



1-1-1982

Book Notes

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Recommended Citation

A. J. Relation, *Book Notes*, 57 Notre Dame L. Rev. 620 (1982).

Available at: <http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndlr/vol57/iss3/9>

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THE PLOT TO KILL THE PRESIDENT. By *G. Robert Blakey* and *Richard N. Billings*. New York: Times Books, 1981. Pp. xiv, 428. \$14.95.

The assassination of John F. Kennedy has proved an irresistible attraction to all manner of theorists with a book to sell. After almost twenty years and countless retellings, Americans can hardly be blamed for automatically disdaining new versions of the assassination. Even serious works now suffer from this frivolity by association.

The Plot to Kill the President, by G. Robert Blakey and Richard N. Billings, is one book which, unfortunately, may receive less than due attention because of this attitude. Both authors served on the staff of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, Blakey as chief counsel and staff director and Billings as editorial director. The book reflects their personal views of the Kennedy assassination, which were not fully accepted by the House Committee. (The members of the Committee agreed that President Kennedy was killed as a result of a conspiracy but could not all agree on who initiated the conspiracy.) Professor Blakey, an attorney, became an authority on organized crime through his work with the Justice Department and the McClellan Committee on Organized Crime. Billings was formerly an editor of *Life* magazine and executive editor of *Congressional Quarterly*.

The book, as the jacket prominently proclaims, purports to prove that "organized crime assassinated J.F.K." The theory's cornerstone is scientific evidence uncovered by the House Committee. The Committee's analysts contend this evidence establishes that Lee Harvey Oswald could not have been a lone assassin (pp. 101-06). Two assassins make a conspiracy. Blakey and Billings contend the balance of the evidence points to Mafia sponsorship of this conspiracy.

The House Select Committee commissioned an acoustical analysis of the Dallas police dispatcher's audio tape of the events in Dealey Plaza on November 23, 1963.¹ An acoustical analysis firm in Chicago studied the tape and concluded that, to a 95% probability, four shots were fired at the President — the third originating on the "grassy knoll" in front of the Presidential limousine.² The authors argue this

1 The microphone switch on Officer H. B. McLain's motorcycle, several cars behind the Presidential limousine, was stuck in the "on" position. The microphone transmitted the sounds in the Plaza to the Dallas police dispatcher. All messages received by the dispatcher were recorded on a Dictabelt. p. 103.

2 The authors discuss, at length, the method of analysis used in the study. Analysts first

study constitutes new evidence which virtually mandates the involvement of a second assassin. Unless Oswald fired four shots from two different locations in the Plaza in less than five seconds, another assassin must have been in the Plaza. The authors contend the presence of this assassin can be reasonably explained only by a conspiracy.

Blakey and Billings argue that several possible conspirators had sufficient reason to desire Kennedy's death: the Russians, frustrated after the missile crisis; the Cubans, threatened by the Bay of Pigs invasion; or an alliance of conservative Americans and the CIA disaffected by the New Frontier (p. 22). None of these groups, however, have ever demonstrated any propensity to assassinate high officials in such a sensational manner.³ According to the authors, only organized crime has ever engaged in sensational public assassinations of prominent people on a sustained basis.

The Mafia certainly had a motive according to Blakey and Bill-

filtered out background noises on the tape, such as the sound of the motorcycle engine, and converted the remaining sounds into a time and loudness graph (p. 92). The scientists created a "control" group of sounds by firing various weapons from different Plaza locations and recording the echoes at different places along the motorcycle's route (p. 98). Every firearm has a distinctive muzzle blast pattern, similar to a human voiceprint. These sound patterns, echoing in an enclosed place like the Plaza produce sounds peculiar to the weapon and to the exact location where the weapon was fired. By comparing the control group to the acoustically cleaned up tape analysts obtained the best "fit" or match of the time and loudness graphs (p.101). This resulted in a 95% probability of four shots; the sniper on the grassy knoll was even located to within plus or minus five feet (p. 101).

