

*The Kennedy Half-Century:  
The Presidency, Assassination, and Lasting Legacy of John F. Kennedy*  
Larry J. Sabato  
Bloomsbury. 603 pp. \$30

### **Sabato's Folly**

*By David Reitzes*

Evaluating a president's place in history, even with the benefit of hindsight, is seldom easy. Applying the proper perspective to as iconic a figure as John F. Kennedy has proven well-nigh impossible. From the instant his presidency was cut short by a burst of gunfire fifty years ago, mythology has overwhelmed reality.

Any historian who tackles this subject is therefore, by definition, audacious. But Larry J. Sabato is doubly so. To his ever-lasting credit, Sabato believes Kennedy's term in office, the assassination, and the aftermath are an indivisible historical whole and must be written about as such.

. . . [I]t is impossible to understand the Kennedy legacy without understanding the assassination—the sequence of events, as well as what most Americans think happened and why. Millions have never been, and will never be, satisfied with the official findings of two separate government inquiries—not least because the inquiries came to opposite conclusions on the critical question of conspiracy. The assassination dictated that JFK would not have the time create a full record and make his whole claim on history. For fifty years the unfinished record of the man and his presidency has stirred Americans as they mourned an unconscionable loss and wondered what might have been. This “ghost legacy” is as powerful as the real one.[\[1\]](#)

This is a bracing change from the approach of most historians who have written about Kennedy, whose tendency has been to treat the assassination as an unwanted complication. Of course, it is not easy to write about an event that remains a controversial mystery to so many, with a majority of Americans consistently believing that the truth about it has never been told. Consequently, it's not unusual to see historians handle the subject rather dismissively, as Robert Dallek did in *An Unfinished Life*:

Despite an authoritative 1993 book, *Case Closed*, by attorney Gerald Posner refuting numerous conspiracy theories, the public, inflamed by a popular 1991 Oliver Stone film, *JFK*, believed otherwise . . . . The fact that none of the conspiracy theorists have been able to offer convincing evidence of their suspicions does not seem to trouble many people. The plausibility of a conspiracy is less important to them than the implausibility of someone as inconsequential as Oswald having the wherewithal to kill someone as consequential . . . as Kennedy.[\[2\]](#)

Despite Sabato's willingness to undertake the necessary task of making history whole again, *The Kennedy Half-Century* is a great disappointment. Sabato's in-depth treatment of the assassination is precisely where the book falters. The author often ends up sounding more like a fevered assassination buff, pandering to popular, uninformed opinion about the assassination, rather than someone who was a Rhodes Scholar, founder of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics, and is the University Professor of Politics at UVA.

Sabato's treatment of the second major official investigations, the 1976-79 probe by the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) is a good illustration of how the book falters. Sabato made this section a centerpiece of his talks about the book, primarily because of a study he commissioned on a supposedly key piece of "evidence," an audio recording that led the HSCA to conclude that JFK "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy." The word "evidence" is in quotes because the item's relevance to the crime has always been a point of dispute. The recording of police transmissions allegedly captured the sounds of the shots in Dealey Plaza (though *no* such sounds are audible), including a theorized shot from the grassy knoll.[\[3\]](#)

The Sabato study, performed by Sonalysts, Inc., in fact, reaffirms the findings of a National Academy of Sciences (NAS) panel that analyzed the audio recording in 1982. The NAS experts unanimously concluded that the so-called acoustic evidence did not demonstrate that there was a grassy knoll shot, and furthermore, the "impulses attributed to gunshots were recorded about one minute after the president had been shot." The NAS panel also noted that the impulses, in all likelihood, were not even recorded by a mike that was in Dealey Plaza—an observation that has since been proven by careful analysis of the photographic evidence.[\[4\]](#)

One might consider the Sonalysts' study an instance of making rubble bounce. More charitably, the re-analysis could be regarded as the proverbial "final nail in the coffin" of HSCA's theory of a second gunman (and thus, a probable conspiracy). Yet

Sabato stops well short of finding that negation of the so-called acoustical evidence invalidates the possibility of a grassy-knoll gunman. After going to so much trouble, this is a puzzling deficit—and a hint of even greater problems in *The Kennedy Half-Century*'s version of assassination history.

