

“American Values: Lessons I Learned from My Family” by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.

Book Review

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Global Research, June 11, 2018

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

When a book as fascinating, truthful, beautifully written, and politically significant as American Values: Lessons I Learned from My Family, written by a very well-known author by the name of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. and published by a prominent publisher (HarperCollins), is boycotted by mainstream book reviewers, you know it is an important book and has touched a nerve that the corporate mainstream media wish to anesthetize by eschewal.

The Kennedy name attracts the mainstream media only when they can sensationalize something “scandalous” – preferably sexual or drug related – whether false or true, or something innocuous that can lend credence to the myth that the Kennedys are lightweight, wealthy celebrities descended from Irish mobsters. This has been going on since the 1960s with the lies and cover-ups about the assassinations of President Kennedy and his brother Robert, propaganda that continues to the present day, always under the aegis of the CIA-created phrase “conspiracy theory.” A thinking person might just get the idea that the media are in league with the CIA to bury the Kennedys.

Such disinformation has been promulgated by many sources, prominent among them from the start in the 1960s was the CIA’s Sam Halpern, a former Havana bureau chief for the *New York Times*, who was CIA Director Richard Helms’s deputy (the key source for Seymour Hersh’s Kennedy hatchet job, *The Dark Side of Camelot*), who began spreading lies about the Kennedys that have become ingrained in the minds of leftists, liberals, centrists, and conservatives to this very day. Fifty years later, after decades of reiteration by the CIA’s Wurlitzer machine (the name given by the CIA’s Frank Wisner to the CIA’s penetration and control of the mass media, *Operation Mockingbird*), Halpern’s lies have taken on mythic proportions. Among them: that Joseph. P. Kennedy, the patriarch, was a bootlegger and Nazi lover; that he was Mafia connected and fixed the 1960 election with Chicago mobster Sam Giancana; and that JFK and RFK knew of and approved the CIA plots to assassinate Fidel Castro.

Of course whenever a writer extolls the Kennedy name and legacy, he is expected to add the caveat that the Kennedys, especially JFK and RFK, were no saints. Lacking this special talent to determine sainthood or its lack, I will defer to those who feel compelled to temper their praise with a guilty commonplace. Let me say at the outset that I greatly admire President John Kennedy and his brother, Robert, very courageous men who died in a war to steer this country away from the nefarious path of war-making and deep-state control that it has followed with a vengeance since their murders.

And I admire Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. for writing this compelling book that is a tour de force on many levels.

Part memoir, part family history, part astute political analysis, and part-confessional, it is in turns delightful, sad, funny, fierce, and frightening in its implications. From its opening sentence – “From my youngest days I always had the feeling that we were all involved in some great crusade, that the world was a battleground for good and evil, and that our lives would be consumed in the conflict.” – to its last – “‘Kennedys never give up, ’ she [Ethel Kennedy] chided us. ‘We have to die with our boots on!’” – the book is imbued with the spirit of the eloquent, romantic Irish-Catholic rebels whose fighting spirit and jaunty demeanor the Kennedy family has exemplified. RFK, Jr. tells his tales in words that honor that literary and spiritual tradition.

So what is it about this book that has caused the mainstream press to avoid reviewing it?

Might it be the opening chapter devoted to his portrait of his grandfather, Joseph P. Kennedy, who comes across as a tender and doting grandpa, who created an idyllic world for his children and grandchildren at “The Big House” on Cape Cod? We see Grandpa Joe taking the whole brood of Kennedys, including his three famous political sons, for a ride on his cabin cruiser, the *Marlin*, and JFK (Uncle Jack) singing “The Wearing of the Green” and, together with his good friend, Dave Powers, teaching the kids to whistle “The Boys of Wexford” (Wexford being the Kennedy’s ancestral home), an Irish rebel tune all of whose words John Kennedy knew by heart:

We are the boys of Wexford
Who fought with heart and hand
To burst in twain
The galling chain
And free our native land.

