

11-1-2008

Book Review: The Echo from Dealey Plaza: The True Story of the First African American on the White House Secret Service Detail and His Quest for Justice after the Assassination of JFK (2008) and The Road to Dallas: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy (2008)

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Repository Citation

Wilkes, Donald E. Jr., "Book Review: The Echo from Dealey Plaza: The True Story of the First African American on the White House Secret Service Detail and His Quest for Justice after the Assassination of JFK (2008) and The Road to Dallas: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy (2008)" (2008). *Popular Media*. Paper 25.
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book review

BLUNDERS AND WONDERS OF NOV. 22, 1963

In this, my 27th article on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, I discuss two recent books [in a two-part article: one book here, one in next week's issue. -Ed.]. The first is *The Echo from Dealey Plaza: The True Story of the First African American on the White House Secret Service Detail and His Quest for Justice After the Assassination of JFK* (Harmony Books, 2007) by Abraham Bolden. It was President Kennedy himself who invited Bolden to join the White House detail. *The Echo from Dealey Plaza* is the first JFK assassination book by a former White House Secret Service agent. One sentence in Abraham Bolden's doleful narrative haunts us: "What I do know is that the president died because of a failure of the security around him, a situation that some of us saw coming."

that he "didn't believe the agents on the White House detail would act swiftly or appropriately to stop an attempt on the president's life." He always received the same response—that he was overreacting.

After the assassination, Bolden contacted the Warren Commission and volunteered to testify not only about the laxity of the agents assigned to protect JFK, but also about a conspiracy involving four men with scope-mounted rifles who had plotted to assassinate JFK while he was on a proposed visit to Chicago on Nov. 2, 1963, a visit canceled just before it was to begin. The Warren Commission, however, refused to interview Bolden. Due to this, as well as a mysterious Secret Service cover-up, the Warren Commission was unaware of the existence of the Chicago assassination conspiracy, and the Warren Report says nothing about the Chicago plot.

In May 1964, in retaliation for his offer to testify before the Warren Commission, Bolden was arrested on trumped-up charges of bribery, obstruction of justice, and conspiracy. After two trials he was convicted on all counts by an all-white jury and served five years in federal prison. In 1978, after his release, Bolden testified before the House Select Committee on Assassinations, relating the story of the four plotters with scoped rifles and how the threat they posed resulted in a last-minute scrapping of JFK's plans to be in Chicago on Nov. 2, 1963. The documentary evidence supporting Bolden's story having been destroyed or hidden away, and with no other Chicago Secret Service agent willing to confirm Bolden's account, the House Assassinations Committee unfortunately regarded Bolden's testimony as of "questionable authenticity" and announced that it "was unable to determine specifically why the president's trip to Chicago, scheduled for November 2, was canceled."

The House Assassinations Committee's wariness of Abraham Bolden's testimony was, we now know, unjustified. Bolden's assertions that three weeks before the Dallas assassination a team of killers equipped with high-power rifles was plotting to shoot Kennedy in Chicago, and that JFK's planned trip to that city was canceled at the last moment due to the dangers of the plot, have become widely recognized truths since publication of Lamar Waldron and Thom Hartmann's authoritative and thoroughly documented *Ultimate Sacrifice* (2005), which devotes two entire chapters to the Chicago conspiracy. Abraham Bolden stands vindicated by history.

The Echo from Dealey Plaza also throws new light on the drinking problems of agents protecting JFK at the time of the assassination. It is well established that, in flagrant violation of Secret Service regulations, nine of the agents guarding JFK in Dallas, including four in the escort car behind the presidential limousine, had been out drinking until the early hours on the morning of Nov. 22. The 1964 Warren Report acknowledged but minimized this startling fact, as did the Final Report of the House Assassinations Committee. Both reports focused on the drinking that occurred the night before the assassination. Neither report concerned itself with whether the consumption of alcohol by the presidential protectors while traveling with the president—such consumption being strictly prohibited under all circumstances—was a recurring problem. It was Bolden's book permits us to see that the irresponsible behavior of the nine agents the night before the assassination was part of a disturbing pattern of similar misbehavior by the White House detail—a pattern that must have materially increased the possibility of an assassination attempt succeeding.