It is one thing for Sabato to observe, quite correctly, that many citizens have been unsatisfied with the findings of the Warren Commission, the government's first official investigation (unless one counts the FBI report of December 1963 as the first). It is something altogether different (and unoriginal) to state, as Sabato does, that "The Warren Commission was doomed from the start, because Washington's power brokers, led by the new president himself, were far more interested in preserving domestic tranquility than in finding the full truth."<sup>[5]</sup>

Sabato's key evidence for such a judgment is a [memorandum](#) written on Monday, November 25, 1963, the day after accused assassin Oswald was murdered by Jack Ruby. In the memo, Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach described to LBJ aide Bill Moyers the importance of establishing the facts in the case and reassuring the public that Oswald was the sole culprit. Katzenbach's argument, as well as the possibility of redundant and potentially counterproductive investigations at the state and federal levels, helped persuade President Lyndon B. Johnson four days later to empanel a commission that would issue a definitive report.

Following in the footsteps of many authors of conspiracy-oriented books on the assassination, Sabato quotes two particular points from the Katzenbach [memorandum](#):

1. The public must be satisfied that Oswald was the assassin; that he did not have confederates who are still at large; and that the evidence was such that he would have been convicted at trial.
2. Speculation about Oswald's motivation ought to be cut off, and we should have some basis for rebutting thought that this was a Communist conspiracy or (as the Iron Curtain press is saying) a right-wing conspiracy to blame it on the Communists.<sup>[6]</sup>

Sabato's criticism is a familiar one. He writes that "It was impossible to know, seventy-two hours after the assassination, exactly what had transpired in Dallas, much less that Oswald was the lone assassin and would have been convicted at trial. Moreover this memo puts far more emphasis on public relations and on pushing a preconceived, sanitized notion of the murder of the president, than it does on an honest effort to uncover all the facts."<sup>[7]</sup>

But like all the conspiracy theorists before him, Sabato is cherry-picking the memo, and taking these two points out of context. The Katzenbach [memorandum](#) actually begins with this declaration:

*It is important that all of the facts* [emphasis added] surrounding President Kennedy's assassination be made public in a way which will satisfy

people in the United States and abroad that all the facts have been told and that a statement to this effect be made now.[\[8\]](#)

Neither course of action proposed by Katzenbach elsewhere in the memo—“making public as soon as possible a *complete and thorough FBI report on Oswald and the assassination* [emphasis added],” or “the appointment of a presidential commission of *unimpeachable personnel to review and examine the evidence* [emphasis added] and announce its conclusions”—advocates or implies a rush to judgment.[\[9\]](#)

When asked about the [memorandum](#) in 1978 during the HSCA investigation, Katzenbach repudiated the idea that he had been urging anything less than an exhaustive inquiry into the crime. While conceding that his memo could have been more “artistically phrased,” Katzenbach explained that

[I]f you are going to conclude, as the Bureau was concluding, that this was not part of a conspiracy, that there were no confederates, then you had to make that case, with all of the facts absolutely persuasive. If you didn’t reveal these facts, someone else was going to reveal them. Now, if there was a conspiracy, there was a conspiracy, and you put those facts out. But if you were persuaded Oswald was a lone killer, you had better put all of the facts out and you better not cover up anything, and you better say now all of the facts are going to be made public.[\[10\]](#)

Sabato does acknowledge that Katzenbach’s “primary motive might have been to tamp down rumors of a conspiracy before they overtook the facts.” But this weak analysis does not balance the innuendo already planted by the University of Virginia professor.[\[11\]](#)

Sabato also grossly misrepresents the December 1963 FBI report on the assassination and its influence on the Warren Commission. Early on, the Bureau was confident that all the forensic evidence pointed to Oswald as the president’s killer, though Director J. Edgar Hoover was discomfited about conflicting reports regarding Oswald’s trip to Mexico City, where he visited the Soviet and Cuban embassies some two months before the assassination. Hoover, no less than Katzenbach, wanted to reassure the public that the FBI had matters under control, and ordered his agents to run down every possible lead, resulting in an estimated 25,000 interviews, to determine whether Oswald or Jack Ruby, Oswald’s murderer, could be credibly linked to a conspiracy. To this day, the raw information that went into the Bureau’s December report constitutes one of the richest veins of information the Kennedy assassination research community has ever had.