We see Joseph P. Kennedy sitting on the great white porch, holding hands with his wife Rose Kennedy, as the kids played touch football on the grass beyond. We read that “Grandpa wanted his children’s minds unshackled by ideology” and that his “overarching purpose was to engender in his children a social conscience” and use their money and advantages to make America and the world a better place. We learn, according to Joe’s son, Senator Robert Kennedy, that he loved all of them deeply, “not love as it is described with such facility in popular magazines, but the kind of love that is affection and respect, order, encouragement and support.” We hear him staunchly defended from the political criticisms that he was a ruthless, uncaring, and political nut-case who would do anything to advance his political and business careers. In short, he is presented very differently from the popular understanding of him as a malign force and a ruthless bastard.

Portraying his grandfather as a good and loving man may be one minor reason that Robert Jr.’s book is being ignored.

No doubt it is not because of the picture he paints of his paternal grandmother, Rose Kennedy, who comes across similarly to her husband as a powerful presence and as a devoted mother and grandmother who expected much from her children and grandchildren but gave much in return. Robert Jr. writes that “Grandpa and Grandma were products of an

alienated Irish generation that kept itself intact through rigid tribalism embodied in the rituals and mystical cosmologies of medieval Catholicism,” but that both believed the Church should be a champion of the poor as Christ taught. The glowing portrait of Grandmother Rose could not be the reason the book has not been reviewed.

Nor can the chapter on Ethel Kennedy’s family, the Skakels, be the reason. It is a fascinating peek into certain aspects of Ethel’s character – the daring, outrageous, fun-loving, and wild side – from her upbringing in a wild and crazy family, together with the Kennedys one of the richest Catholic families in the U.S. in days past. But there their similarities end. The Skakels were conservative Republicans in the oil, coal, and extraction business, who “reveled in immodest consumption,” were huge into guns and “more primitive weaponry like bows, knives, throwing spears and harpoons,” and “pretty much captured shot, stabbed, hooked, or speared anything that moved, including each other.” The Skakel men worked as informers for the CIA wherever their businesses took them around the world and they worked very hard to sabotage JFK’s run for the presidency. Ethel’s brother George was a creepy and crazy wild man. Once Ethel met RFK, she switched political sides for good, embracing the Kennedy’s liberal Democratic ethos.

A vignette of Lemoyne Billings, JFK’s dear friend, who after RFK’s assassination took Robert Jr. under his wing, can’t be the reason. It too is a loving portrait of the man RFK Jr. says was “perhaps the most important influence in my life” and also the most fun. In his turn Billings said that JFK was the most fun person he had ever met. They referred to each other as Johnny and Billy and both were expelled from Choate for hijinks. But stories about Lem, JFK, and RFK Jr. would attract, not repel, the mainstream press’s book reviewers.

Clearly the chapter about Robert Jr.’s early bad behavior, his drug use, and his conflicted relationship with his mother would be fuel for the Kennedy haters. “I seem to have been at odds with my mother since birth,” he writes. “My mere presence seemed to agitate her.” Mother and son were at war for

decades, and his father’s murder sent him on a long downward spiral into self-medicating that inflamed their relationship. Moving from school to school and keeping away from home as much as possible, his “homecomings were like the arrival of a squall. With me around to provoke her, my mother didn’t stay angry very long – she went straight to rage.” His victory over drugs through Twelve Step meetings and his reconciliation with his mother are also the stuff that the mainstream press revels in, yet they ignore the book.

The parts about his relationship with his father, his father’s short but electrifying presidential campaign in 1968, his death, and funeral are deeply moving and evocative. Deep sadness and lost hope accompanies the reader as one revisits RFK’s funeral and the tear-filled eulogy given by his brother Ted, then the long slow train ride bearing the body from New York to Washington, D.C. as massive crowds, lined the tracks, weeping and waving farewell. And the writer, now a 64-year-old-man, but then a 14- year-old-boy, named after his look-alike father, the father who supported and encouraged him despite his difficulties in school, the father who took the son on all kinds of outdoor adventures – sailing, white water canoeing, mountain climbing – always reminding him to “always do what you are afraid to do” and which the son understood to be “boot camp for the ultimate virtue – moral courage. Despite his high regard for physical bravery, my father told us that moral courage is the rarer and more valuable commodity.” Such compelling, heartfelt writing, with not a word about who might have killed his father, would be another reason why the mainstream press would review this book.

