

Why RFK Shunned the Inquiry into His Brother's Assassination

By Max Holland

For the federal government, and all Americans, it has been a long, torturous road from the 6th floor of 411 Elm Street in Dallas to the second floor of 600 E Street in Washington. But now these two red brick buildings are irrevocably connected in history as the federal government writes the last chapter of its part in the tragedy which, 35 years ago, struck dumb an entire nation.

Four-eleven Elm Street is more commonly known by the name of its former tenant, the Texas School Book Depository Company. The nondescript building at 600 E Street has no such claim on the national consciousness, though over time the work of one tenant there will do as much or more to shape history - if reason ever prevails over our paranoia with respect to the assassination of President Kennedy.

For the past four years, five presidential appointees have labored almost anonymously, yet tirelessly, in Suite 208 to make public every significant artifact and document related to November 22, 1963, and its aftermath. Within a matter of days the Assassination Records Review Board, as the appointees are collectively known, will publish its final report and shut down for good on September 30th.

Unlike every previous federal effort, however, the review board will not assert a single conclusion, in keeping with its mandate. It will report only what it managed to find. It's up to others to make sense out of the four-million-page collection, assembled at the cost of \$ 8 million to the taxpayers.

While there are 10,000 stories in those documents, including many peripheral to the assassination, it is not premature to ask how, if at all, they affect our understanding of the emotional and political Grand Canyon that opened beneath our gaze in 1963.

Many of the documents have lain open for months already. Whether by accident or design, the review board has shed new light on the genuine Rosetta stone to that weekend in Dallas, namely, the response of Robert F. Kennedy to his brother's murder.

The version heretofore propagated was congenial to the Camelot metaphor, though independent of it. Roughly described, the preferred account has been that Robert Kennedy, attorney general at the time, was so profoundly devastated by the loss that he paid little heed to who was responsible for the assassination. "Jack's gone and nothing is going to bring him back" was RFK's refrain whenever he was intermittently pressed on his apparent uninterest in the Warren Commission's investigation.

The truth turns out to be considerably more complicated and interesting. Through the review board's efforts, you can piece together as never before the genuine, underlying reason for Robert Kennedy's uncharacteristic response. His pain was compounded by guilt. Because what occurred in Dallas was roughly what Robert Kennedy hoped and planned to have happen in Havana.

While a dozen documents retrieved and declassified help to build this case, the single most striking is an Oval Office memorandum of conversation dated January 4, 1975, almost 12 years after Dallas. There are only three men in the room that Saturday morning as the discussion begins: Gerald Ford, president for a mere five months; Henry Kissinger, who held unprecedented power as Ford's secretary of state and national security adviser, and Brent Scowcroft, the note-taker (and later a national security adviser in his own right). The urgent, 9:40 a.m. meeting was called because the season of inquiry spawned by Watergate had not exhausted itself. But now the target was not a president but the sacrosanct Central Intelligence Agency, which was hanging in the fire after press reports of "massive" wrongdoing.

Kissinger is conveying to Ford the gist of his just-concluded breakfast conversation with former CIA Director Richard Helms, who had been summoned from Tehran to brief the White House about the alleged misdeeds. "What is happening," Kissinger tells the president, "is worse than in the days of McCarthy. You will end up with a CIA that does only reporting, and not operations.

"Helms said all these stories are just the tip of the iceberg. If they come out, blood will flow. For example, Robert Kennedy personally managed the operation on the assassination of Castro."

The suggestion has already been made (this memo was opened in July) that the document does not really mean what it states in plain English, that it must be carefully put into context. Yet it is precisely the context that makes this document dispositive. Unless the White House could devise a mechanism, the CIA's days as an instrument of presidential power were numbered. But the president had to have all the facts to act effectively. It is inconceivable that Richard Helms told Henry Kissinger anything less than the full, hard truths as Helms knew them and as Kissinger needed to know them. As Allen Dulles once explained the need-to-know principle, "I would tell the president of the United States anything . . . I am under his control. He is my boss."

This truth about Robert Kennedy's bottomless melancholy, which never fully lifted during the remainder of his life, has at least three implications. For one, it helps explain his uninterest in the Warren Commission. Months before that federal panel presented its conclusion - indeed, probably no later than Christmas 1963 - he had reached the unavoidable conclusion, relying on his own crack investigators: Oswald, though enamored of Castro, had acted alone and Jack Ruby was a self-appointed vigilante. None of RFK's *bete noires* - not Castro, Jimmy Hoffa or the *Cosa Nostra* - had anything to do with the Dallas murders. Consequently the Warren Commission was not going to tell him anything he did not already know.

Indeed, in some respects the Warren Commission's investigation represented a threat, first to the Kennedy administration's image and then to RFK's own political viability. That is the only conceivable reason why Kennedy, when specifically asked by Earl Warren, did not share his knowledge of anti-Castro plotting with the Warren Commission. One is left with the bleak, sobering fact that Robert Kennedy and other high-ranking officials, no less than the CIA, realized that the national interest (as apart from the truth) would not be served by having the Warren Commission delve into and probably expose the plotting.

Rock-solid intelligence proved Castro had nothing to do with Oswald. Therefore, whatever the US government was trying to do was irrelevant to the issue of Oswald's culpability. The same need-to-know principle that compelled full disclosure in 1975 dictated in 1964 that the chief justice and Warren Commission staff be kept in the dark insofar as possible. And so they were.

Robert Kennedy's anguish and predicament turns out to be the metaphor for understanding the aftermath of the assassination. The entire, vast apparatus of the federal government had been put in motion to find out who had murdered a president. But once the facts pointed overwhelmingly in one and only one direction, the truth was portioned out to protect individuals and bureaucracies.

It's not the civic portrait (a government of laws, not men) depicted by high school textbooks. But it is the legacy left behind by the Assassination Records Review Board, and it ought to shift the entire axis of public understanding. Will Americans ever come to terms with this portrait of imperfection, and understand that for all the omissions, their government did not fail in its one supreme duty - which was to tell the people who had killed their president.

Postscript: In March, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., the historian who did more than anyone to obfuscate the truth about Robert Kennedy's response to his brother's assassination, died in New York of a heart attack.