Donald E. Wilkes, Jr.

To be continued next week. Donald E. Wilkes, Jr. teaches in the UGA School of Law, and has written for *Flagpole* about the Kennedy assassination for years. A fuller version of this article appears at Flagpole.com.

The Echo from Dealey Plaza



The true story of the first African American on the White House Secret Service

detail and his quest for justice after the assassination of JFK



Abraham Bolden

It is now an accepted truth that, due to its own blundering, the U.S. Secret Service inadequately protected JFK in Dallas, TX on Nov. 22, 1963. As the 1979 Final Report of the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations bluntly puts it, the Secret Service "was deficient in the performance of its duties." In addition to the Final Report, numerous books and articles set out the grim specifics of the Secret Service bungling. There were shocking defects in the advance planning and the final arrangements for the presidential motorcade through Dallas on Nov. 22. As a result, escort security for the motorcade was, in the castigating words of the House Assassinations Committee, "uniquely insecure."

During his brief tenure (June to July 1961) on the White House detail, Abraham Bolden became alarmed by the drinking habits, sexual escapades, and arrogant overconfidence of many (but certainly not all) of the Secret Service agents guarding JFK. After completing his probationary period of service on the White House detail, Bolden decided to opt out of protective work and return to criminal investigation, transferring to the Secret Service field office in Chicago. Before leaving Washington, in an exit interview with U. E. Baughman, then chief of the Secret Service, Bolden related his personal knowledge of the carousing of the White House detail. On arriving in Chicago, Bolden told every colleague or superior he could

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book review

MAFIA MURDER?

Editor's note: Following is the second part of a two-part article, continued from last week's issue.

The second book I shall review is David Kaiser's *The Road to Dallas: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008). A professional historian, David Kaiser is a professor in the strategy and policy department of the Naval War College. His book is one of the first JFK assassination books based on an examination of the hundreds of thousands of pages of government files and records made public under the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collections Act of 1992.

The mantra of *The Road to Dallas* is that organized crime was responsible for the assassination. Kaiser believes that Mafia bigshots Carlos Marcello, Santos Trafficante, Sam Giancana and John Roselli, with the encouragement of Teamsters Union boss Jimmy Hoffa, masterminded the killing of JFK, who was then shot dead by a professional hitman working for the mob. The motive for the assassination was to put an end to Attorney General Robert Kennedy's no-holds-barred crusade to cripple organized crime in America.

None of these assertions is new, and *The Road to Dallas* is hardly the first book to suggest that the JFK assassination was a gangland murder. Among researchers the Mafia conspiracy theory is one of the leading explanations for the JFK assassination. Despite the praiseworthy research efforts of Kaiser and other proponents of the theory, however, the Mafia conspiracy theory remains no more credible than various other viable conspiracy theories (e.g., the CIA conspiracy theory, the Castro conspiracy theory, the anti-Castroite conspiracy theory, and the white supremacist/right-wing extremist conspiracy theory). *The Road to Dallas* is by no means a slam-dunk victory for the mob plot theory.

(For what it is worth, I believe that JFK was assassinated by a conspiracy and that the conspirators most likely were an ad hoc group of fanatical anti-Castroite extremists, rogue CIA operatives, racial supremacists, right-wing extremists and organized crime figures.)

LEE HARVEY OSWALD: MAFIA HITMAN?

In many respects, Kaiser's *The Road to Dallas* professes true belief in the Warren Commission. Like the Warren Commission, Kaiser's book maintains that Lee Harvey Oswald fired all the shots in Dealey Plaza; that the CIA was not involved in the assassination; and that it was indeed Oswald who murdered Dallas police officer J.D. Tippit, shot to death about 45 minutes after the JFK assassination. Kaiser also endorses the Warren Report's widely-condemned single bullet theory.

