can one go on to believe three other things he alleges?

1. Joseph Kennedy, aware ahead of time that the 1960 election would have to be stolen in Illinois, asked a friend of his, Judge William Tuohy, to arrange a meeting with Giancana. Since the judge did not know Giancana, he asked a lawyer for the mob, Robert McDonnell, to set up the meeting—a meeting the judge was imprudent enough to hold in his own office. The judge is dead now, and McDonnell was seventy-one years old when Hersh interviewed him. McDonnell, a disbarred ex-alcoholic, was convicted in 1966 of using forged money orders and in 1983 of attempted bribery. McDonnell's one claim to fame was his marriage to Giancana's daughter, "Toni." Hersh has only McDonnell's word for the meeting of Joseph Kennedy with Giancana. And even McDonnell says Giancana did not steal anything for Kennedy, he just got union members to campaign hard for him—which is short of the allegation of vote stealing that Hersh quotes, with apparent agreement, from a former federal prosecutor (G. Robert Blakey).

Is McDonnell's word stronger than

the implausibility of his tale? Why, if Kennedy had long ties with the mob, would he have to go to Judge Tuohy for an introduction to Giancana? If he did not know Giancana by this time, surely he would know somebody who did know him. Yet Hersh relies on bluff to decide the matter: "Robert McDonnell's firsthand testimony is compelling...." Just in case we are not convinced by now, Hersh adds confirming testimony that is actually contradictory.

2. Tina Sinatra told Hersh that her father Frank was the go-between who set up a meeting with Giancana on a golf course, to discuss mob help with

time (and she, in fact, denies she was). But to trust the mobsters' party girl with incriminating money, as she claims he did, would be out of character for Kennedy, in ways that Hersh himself has pointed out in another connection. Various women told Hersh that Kennedy had a low regard for women, treating them as mere sex objects. One of the more intelligent former lovers quoted by Hersh strikes the recurring note: "There was a compartment for girls, and once you were in the sex compartment, you weren't a person anymore. I got declassified and depersonalized."

Ms. Exner, who naively says that the President loved her, now has a motive for saying that he trusted serious mat-

Cusack, a man passing him forged documents about Marilyn Monroe, has only to read this book to wonder what he would not fall for if it fit his purpose. He even believes Campbell when she adds more people who trusted her with incriminating materials. She made trips taking things to kill John Rosselli as well as to Giancana. She arranged two meetings with Giancana after Kennedy became president. When she became pregnant with Kennedy's child, she and the President decided she must have an abortion. Where did Kennedy turn for that? By now you expect it: "Would Sam help us?" The President wants to incur a debt that gives precious knowledge of a scandal to the Mafia boss. Sounds believable to Hersh.

Hersh has only one thing to confirm Exner's suspect new "memories"—at least he thinks it a confirmation. Since Exner was under FBI surveillance (though no money satchels were reported by the agents), J. Edgar Hoover's men observed a break-in at her house conducted by the twin sons of an ex-FBI man who was acting as chief of security at General Dynamics Corporation. Since General Dynamics later won a defense contract from the Kennedy administration, Hersh asks, "Was Jack Kennedy blackmailed by a desperate corporation?" Even if that hypothesis were granted, it would still not add an ounce of credibility to Exner's claims that she was a courier taking money and documents from the White House into gangland. Even if the break-in artists knew of these, did they expect her to keep copies after she gave them to Giancana?

What were the intruders after? Love letters? Were they placing a recording device? In any case, Hersh is sure it had to do with Kennedy and with General Dynamics. He assumes what needs proving when he says: "I tried unsuccessfully to find out how General Dynamics learned of Judith Exner's ties to Jack Kennedy." That sentence assumes (a) that Hale's sons did nothing but at the behest of their father, (b) that Hale did nothing but at the behest of General Dynamics, and (c) that the only reason to be interested in Exner was Kennedy. But Exner had far more public ties with Frank Sinatra and Sam Giancana than with Kennedy. Hale's sons may have had an agenda of their own. Hale, as an ex-agent with security skills for sale, may have had other clients, or freelance interests. Why would General Dynamics, on the improbable hypothesis that it knew of the Kennedy-Exner connection (which Hersh himself calls a closely kept secret), have commissioned an illegal act making the corporation subject to blackmail from Hale, on the off chance of finding something with which the corporation could corrupt the whole procurement process? (Hersh, as usual, writes as if Kennedy acted entirely free of government machinery, defiant of other pressures from powerful players.)

