

## Big D

*By Ron Capshaw*

*Dallas 1963*

Bill Muntaglio and Steven L. Davis

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Rarely mentioned in the seemingly endless debate about who killed John F. Kennedy is how much the reputation of Texas was tied into it. The immediate reaction from the national news media on 22 November 1963 was that the hateful rightwing climate in Dallas murdered the president. Texans, in turn, sought to save their state's pride by practically screaming (which didn't help their case) that Kennedy wasn't killed by a Texan or Texans but by a New Orleans-born Marxist.

Bill Muntaglio a Texas journalist, and Stephen L. Davis, a University of Texas professor residing in Austin, a liberal bastion, show the dangerous combination of fundamentalist religion and politics in Camelot-era Dallas. Ministers cranked out pamphlets entitled "God: The First Segregationist." Birchers regard the cold war as a holy one, the forces of God versus satanic communism, and true to their conspiracy mindset found one of its minions in the White House. Even though President Kennedy's commitment to civil rights was feeble at best, Dallas's right-wing viewed him as some kind of Malcolm X, and his decided anticommunism (his administration increased the number of advisers in South Vietnam, and waged a secret war against Fidel Castro) was still found wanting. The publisher of the *Dallas Morning News* told Kennedy to his face that the country needed a man on horseback, but was instead getting a president who rode Caroline's bicycle. Not even one of their one, Lyndon B. Johnson, was exempt from suspicion and abuse. When visiting Dallas during the 1960 campaign, he and Lady Bird were mobbed by an angry crowd. And UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson was spat upon and hit during a visit to Dallas just a month before the assassination.

Perhaps out of some lingering state pride, the authors do show that a moderate-liberal group existed in the city. Stanley Marcus and the Reverend Rhett James led protests against businesses that would not integrate. But they represented a passive element in the Dallas body politic, one that would not become assertive until after the assassination. Only then did the citizenry erupt, phoning in death threats to rightwing benefactor H. L. Hunt and destroying the office of the local John Birch Society.

Whatever their beliefs regarding the assassination, the authors, show how the suffocating hate in Dallas might have inadvertently activated an assassin. If there ever was a person who was in the wrong place at the wrong time, it was Lee Harvey Oswald. He truly was surrounded by an opposing point of view; even the few liberals in the city were anti-Castro (his Fair Play for Cuba chapter in New Orleans had had one member—himself). Such a vast unpopularity probably appealed to his loner nature, and he could have felt himself a David in a whole city of Goliaths. While Oswald's views made him an outcast in Dallas, the authors argue he did absorb the city's Manichean worldview. Oswald lumped Kennedy in the enemy camp although the president's foes were reactionaries who opposed Castro. If all of this was true, then the authors are correct—the hatreds of left and right did feed off each other.

*Dallas 1963* is an amazing book. The authors are not interested in condemning, merely reporting. They do not attempt, like NBC commentator Chris Matthews, to link the atmosphere of Dallas with the feelings of those who oppose Obama today. Instead they provide a cautionary tale about how hatred and frustration can boil over dangerously.

This is Ron Capshaw's second book review for *Washington Decoded*.