A spectator in the Plaza, Abraham Zapruder, filmed the Presidential motorcade from the grassy knoll. He was virtually in front of the limousine as the President was shot. The film has become a key piece of evidence in the investigation of President Kennedy's assassination (p. 89). The autopsy report on President Kennedy has never been published nor did the Warren Commission examine these materials (p. 75, 107). Neither the Zapruder film nor the still unpublished autopsy report revealed a fourth wound in the President's body, so this bullet must have lodged harmlessly somewhere in the Plaza.

The sounds on the tape could not be analyzed scientifically until the acoustical techniques used in this study were developed. Although some people in the area reported a shot or shots from the knoll, these were contradicted by other spectators. The echoes in the Plaza made all bystander accounts unreliable.

3 Assassination of heads of state by foreign agents is rare, probably for fear of establishing dangerous patterns that could backfire on the instigators. Those assassinations which occur do so in secret, thus concealing the involved parties' identities. For example, though the weight of evidence points to Soviet complicity in the 1948 death of Jan Masaryk, President of Czechoslovakia, Masaryk was killed when he was alone in the early morning hours. Of course, under the political circumstances in Czechoslovakia in 1948 that possibility was never exhaustively investigated by the authorities. C. STERLING, *THE MASARYK CASE* (1968). Although planning evidently has taken place, the CIA has never been proved to have assassinated a major foreign figure. U. S. CONGRESS, SENATE, SELECT COMMITTEE TO STUDY GOVERNMENTAL OPERATIONS WITH RESPECT TO INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITIES, *ALLEGED ASSASSINATION PLOTS INVOLVING FOREIGN LEADERS* (1975).

ings. The Kennedy administration's anti-crime drive, headed by Attorney General Robert Kennedy, was beginning to seriously damage organized crime activity and revenue nationwide. The increasingly tense relationship between Mafia leaders and the FBI, and the unprecedented assaults on FBI agents documented by Blakey and Billings were symptomatic of organized crime's fear (pp. 238-39).

Furthermore, Lee Harvey Oswald would have been a particularly suitable instrument for an assassination plot. The authors argue that Oswald was susceptible to suggestion and manipulation (pp. 363-66). He was an expert marksman and his disjointed political wanderings would confuse and distract investigators.

Yet the Lee Harvey Oswald portrayed by the Warren Commission hardly seemed the typical Mafia assassin.⁴ But, Blakey and Billings reveal that organized crime had known of Oswald for a long time. One of the most interesting — and most ignored — aspects of the House Committee's investigation was the discovery of Oswald's links to organized crime figures. Oswald's uncle, who raised Oswald, ran numbers for the New Orleans mob (p. 343). In addition, Oswald's high school civil air patrol instructor was an investigator for the New Orleans syndicate (pp. 345-48).

These underworld contacts continued and may even have increased after Oswald's return from Russia, according to the authors. Committee investigators uncovered new evidence that Oswald continued to be seen with known mobsters. Blakey and Billings conclude that given the contact between Oswald and organized crime, together with his allegedly unstable personality, Oswald could have been talked into thinking of shooting President Kennedy, provided the means of doing so and helped in his pro-Castro activities to deflect suspicion from his silent partners.

According to Blakey and Billings, the final piece in the puzzle did not surface until Judith Campbell, the woman who claimed to have been shared by Sam Giancana and President Kennedy, made her story public.⁵ The authors say that though organized crime figures have never taken anti-crime drives personally, once a law enforcement official accepts favors, adverse activity by that officer becomes tantamount to treason. Other officers escape personal retribution by staying clear of any underworld gifts or favors (p. 374).

4 The Warren Commission apparently viewed Oswald as the traditional American assassin: a lone psychopath acting for purely personal motives. I-XXXVI THE PRESIDENT'S COMMISSION ON THE ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT KENNEDY, HEARINGS (1964).