Sabato’s assessment, however, is as follows: “In what critics charged—accurately or not—was yet another attempt to protect the FBI’s reputation, Hoover launched his own *selective* [emphasis added] investigation into the murder and, at LBJ’s behest, sent the Warren Commission a copy of the Bureau’s final report less than a month after the assassination.” It is true that the FBI report was flawed, mainly because it presented what proved to be an inaccurate description of the shooting sequence in Dealey Plaza (the

Bureau did not realize that one of the three shots passed through President Kennedy and then struck Governor Connally). But the report was hardly “selective,” and the implication that the report handicapped the Warren Commission is provably false.[\[12\]](#)

Transcripts of executive sessions from December make it clear that the commissioners were dissatisfied with the FBI report from the start—along with a similar report submitted by the Secret Service—and had no intention of letting the investigation end there. That is why the commission promptly decided to hire its own large staff, subpoena witnesses for direct testimony, and take whatever other steps it deemed necessary to uncover all the facts about the crime. As John J. McCloy stated at the commission’s [16 December 1963](#), meeting:

I have the feeling that we have another obligation than the mere evaluation of the reports of agencies, many of which, as you suggested, or some of them at least, may be interested, may be involved. There is a potential culpability here on the part of the Secret Service and even the FBI, and these reports, after all, human nature being what it is, may have some self-serving aspects in them.[\[13\]](#)

The commissioners’ refusal to act as a rubber stamp was even more pronounced at their meeting on [22 January 1964](#), when they convened to discuss a rumor that Oswald had been a paid informant for the FBI. The Bureau had already denied that any such relationship existed, and chief counsel J. Lee Rankin expressed the view that it “would be very difficult to prove out . . . . I assume that the FBI records would never show it . . . .” The chief justice observed, “[The Bureau] would like to have us fold up and quit,” to the general agreement of his colleagues. Their subsequent investigation consumed tens of thousands of man-hours over a period of eight months, involved travel to Dallas, New Orleans, and Mexico City, and required the taking of sworn testimony from no less than 489 witnesses.[\[14\]](#)

Following publication of *The Kennedy Half-Century*, several members of the Warren Commission’s staff (all the commissioners are deceased) took issue with Sabato’s representations. Retired Judge Burt W. Griffin, of Ohio, an assistant counsel, commented, “Unfortunately, Mr. Sabato maligns some very decent, honest men on the commission and a totally dedicated and remarkably competent staff. He has no evidence that any member of the commission or the commission as a whole was compromised with respect to the commission’s conclusions.” Judge Richard M. Mosk, an associate justice of the California Courts of Appeal and a commission staff member, added, “There have been a lot of conspiracy theories and we’ve taken that with a grain of salt . . . . We expect that from some people, but [Sabato] is a respected educator with a lot of pull in the media. He should know better.”[\[15\]](#)

Apart from dredging up old, misleading characterizations of the commission’s work, Sabato is genuinely unable to make up his mind on some fundamental issues about the assassination, including the presence of a gunman on the infamous grassy knoll. While acknowledging that the evidence points most conclusively to Oswald as an

assassin, if not the sole assassin, Sabato blames the Warren Commission for not putting all such issues to rest:

Ironically, in its rush to tamp down the rumors surrounding the assassination, the Warren Commission guaranteed the perpetuation of conspiracy theories for years to come. In the early 1960s, the public was thought incapable of handling the truth. Rather, it had to be spoon-fed a convenient, calming version of events. Americans were never told about the government's efforts to murder Fidel Castro and other world leaders, which many might have seen as sufficient motive for a revenge killing. Nor did the public know about Washington's relationships with the Mafia, Oswald's full history, or many other things that might have had a direct bearing on the events of November 22, 1963.

