

## Looking for Faust in Texas

*Faustian Bargains: Lyndon Johnson and Mac Wallace in the Robber Baron Culture of Texas*

Joan Mellen

Bloomsbury. 359 pp. \$37.

By John McAdams

The “Faustian bargains” in the title of Mellen’s latest book are the pacts she believes three Texans implicitly made with Lyndon Johnson, to serve Johnson’s corrupt purposes in return for his sponsorship and patronage. But unlike Goethe’s Faust, there was no redemption at the end for any of them.

The Texan named in the subtitle, Mac Wallace, was a student leader at the University of Texas during World War II, and some JFK assassination conspiracists believe Wallace shot John Kennedy. The two unnamed Texans, somewhat oddly, were far more notorious in the 1960s: Billie Sol Estes, a corrupt wheeler-dealer whose schemes ultimately ended in imprisonment, and Bobby Baker, a Senate staffer who parlayed his connections with powerful people into huge influence and wealth, but whose dealings also landed him in Federal prison.

Mellen is the author of a mind-numbing book in praise of Jim Garrison’s investigation in New Orleans ([A Farewell to Justice](#)), so one approaches this volume with considerable skepticism. [Faustian Bargains](#) is more of a mixed bag, but it does repeat deficits of that earlier work. Mellen, again, relies heavily on—to put it mildly—highly questionable sources, constantly relying, for example, on the statements of Billie Sol Estes. Yet in a latter chapter of the book Mellen herself trashes Estes’s credibility, accurately characterizing him as “an admitted liar, con man and convicted felon.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Other dubious sources include J. Evetts Haley’s rather unhinged polemic *A Texan Looks at Lyndon*, and an unpublished manuscript by Stephan Pegues titled “Texas Mafia.” That’s right: a secondary source that never got published, written by an obscure author. Mellen admits that this source is “characterized by exaggeration” and that Pegues has passed away leaving “no source notes, nothing substantiated.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Much better, in principle, is her use of the notes and private papers of Holland McCombs, a long-time Time Inc. journalist. In 1963, McCombs assiduously interviewed what appears to be dozens of people with stories to tell about LBJ and his allegedly shady dealings in Texas. Unfortunately, most of what McCombs uncovered was merely gossip. It is fairly well-established or accepted that the political culture of Texas in the 1950s and 1960s condoned a lot of questionable practices, but for the historian unfounded gossip, however tantalizing, still has to be proven. Often Mellen cites assertions from memoranda McCombs wrote to *Life* magazine editors with no indication who or what the primary source was. Even worse, Estes was an important source for McCombs.

Mellen's reliance on McCombs makes one omission all the more interesting. It was none other than McCombs who, in 1967, first put the brakes on what had been *Life* magazine's support for Jim Garrison's "investigation" of the Kennedy assassination. McCombs happened to know Clay Shaw, and when he was arrested by the New Orleans DA, McCombs instantly realized the investigation had to be a miscarriage of justice if not worse: a clown show directed by a demagogue. Mellen conveniently sidesteps the contradiction between her hagiography of Garrison and dependence on McCombs in this book.[\[3\]](#)

From the '60s

In places, Mellen shows that she is an unreconstructed '60s leftist, although some of her positions are so iconoclastic they defy easy categorization. For example, she calls the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident a "false flag operation." In fact, it is now well established that the destroyer *USS Maddox* was attacked by North Vietnamese forces, and nervous sailors on the *USS Turner Joy* believed they were under attack and reported being under attack (although it turned out they were mistaken).[\[4\]](#)

Mellen also accepts a rather preposterous theory about the attack by Israeli forces on the intelligence ship *USS Liberty* in June 1967. Supposedly, the attack was some sort of conspiracy between LBJ and the Israelis to provide cover for a nuclear attack on Cairo. Four aircraft with nuclear weapons, Mellen claims, were launched from a US aircraft carrier headed for Cairo during the attack, but were for some unexplained reason called back.[\[5\]](#)

More integral to the theme of Mellen's book is her view of Lyndon Johnson's political views. Rejecting the now-mainstream perspective that Johnson was at heart a liberal whose liberal views played out in his Great Society legislation, Mellen insists that he was a "southern conservative" who rather opportunistically embraced liberal programs when he became president. She dismisses his presidential liberalism by calling him a "gifted thespian" who had "discovered the formula he required" and further that he "had few principles or convictions of his own."[\[6\]](#)

She never mentions that Johnson ran as a pro-Roosevelt, pro-New Deal Democrat during his first campaigns for the House of Representatives. Subsequently, as a senator, Johnson opposed Truman's civil rights legislation (as public opinion in Texas pretty much required), and he certainly supported his state's defense industries and oil & gas interests. Doing otherwise would have been shocking—and politically suicidal, especially for someone with presidential ambitions.

Since Mellen views Johnson as thoroughly corrupt, then of course he would have corrupted those men who fell into his orbit. Just how convincing a case does Mellen lay out?

Mac Wallace: JFK Assassin?