So there you have it. On the flimsy word of three peripheral people—McDonnell, Sinatra fille, and Exner—all boosting their own importance, the whole Giancana tale is fabricated. Each was privy to a crucial contact between Giancana and Kennedy. Two have carried this story into a dishonored age that their tales are meant to ornament. The third, Tina Sinatra,



the 1960 election. Well, which is it to be? If Kennedy was already in contact with Giancana through Sinatra, why did he need to begin all over again with a judge who did not even know the man? Hersh does not address the chronological problem with clarity; he fudges the issue of priority, saying the meeting in Tuohy's office was sometime "in the winter of 1959-60" and the golf course meeting followed Sinatra's summons to Hyannis Port "late in 1959."

3. Finally, the Kennedys, who seemed to have extraordinary difficulty getting access to Giancana, settled on the least probable intermediary of all, Judith Campbell (now Campbell Exner), who was having an affair with John Kennedy while she was moving in mob circles. "Jack asked, would I set up a meeting with Sam Giancana...." For what reason? "I assumed it was for the campaign." Is there anyone in America the Kennedys did not go to in 1960 asking for a way to meet with Giancana? It was certainly reckless for Kennedy to be having the affair—though there is no evidence he knew she was sleeping with Giancana at the

ters to her, even though it means she has to contradict what she told the Church Committee back in 1975 and what she wrote in her as-told-to book of 1977, *My Story*. Then she said she passed no communications at all between the two men. But now the sixty-three-year-old Exner, debilitated by a long struggle with cancer, assures the eagerly listening Hersh that the messages she carried to Giancana proved Kennedy's love for her: "He was bringing me into his life, and that was very important to me.... He had to have great trust and faith in me."

Of course Ms. Exner has, like all of us, read about the CIA's attempt to use Giancana to assassinate Castro, so—sure enough—Kennedy relied on her to send messages and documents to Giancana dealing with this explosive matter. What documents? Hersh might have asked himself at this moment. Maps of Havana, formulas for poison pills? But that would spoil the good story Hersh is positively salivating over by now. Anyone puzzled by the way Hersh fell for the story of Laurence

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used her story to spice up a TV show about her father, which no one took as "evidence" until Hersh came along. It would be reassuring to think that Hersh's treatment of the Giancana connection were an exception to his book's general trustworthiness. Unfortunately, it is entirely typical, and not even the worst case of flimsily substantiated claims.

Sex Life

Hersh runs through the litany of liaisons already reported—Ms. Exner, Inga Arvad, Mary Pinchot Meyer, Florence Pritchett, secretaries "Fiddle" and "Faddle" (Hersh, unlike some writers, does not give their real names), Pamela Turnure, Alicia Darr, Ellen Rometsch, Suzy Chang, Maria Novotny. This topic has been thoroughly gone over and he has nothing but further detail (some of it suspect) to add. A Secret Service man who broke his profession's code to talk about Kennedy's sex life gave Hersh an anecdote (investigative reporters love anecdotes) about the President's wife deciding to use the White House swimming pool while the President was cavorting there with two women. The swimmers escaped by another route, leaving one large set of wet footprints and two small ones. But two other agents, also relied on by Hersh, say the President never had other women in the White House when his wife was there.

Nigel Hamilton, when doing research for his book on Kennedy, turned up records of his continual reinfection with venereal disease. Hersh gives more detail on the problem (chlamydial infection) and on the threat it posed to Kennedy's sexual partners—including his wife. But the complications of Kennedy's medical regime were best covered by Richard Reeves, who rightly said that health, not sex, was the real Kennedy secret. The President was taking cortisone for his Addison's disease (cortisone is a libido booster) and penicillin for his recurring venereal disease—a kind of pharmacological merry-go-round. Since he was also taking painkillers for his back and the amphetamines given him by Max Jacobson ("Doctor Feelgood"), Kennedy was a walking drugstore.