It is a matter of some wonder that a distinguished scholar such as Kaiser would embrace discredited findings of the Warren Commission. There is ample evidence that the shots fired in Dealey Plaza came from more than one location, as the House Assassinations Committee concluded way back in 1979. There are mountains of evidence suggesting that CIA personnel may very well have been involved in the JFK assassination, and *The Road to Dallas* itself is chock full of information about mysterious connections between the CIA and both Oswald and organized crime figures. The evidence that Oswald murdered officer Tippit is unconvincing. Finally, there are powerful reasons for rejecting the single bullet theory.

In other important respects, however, *The Road to Dallas* forthrightly repudiates key findings of the Warren Commission. Although the Warren Report described Oswald as a Marxist and pro-Communist, Kaiser's book finds that "Oswald was not

a sincere leftist" and that "there is not one shred of evidence indicat[ing] that he had a single personal contact with [any] leftist organizations, or, indeed, with any leftist activists at all." Rather, Oswald's political activities suggest that he might have been clandestinely working for the FBI to embarrass leftist causes. Contrary to the Warren Report, Kaiser's book says the JFK assassination was not the work of a lone assassin but a conspiracy—a Mafia conspiracy. According to the book, Oswald was the triggerman, retained by the syndicate, who shot JFK. Thus, Kaiser believes the Warren Report was wrong in concluding that when Oswald killed Kennedy he was acting by himself as a lone nut; in actuality, Oswald was a paid assassin. Finally, "The Warren Report downplayed [Jack] Ruby's organized crimes associations." Furthermore, Ruby, who murdered

Oswald in Dallas police headquarters two days after the president's assassination, did not, as the Warren Commission claimed, act impulsively or for personal reasons. Instead, Ruby was hired by organized crime to kill Oswald and stalked Oswald for two days before gunning him down in the presence of 70 policemen.

That the JFK assassination resulted from a conspiracy, that Lee Harvey Oswald only pretended to be a leftist, that Jack Ruby was mob-connected and assigned by the Mafia to bump off Oswald, I can well believe. That Oswald was a mob hitman, however, is not believable. Indeed, the very notion that Oswald was a paid Mafia killer is wondrous.

There is, after all, practically no evidence that Oswald was the expert shot required for the task of assassinating a president, while there is a mass of evidence that he was at best an average shooter. Even if Oswald had been a crack shot, the Mafia would surely have had better, more experienced kill-

ers to turn to, men who were not only far better shots than Oswald but also more reliable and professional in the art of rubbing people out. Finally, it is inconceivable that a Mafia hitman taking on the job of murdering the president would use the worn 1940 bolt-action Italian carbine, firing 6.5mm ammunition manufactured in 1944, that both the Warren Commission and Kaiser say Oswald used. The evidence adduced in *The Road to Dallas* in an attempt to prove that Oswald was a hired killer is, in my estimation, feeble.

TRUTH ON THE MARCH

The Kennedy assassination is an exception to the usual rule that the passage of time makes it more difficult to reconstruct past events. It has now been 45 years since the assassination, and we now know far more about it than we did in 1964 when the Warren Report was issued. If the Warren Report were released today for the first time, it would be hooted down for its shallowness. The principal reason for this? The steady publication, year after year since 1964, of new books and articles with additional information or newly discovered facts about the assassination. Despite regrettable errors which have crept into some of these writings, overall we ought to be thankful to their authors. I therefore salute Abraham Bolden, author of *The Echo from Dealey Plaza*, and I also salute David Kaiser, author of *The Road to Dallas*, notwithstanding that book's imperfections. Both authors have contributed to the march of truth. In regard to America's crime of the 20th century, we still don't know the full truth, and we may never know the full truth, but we do know a lot more than we once did.

Donald E. Wilkes, Jr.

Donald E. Wilkes, Jr. teaches in the University of Georgia School of Law. A fuller version of this article appears at Flagpole.com.

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