In spite of some questionable conclusions, Mellen has produced an interesting and compelling account of the life of Mac Wallace. Apparently a charismatic figure, he was elected student body president at the University of Texas in 1944 and led a student movement to protect academic freedom on campus. Intelligent and well-liked by fellow students, and later, co-workers on the various jobs he held, early on Wallace seemed to have a promising future.

Mellen interviewed numerous key figures in Wallace's life, including his two wives, two of his children, and the "love of his life" (one Nora Ann Carroll) whom he never successfully wooed. She also obtained Wallace's unredacted FBI file and the extensive records of the federal panels that intensively investigated Wallace during repeated efforts by the Department of the Navy to revoke his "secret" security clearance. She paints a rather poignant portrait of a man whose life moved along a downward trajectory until he was finally killed in an auto accident in 1971 when his car ran off the road and smashed into a bridge abutment.

After holding some highly responsible positions in defense industries, once Wallace lost his security clearance he was eventually reduced to selling insurance in his brother's agency. His alcoholism and two very bad marriages did not help, and neither did his murder of a man (one John Douglas Kinser) who was engaged in an adulterous affair with his first wife. (Wallace got off virtually unscathed, having been found guilty, but receiving a suspended sentence).

Wallace has loomed large in some recent JFK assassin fantasizing. Some theorists portray him as a "hit man" for LBJ, and allege that Wallace, and not Lee Harvey Oswald, was the assassin who shot John Kennedy from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository.[\[7\]](#)

Mellen dismantles these notions. She notes that Wallace had an alibi for 22 November 1963, as he was at home with his son in California. With well-aimed sarcasm

she notes Wallace's financial problems, and observes that "if he was Lyndon Johnson's hit man . . . he was committing those murders free of charge."[\[8\]](#)

And in an impressive piece of research, Mellen refutes the one piece of supposed hard evidence placing Wallace on the sixth floor of the Depository: a single fingerprint, unidentified during the Warren Commission's investigation, on one of the cardboard cartons. Two purported "fingerprint experts," whose credentials were highly suspect (even if one wants to be generous) claimed a match between this print and a poor quality print from Wallace's arrest in Austin for the Kinser murder. Mellen obtained a high quality version of the of the sixth floor print from the National Archives, and a high quality print from Wallace's Marine Corps records. An expert with top notch credentials examined both, and concluded they did not match.[\[9\]](#)

### The Real Mac Wallace

Mellen concedes that Wallace's ties to LBJ are speculative. She admits that their lives "rarely intersected," and that the two "were linked only tenuously."[\[10\]](#)

Wallace almost certainly met Johnson when the then-congressman spoke at the University of Texas in the early 1940s. And Mellen cites FBI records claiming that Cliff Carter (a key LBJ aide) got Wallace his job in the Agriculture Department in 1949. But then she notes that Johnson aide Horace Busby (who had known Wallace at the University of Texas and from the campaign of liberal Texas gubernatorial candidate Homer Rainey) made damning (Mellen says "defamatory") statements about Wallace to the FBI. Mellen then notes that "had Mac Wallace been close to or important to Lyndon Johnson at that time, it is doubtful that Busby would have spoken out so strongly against him."[\[11\]](#)

Wallace claimed a closer relationship with LBJ on a few occasions. In 1968, for example, Wallace reportedly told his son Michael that he could call Johnson and get Michael out of the draft. Given the lack of hard evidence in the voluminous Federal paper trail about any significant relationship between Wallace and LBJ (something Mellen concedes), these claims have to be viewed as idle boasts.[\[12\]](#)

In spite of Mellen's concessions about the historical record, her Faustian thesis causes her to exaggerate possible links between Wallace and LBJ. She blandly assumes that when Wallace got management posts in defense industries, LBJ had a role in arranging those jobs. But she has no evidence, and Wallace's education (a bachelor's in business administration and a master's in economics) made him well-qualified. Mellen even admits that "it is not known for certain" whether Johnson got Wallace his job at one defense contractor (TEMCO) or intervened to protect Wallace's "secret" security clearance.[\[13\]](#)

The author actually holds open the possibility that Wallace's murder of Kinser was not to avenge an adulterous affair, but to silence a man who might have had damning things to say about LBJ. Kinser supposedly had an affair with Josepha Johnson, Lyndon's wayward and promiscuous sister. Mellen speculates that Josepha might have told Kinser about some of LBJ's shady activities. Mellen considers this something that might be "buried in the graveyard of Johnson cover-ups" and speculates that perhaps "Johnson had sent Wallace . . . instructions to murder Kinser."[\[14\]](#)

These are all strong conclusions from very weak evidence.