It was in the matter of Kennedy's sex life that Hersh anticipated scoring his great coup, until it was learned that the records of Kennedy payments to silence Marilyn Monroe were forged. He cannot give up on Monroe, but he is as vague in most of his allegations as the writers who preceded him. The one first-hand account of a tryst he can produce comes from the useful Charles Spalding (of whom more later), who claims he saw Monroe at Hyannis Port. But Monroe's most reliable biographer, Donald Spoto, working with the calendars of both parties, says that Kennedy met Monroe only three times, setting aside her famous appearance at his birthday party, and they had sex only once, on March 24, 1962, in Palm Springs, California, as Monroe said. All other specific claims for their meetings are impossible chronologically and geographically.¹

Hersh, of course, also assumes that Robert Kennedy had an affair with

Monroe, though Spoto and James Hilty show there is no evidence for even one sexual encounter with Robert.² Yet the ever-handy Charles Spalding says the President dispatched him from the White House to California in order to keep Monroe from talking (though he says nothing of a payoff—what was he going to do to silence her? Kill her?). He found her in such pitiable condition that he took her to the hospital—an act not recorded in Spoto's thorough treatment of Monroe's hospitalizations in 1961 and 1962.

Spalding's "confirmations" of John Kennedy's affair with Monroe are dubious, but Hersh cannot afford to challenge seventy-one-year-old Spalding's reliability (though he does admit the man, who was on Dr. Max Jacobson's "uppers" in the Sixties, now has "impairment of his short-term memory")—since Spalding is the one person Hersh could find to prove that Kennedy was secretly married in 1947 and perhaps never divorced, making bastards of John Jr. and Caroline Kennedy.³ Spalding knows there was a Kennedy marriage to Durie Malcolm in the Palm Beach, Florida, records, since Kennedy sent him to destroy the marriage record.

Everything else about this "marriage" is rumor based on an amateur genealogist's huge book of family connections. Louis L. Blauvelt, who was sixty-seven in 1947, added item 12,427 to his list sometime before his death in 1959. It is vague and inaccurate (he does not know Durie Malcolm's birth date or how to spell her name, and he reverses the chronology of her first two marriages). There is nothing in Blauvelt's papers to show what he based his entry on. Hersh, again assuming what has to be proved, writes of Blauvelt that "his evidence, whatever it was, no longer exists." (Did Spalding destroy the old man's files as well as the marriage record?)

Hersh never bothers to ask why Spalding, a minor Kennedy hanger-on, would be given so delicate an assignment. Or, for that matter, why John Kennedy would have handled the matter. His father knew how to take care of such problems, and regularly did. He had tried operators for the purpose—men like investigator James McInerney and the lawyer Jack Miller.⁴ Joseph Kennedy kept a close eye on his son's activities through various traveling spies and caretakers, and it is impossible that a wedding would have escaped his close surveillance. (The idea that the wedding might have been a spur-of-the-moment madcap adven-

ture is precluded by the fact that Florida mandated a three-day cooling-off period between taking out a license and performing the marriage.) If there was damage control to be done, there were pros at hand for the purpose.

Besides, Kennedy was not the marrying kind. He delayed marriage until political and familial pressure dictated it. But for the need to give his father more Kennedy heirs, he might have made his bachelor life more carefree by taking his own recommendation to Ben Bradlee to have a vasectomy.⁵ And if, by a slip, he was momentarily diverted into taking out a marriage license, his father's watchdogs would have intervened to prevent the folly from being completed three days later. (Spalding, by the way, talks of destroying the marriage record. Did he also find and destroy the record of the license being issued?) Both Kennedy and socialite Durie Malcolm were high-profile people in Palm Beach society. The dates they did have were reported in the press. How could the two acts—taking out the license and getting married—not have been reported by any of the people handling the ceremonies, and spread by word of mouth? Hersh's desire to believe has made him as much a sucker for Charles Spalding as he was for Judith Exner or Laurence Cusack. His slur on Kennedy's children is as despicable as that on three "female Kennedy family members" who, he quotes an agent as saying, "propositioned various Secret Service agents" for sex.