5 JUDITH CAMPBELL EXNER (with OVID DEMARIS), MY STORY (1977).

Judith Campbell, according to Blakey and Billings, was just this sort of "favor" in the underworld's eyes. Whatever Kennedy's view of the situation, the President was thought to "owe" the syndicate for Ms. Campbell's services. The vigorous anti-crime drive launched by the Kennedy Justice Department may have been seen as treachery. In this light, the case for the Mafia plot becomes more persuasive. Betrayal, real or perceived, has always been a sufficient motive for Mafia murders.

The conspiracy itself seems plausible and well-conceived. Oswald is coaxed into the killing and led around the pro-Castro movement to conceal his sponsors' tracks. A second gunman, insurance against failure, is recruited, positioned and later quietly eliminated. Finally, Oswald himself is silenced by Jack Ruby, the Mafia-connected proprietor of a Dallas "strip joint," who, according to the Committee, was in financial trouble in November, 1963 (pp. 307-10).

Stylistically, Blakey and Billings view the assassination as a tragedy reminiscent of classical Greek theater. The authors convey a fascinating sense of the irony and tragedy in their version of President Kennedy's end: a President and a Kennedy killed over a woman and his brother's sense of duty. Unfortunately, much of the book's heart hides behind protracted introductory and background chapters. The authors force the conscientious reader to wade through extended, though interesting, historical material before revealing the crucial acoustical study. Even then this fruit of modern science lingers several chapters before the authors fit it into their reconstruction of the assassination.

Once reached, however, the Mafia plot theory is intellectually more satisfying than either Mark Lane's governmental bogeyman theory⁶ or the Warren Commission's concept of Lee Harvey Oswald.⁷ The roles assigned to the principal characters by the authors seem realistic and the motives powerful, producing a more compelling explanation of the assassination.

The reader's satisfaction is not complete, however, because the Mafia theory also has its problems. Lee Harvey Oswald, as pictured by the Warren Commission, hardly seemed the typical Mafia assassin. Further, organized crime never assassinated other nationally prominent anti-crime figures like Thomas Dewey or Estes

6 Mark Lane's version of the Kennedy assassination revolves around a supposed plot within the United States bureaucracy that, if it did not actually kill the President, at least allowed the murders to occur and then covered up its own complicity. MARK LANE, *RUSH TO JUDGMENT* (1966).

7 See note 4.

Kefauver.⁸ In addition, the idea that the Mafia engineered the assassination of the President of the United States, and kept it secret for twenty years, appears at first blush so outlandish as to hardly warrant serious consideration. Only with the benefit of the background material mentioned previously does the theory begin to seem more plausible. The evidence presented convincingly raises the possibility that Oswald *could* have been the stooge for a Mafia-inspired assassination.

The theory turns on one point: the acoustical study. Without a fourth shot and a second sniper, the Mafia plot cannot rise above speculation. Thus, accurate understanding of a significant event in modern American history depends on the esoteric analysis of a nearly twenty-year old Dictabelt accidentally recorded by a faulty microphone switch. Yet even if the analysis is valid, a question mark still lingers over the assassination. The unremovable 5% chance that there were not four shots remains to cloud the identity of the assassin(s). The real contribution of *The Plot to Kill the President* has not been to provide an answer here but rather a more refined question.

In poring over the details of organized crime and the Kennedy assassination, however, the authors seem to ignore a more burning issue: what happened to America's vaunted investigating agencies? If Blakey and Billings are correct, the FBI, the CIA and the Warren Commission botched one of the twentieth century's biggest criminal cases. Why, and how, this happened could be just as important as what happened.

A. Joseph Relation

8 As New York County special prosecutor, Thomas E. Dewey successfully prosecuted Charles "Lucky" Luciano, became Governor of New York and ran for President. Senator Estes Kefauver chaired the Senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce (the Kefauver Committee) and subsequently ran as Vice-Presidential candidate with Adlai Stevenson.