Instead, the Warren Commission gave everyone a sanitized, abbreviated version of the assassination. The public was condescendingly told to accept the official account without subversive, unpatriotic questioning. The commission laid the groundwork for the cynicism that became deeply rooted in the late 1960s and the 1970s—a profound distrust of the “official” government story about anything.[\[16\]](#)

It is unreasonable to trace the erosion of confidence in the US government to the Warren Commission, when in point of fact its report has never been impeached. The commission, moreover, had little or no say over the release of national security secrets, most notably the Kennedy administration's anti-Castro policy and the CIA's relationship with organized crime in the early 1960s. The perception of deception that arose in the late 1960s and 1970s had much more to do with Vietnam and Watergate than the work of the commission. As Chief Justice Earl Warren recalled, there were no express limitations placed upon the commission by President Johnson or anyone else: “The president gave us the broadest powers . . . to get anything in the government.” But Sabato sees it differently, presenting Warren as a willing accomplice in the abortion of justice. “The new president made it clear from the start that he wanted a short, superficial inquiry that neatly buttoned up the messy matter of how he had become chief executive.”[\[17\]](#)

One of Sabato's specific complaints is the commission's failure to interview what he considers significant eyewitnesses. He is incredulous, in particular, that two of the closest eyewitnesses to the shooting, William and Frances Gayle Newman, whose accounts of the assassination were televised within hours of the events, were not called to testify.

While it might have been preferable for the Warren Commission to depose each and every Dealey Plaza witness, what did Bill and Gayle Newman have to offer that could have made any difference? Sabato suggests that they were witnesses to a grassy knoll gunman. He quotes from a [22 November 1963 interview](#) of Bill Newman by WFAA-TV newsman Jay Watson: “You think the shot came from up on top of the viaduct [the Triple Underpass] toward the president, is that correct?” “Yes, sir,” Newman replied, but quickly corrected himself, “no, not on the viaduct itself, but up on top of the hill, a little mound of ground with a garden.”[\[18\]](#)

But Newman later clarified “It was a visual impact that it had on me, more so than the noise. Seeing the side of the president’s head blow off; seeing the president go across the car seat into Mrs. Kennedy’s lap, in her direction. It gave me the sensation that the shots were coming from directly behind where I was standing.” He later reaffirmed this: “The shot came from behind. The reality of it is, I have no idea of the actual flight of the projectile, the bullet, only that visual impact that it had on me, to seeing the way that President Kennedy reacted to the shot, gave me that sensation.”[\[19\]](#)

Newman again emphasized this in a November 2013 interview with journalist Jefferson Morley:

Now when I’m talking with people about it, I say I thought that shot came from behind. And at the end of it people always say, “From behind where? From behind, meaning the sixth floor, or from behind meaning the picket fence?” And I just leave it with “behind,” because it was a visual...it wasn’t the noise . . . it was the visual impact of him, as if you just pushed him across the car seat . . .”[\[20\]](#)

Sabato falsely suggests that the Newmans’ testimony was deliberately avoided by the Warren Commission because it would have contradicted the scenario of Oswald as a lone assassin. He completely overlooks the fact that the commission took testimony from numerous witnesses whose accounts would stand in contradiction to the panel’s findings about the source of the shots.

More to the point, Sabato seems completely unaware about the inherent unreliability of eyewitness perception and memory in general, particularly when it involves stressful situations—gunfire in particular—and the gruesome murder of a president in broad daylight. As the authoritative textbook, *Firearms Investigation Identification and Evidence*, states, “It is extremely difficult to tell the direction [from which a shot was fired] by the sound of discharge of a firearm.” “Little credence” should be placed in such testimony.[\[21\]](#)

“And to be truthful with you,” Bill Newman says, “I could take either position very easily, that Lee Harvey Oswald fired three shots from the sixth floor window and acted totally alone. But by the same token I could take the position very easily that there [was] somebody else involved.”[\[22\]](#)

It has been understood for decades that Dealey Plaza individual eyewitnesses cannot be the last word on such issues. The preponderance of eyewitness testimony, taken in conjunction with dispositive forensic evidence, is what matters. To reiterate Richard Mosk’s critique, a historian of Sabato’s standing should know better.