Politics

Seymour Hersh is (or used to be) an investigative reporter, one who seeks to confirm or disprove specific allegations. The focus is on what was said or done at a specific event—did Lieutenant Calley kill people at My Lai was Nixon covering up Watergate, did Noriega run drugs? Like many investigative reporters, he is not so good at analysis, or even at writing.⁶ He does not see how specific incidents fit into larger patterns or respond to competing pressures.⁷ He personalizes situations, as if each actor he studies has complete control of the situation he or she is in. Whole structures of government disappear while his villains act in a vacuum. The worst case of this is his treatment of the Cuban missile crisis. He has said that the Kennedys were obsessed with Castro, and with their own political future, and he acts as if the crisis did nothing to affect or alter those obsessions.

Hersh suggests that the debates of the Executive Committee, tapes of which have just been published, were a charade. Since Kennedy had to activate

⁵Benjamin C. Bradlee, *Conversations with Kennedy* (Norton, 1975), p. 165: "[The President] advised out of the blue, 'You ought to get yourself cut.'"

⁶Hersh often fumbles toward the right word without getting there. He writes "evocative of" when he means "similar to," or "surfeited with" for "flooded with," or "unprecedented" for "unparalleled," or "invoking counterinsurgency" for "engaging in," or "unilaterally" for "automatically."

⁷For similar analytical limitation in the work of investigative reporter Bob Woodward, see Joan Didion, "The Deferential Spirit," *The New York Review*, September 19, 1996, pp. 14–19.

²Spoto, *Marilyn Monroe*, pp. 489–496, and James W. Hilty, *Robert Kennedy: Brother Protector* (Temple University Press, 1997), pp. 243–249, 552–557. Norman Mailer, who did so much to popularize the myth of Robert Kennedy's affair with Monroe, breezily told a TV interviewer that he included the allegations against Kennedy to please an editor who wanted to sell more books—"I needed money very badly" (Hilty, p. 553).

³*Time*, interviewing Spalding to check Hersh's story, found that the "short-term-memory loss" was "apparent." He denied to *Time* that he was sent to silence Monroe. Kennedy, he says, sent him to see how she was doing. *Time*, November 17, 1997, p. 45.

⁴Hilty, *Robert Kennedy*, p. 253.

¹Donald Spoto, *Marilyn Monroe: The Biography* (HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 486–489.

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the tape recorder, he and his brother were speaking for the record while the rest were being given make-work to keep them from interfering with the real and only actors, the Kennedy brothers:

In one move, Kennedy isolated those men who could lead a public charge against his stewardship of state and left them to debate in private, while he and his brother struggled to reap political gain from a mess that had been triggered by their obsession with Cuba. The Ex Comm members, who included cabinet secretaries and establishment figures such as Dean Acheson, the hard-line former secretary of state, and Robert A. Lovett, the New York lawyer and financier, were kept busy plotting air strikes and planning invasions. But the real decision-making was done elsewhere.

It is true that Kennedy would engage in back-channel negotiation with the Russians, but the idea that Kennedy is just playing make-believe in the tapes of the Ex Comm discussions can be entertained only by someone who thinks he was supernaturally crafty and confident. Whatever he did had to be affected by those tense discussions. It is true he brought the missile crisis on himself with the plot against Castro. But he was in a trap, with options sealed off by the very cold war climate he had helped to produce. Hersh's reduction of every other aspect of the crisis, and of everybody else's role except Bobby's, is the extreme case of "investigative" blinders.

The same weak hold on political reality shows up in Hersh's treatment of domestic politics. He is so focused on the Kennedy brothers as filling the whole scene that he seriously claims that Bobby was plotting to replace Lyndon Johnson as his brother's running mate in the 1964 campaign. That would make no political sense. The South would be doubly offended—by Johnson's ouster and by the promo-

tion of a man bitterly hated in the South for his civil rights activities as attorney general. Most sensible people would resent the nepotism. The Democratic Party would surely resist being treated as a personal fiefdom. And Bobby was more useful at Justice, where he could deal with J. Edgar Hoover from a position of law enforcement. Only a man who has lost whatever political sense he may have had could take such a scheme seriously.