### Billie Sol Estes

Estes, unlike Wallace, was thoroughly corrupt. The extent of Johnson's involvement in his corruption, however, is murky. Mellen admits that "evidence of Lyndon Johnson's many collaborations with Billie Sol Estes remains as circumstantial in 2016 as it did in 1964." Indeed, much of the "evidence" of an LBJ connection with Estes is merely Estes's own unsubstantiated claims.[\[15\]](#)

If Johnson or his staff sometimes helped Estes when he had problems with federal authorities, this may be no more than the normal activity of congressional offices, which often take up the cause of constituents against the bureaucracy. This interpretation is bolstered by the fact that one of Johnson's chief political antagonists in the state, US Senator Ralph Yarborough (D), helped Estes on numerous occasions, as Mellen notes. When Estes wanted to evade government regulations on how much cotton he was allowed to grow, he was given assistance by Johnson, Yarborough, and Congressman J. T. Rutherford (D). Holland McCombs reported that Estes "practically used Yarborough's office as his Washington headquarters and had Yarborough running around taking him to see officials of the Agriculture Department." McCombs also learned that Estes made twenty-eight calls to the office of Yarborough within sixteen hours after he was arrested.[\[16\]](#)

This looks more like a rich businessman who had curried favor wherever he could than a special client of Lyndon Johnson.

Historian Robert Dallek examined the files from an extensive FBI investigation of Baker, and said the material "suggests that the bureau made a serious effort to learn the truth about Johnson and Estes and found no significant ties." Dallek had to concede, however, the possibility that some incriminating files had been destroyed.[\[17\]](#)

Bobby Baker

If the connections between LBJ and Mac Wallace or Billie Sol Estes, are wobbly at best, Johnson's relationship with Bobby Baker was undeniably strong. As a Senate staffer, Baker worked hand-in-glove with Johnson and was even called "Little Lyndon." But to what extent was Johnson implicated in Baker's corrupt affairs? There were some questionable incidents. In a deal arranged by Baker, an aide of Johnson's (Walter Jenkins) apparently insisted that an insurance agent who sold a policy to Johnson must kick back \$1,200 in an advertising buy on Johnson's Austin television station. A \$542.25 Magnavox stereo was also part of the deal. But Johnson broke off relations with Baker after 1960.[\[18\]](#)

In evaluating the allegations of Johnson's involvement in corrupt dealings, whether those of Estes or Baker, it might be best to take seriously LBJ's own claim: "The damn press always accused me of things I didn't do. They never once found out about the things I did do."[\[19\]](#)

In the end, Mellen's organizing thesis about Faustian pacts simply doesn't work. She writes that Mac Wallace "provides an object lesson for anyone who too carelessly might wander into a devil's bargain with a powerful and profoundly amoral public figure." But Wallace was the victim of his own character flaws and bad judgment. As for Estes and Baker, their souls were in hock before they ever met LBJ. At worst, Johnson was tangentially involved in their corruptions, and the evidence for that even is scant.[\[20\]](#)

Still, Mellen's book is useful, if one ignores the conceit borrowed from Goethe, some quirky notions, and some poorly supported conclusions. Mellen has produced a broad-gage, assiduous, thorough, and compelling debunking of one stream of JFK conspiracy theorizing. She clearly likes Mac Wallace, the liberal student activist who led mass, peaceful demonstrations in the early 1940s, presaging the student activism of the 1960s. Defending him against the casual libels of the JFK conspiracy theorists was a worthwhile enterprise.

John McAdams, an associate professor of political science at Marquette University and webmaster of the [Kennedy Assassination Home Page](#), is the author of [JFK Assassination Logic: How to Think about Claims of Conspiracy](#) (2011).

[\[1\]](#) Mellen, *Faustian Bargains*, 232.

[\[2\]](#) *Ibid.*, 300.

[\[3\]](#) Patricia Lambert, *False Witness: The Real Story of Jim Garrison's Investigation and Oliver Stone's Film* (New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc., 1998), 82-83.

## Washington Decoded

[4] Mellen, *Faustian Bargains*, 187; Carl Otis Schuster, "[Case Closed: The Gulf of Tonkin Incident](#)," historynet.com.

[5] Mellen, *Faustian Bargains*, 193-214.

[6] Ibid., 180-182.

[7] See the entry for "Malcolm Wallace" in Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcolm\\_Wallace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcolm_Wallace)

[8] Ibid., 175, 257.

[9] Ibid., "Appendix: Evaluation and Comparison of Fingerprints," 272-283.

[10] Ibid., xxiii, 229.

[11] Mellen claims that this "leaves no doubt that it was Lyndon Johnson who gained him the job." She then concedes that "As usual with Johnson there is nothing in writing." Ibid., 76-78.

[12] Ibid., 215. Mellen notes that the complete unredacted FBI files on Wallace contains no mention of LBJ except for a notation that interviewee Horace Busby was a Johnson staffer. Ibid., 251.

[13] Ibid., 263.

[14] Ibid., 229.

[15] Ibid., 266.

[16] John R. Johannes, *To Serve the People* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); Mellen, *Faustian Bargains*, 153, 321.

[17] Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 40.

[18] Ibid., 41; Mellen, *Faustian Bargains*, 161.

[19] Quote by Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 40.

[20] Mellen, *Faustian Bargains*, 268.