Shortcomings of the kind described above overshadow *The Kennedy Half-Century*’s positive qualities, which include an evaluation of the forensic evidence in the assassination; a survey of some of the most frequently-named conspiracy suspects; an eye-opening chapter on the state of presidential protection in 1963; and most importantly,

thoughtful, often lucid ruminations on JFK's presidency and legacy. By writing about the assassination as if it were an unresolved whodunit, Sabato undermines precisely what he is trying to achieve. His presentation of assassination history is so tendentious that the book is ultimately symptomatic of the confusion that suffuses the life and afterlife of our 35th president, rather than the antidote envisioned by its author.

David Reitzes writes for a variety of print and online media, including his own website, [JFK Online](#). His article, "[JFK Conspiracy Theories at 50: How the Skeptics Got It Wrong and Why It Matters](#)," appeared in *Skeptic* magazine. This is his first review for *Washington Decoded*.

[1] Sabato, *Kennedy Half-Century*, 132-133.

[2] Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 2003), 699.

[3] US House of Representatives, Select Committee on Assassinations, *Report* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1979), 1.

[4] National Research Council, [Report of the Committee on Ballistic Acoustics](#) (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1982), 6-7, 34. A private citizen, Steve Barber, played an instrumental role in drawing the panel's attention to the timing of the impulses. Subsequently, Dale Myers's work proved that HSCA's scenario of an open mike in Dealey Plaza was invalid. See Dale K. Myers, "[Secrets of a Homicide: Epipolar Geometric Analysis of Amateur Films Related to Acoustics Evidence in the John F. Kennedy Assassination](#)," (Milford, MI: Oak Cliff Press, 2007). See also "[Acoustical Analysis of November 22 1963 Dallas Police Recordings](#)," the Sonalysts study that Sabato commissioned.

[5] Sabato, *Kennedy Half-Century*, 133-134. The claim that the Warren Commission was first and foremost devoted to pacifying the public, rather than developing all the facts, was first advanced in 1966. See Edward Jay Epstein, *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth* (New York: Viking, 1966).

[6] Sabato, *Kennedy Half-Century*, 134.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] "Memorandum for Mr. Moyers," 25 November 1963 in US House of Representatives, Select Committee on Assassinations, *Investigation of the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy: Hearings*, Vol. III (Washington, DC: GPO, 1979), [567](#).

[9] [Ibid.](#)

[10] US House of Representatives, Select Committee on Assassinations, *Investigation of the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy: Hearings*, Vol. III (Washington, DC: GPO, 1979), [653](#).

[11] Sabato, *Kennedy Half-Century*, 134.

[12] *Ibid.*, 135.

[13] Executive Session, President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy, [12 December 1963](#), courtesy Mary Ferrell Foundation.

[14] Executive Session, President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy, [22 January 1964](#), courtesy Mary Ferrell Foundation.

[15] Bryan McKenzie, "[Warren Commission Members Take Issue with Sabato's JFK Book](#)," *The Daily Progress*, 21 December 2013.

[16] Sabato, *Kennedy Half-Century*, 138. The reasons for the decline in trust in 1960s are complex. The decline began even before the *Warren Report* was issued in September 1964, and during the two years the report was widely regarded as definitive, trust in the government was simultaneously plummeting. Pew Research Center for the People & The Press, *Deconstructing Distrust: How Americans View Government* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 1998), 6.

[17] Vincent Bugliosi, *Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 326; Sabato, *Kennedy Half-Century*, 140.

[18] Sabato, *Kennedy Half-Century*, 141.

[19] Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, "[Kennedy Assassination: Bill and Gayle Newman](#)," Part 2, 10 July 2003; Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, "[Living History with the Newmans](#)," 9 November 2013.

[20] Jefferson Morley, "[What Was Going Through My Mind Was That Shot Coming Right Over the Top of Our Heads](#)," *JFKfacts.org*, 22 November 2013.

[21] Bugliosi, *Reclaiming History*, 848.

[22] Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, "[Living History with the Newmans](#)," 9 November 2013.