The same is true of Hersh's claim that Johnson, with the help of House Speaker Sam Rayburn, blackmailed his way onto the ticket with Kennedy in 1960, threatening to reveal some dark secret if he were not given the job. Actually, of course, Johnson had used the blackest secret—the Addison's disease—in an unsuccessful effort to eliminate Kennedy. He was not believed. That would hardly make him sanguine about the usefulness of further "revelations." Besides, how credible would any such threat be to Kennedy? Johnson could not make good his threat without defeating the Democratic candidate, incurring his own party's wrath, and destroying any future chance he might have at the presidency. Rayburn, who is supposed to have joined in this threat, was a devoted Democrat with his own lifelong reputation at stake.

The famous fumbling and half-starts during the night of Johnson's choice reflected real hesitation on both sides and a final calculus, on both sides, of pragmatic advantage. Johnson had good reason to fear any loss of the power he wielded as majority leader in the Senate, and he could not be sanguine about good treatment from the man he had accused of lying about his secret disease. Kennedy had to put that affront aside (to Bobby's disgust) and focus on Johnson's usefulness for the Southern vote. Once again, larger factors were in play than the ambition and the secrets of the principals—which alone seem to interest Hersh.

Is there nothing of use in this book? Practically nothing. Hersh does make

a good case that attitudes toward assassination were more casual in the CIA and in the White House than people have realized—not only in the case of Diem in Vietnam but of Castro during the Bay of Pigs invasion. A former view was that the CIA undertook the murder of Castro only as part of Operation Mongoose after the invasion of the Bay of Pigs had failed. Hersh more probably argues that assassination was part of the Bay of Pigs scheme. The government would be decapitated. This would help explain why the director of the operation, Richard Bissell, who was not otherwise stupid, expected the landing to work. It would also explain why Kennedy refused a second air strike. He knew by then that the assassination had not been accomplished. The closeness with which he monitored the invasion came from his need to find out how the parts of the plan were meshing.

This assumes, of course, that Kennedy knew that assassination was essential to the plan. The admiration that Kennedy had for his father's ruthlessness, shown in the handling of his own career and scandals, was extended to the "realism" of Bissell, who would confide the real nature of his plan to a man of such tough breeding. All this remains speculative—but at least it is not half-baked speculation of the sort that abounds elsewhere in the book.⁸

It is an astonishing spectacle, this book. In his mad zeal to destroy Camelot, to raze it down, dance on the rubble, and sow salt on the ground where it stood, Hersh has with precision and method disassembled and obliterated his own career and reputation. □

⁸Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, drawing on Moscow documents, write that Castro and the Kremlin thought that assassinations were part of the invasion plan in 1961, since Castro's men found pistols with silencers in the CIA's Havana arms cache. See their book, *"One Hell of a Gamble": Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964* (Norton, 1997), p. 134: "The pistols seemed to make some sense of the flawed Bay of Pigs operation."

THE THREE KINGS

We'll arrive too late...

—André Frenaud, "The Three Kings"

If it hadn't been for the desert and laughter and music—
we'd have made it, if our yearning
hadn't mingled with the highways' dust.
We saw poor countries, made still poorer
by their ancient hatred;
a train full of soldiers and refugees
stood waiting at a burning station.
We were heaped with great honors
so we thought—perhaps one of us
really is a king?
Spring meadows detained us, cowslips,
the glances of country maidens
hungry for a stranger's love.
We made offerings to the gods, but we don't know
if they recognized our faces
through the flame's honey-gold veil.
Once we fell asleep and slept for many months,
but dreams raged in us, heavy, treacherous,
like surf beneath a full moon.

Fear awakened us and again we moved on,
cursing fate and filthy inns.
For four years a cold wind blew,
but the star was yellow, sewn carelessly
to a coat like a school insignia.
The taxi smelled of anise and the twentieth century,
the driver had a Russian accent.
Our ship sank, the plane shook suddenly.
We quarrelled violently and each of us
set out in search of a different hope.
I barely remember what we were looking for
and I'm not sure if a December night
will open up some day like
a camera's eye.
Perhaps I'd be happy, live content
if it weren't for the light that explodes
above the city walls each day
at dawn, blinding my desire.

—Adam Zagajewski

(translated from the Polish by Clare Cavanagh)