It is the heart of this book that has the reviewers avoiding it like the plague, perhaps a plague introduced by a little mockingbird.

American Values revolves around the long war between the Kennedys and the CIA that resulted in the deaths of JFK and RFK. All the other chapters, while very interesting personal and family history, pale in importance.

No member of the Kennedy family since JFK or RFK has dared to say what RFK, Jr. does in this book. He indicts the CIA.

While some news outlets have mentioned the book in passing because of its assertion that what has been known for a long time to historically aware people – that RFK immediately suspected that the CIA was involved in the assassination of JFK – Robert Jr.'s writing on the war between the CIA and his Uncle Jack and father is so true and so carefully based on the best scholarship and family records that the picture he paints fiercely indicts the CIA in multiple ways while also indicting the mass media that have been its mouthpieces. These sections of the book are masterful lessons in understanding the history and machinations of "The Agency" that the superb writer and researcher, Douglass Valentine, calls "organized crime" – the CIA. A careful reading of RFK Jr.'s critical history leads to the conclusion that the CIA and the Mafia are not two separate murderer's rows, but one organization that has corrupted the country at the deepest levels and is, as Kennedy quotes his father Robert – "a dark force infiltrating American politics and business, unseen by the public, and out of reach of democracy and the justice system" – posing "a greater threat to our country than any foreign enemy." The CIA's covert operations branch has grown so powerful that it feels free to murder its opponents at home and abroad and make sure "splendid little wars" are continually waged around the globe for the interests of its patrons. Robert Jr. says, "A permanent state of war abroad and a national security surveillance state at home are in the institutional self-interest of the CIA's clandestine services."

No Kennedy has dared speak like this since Senator Robert Kennedy last did so – but privately – and paid the price. His son tells us:

Days before his murder, as my father pulled ahead in the California polls, he began considering how he would govern the country. According to his aide Fred Dutton, his concerns often revolved around the very question that his brother asked at the outset of his presidency, 'What are we going to do about the CIA?' Days before the California primary, seated next to journalist Pete Hamill on his campaign plane, my father mused aloud about his options. 'I have to decide whether to eliminate the operations arm of the Agency or what the hell to do with it,' he told Hamill. 'We can't have those cowboys wandering around and shooting people and doing all those unauthorized things.'

Then he was shot dead.

For whatever their reasons, for fifty plus years the Kennedy family has kept silent on these matters. Now Senator Robert Kennedy's namesake has picked up his father's mantle and dared to tell truths that take courage to utter. By excoriating the secret forces that seized power, first with the murder of his Uncle Jack when he was a child, and then his father, he has exhibited great moral courage and made great enemies who wish to ignore his words as if they were never uttered. But they have. They sit between the covers of this outstanding and important book, a book written with wit and eloquence, a book that should be read by

any American who wants to know what has happened to their country.

There is a telling anecdote that took place in the years following JFK's assassination when RFK was haunted by his death. It says so much about Senator Kennedy and now his son, a son who in many ways for many wandering years became a prodigal son lost in grief and drugs only to return home to find his voice and tell the truth for his father and his family. He writes,

One day he [RFK] came into my bedroom and handed me a hardcover copy of Camus's *The Plague*. 'I want you to read this,' he said with particular urgency. It was the story of a doctor trapped in a quarantined North African city while a raging epidemic devastates its citizenry; the physician's small acts of service, while ineffective against the larger tragedy, give meaning to his own life, and, somehow, to the larger universe. I spent a lot of time thinking about that book over the years, and why my father gave it to me. I believe it was the key to a door that he himself was then unlocking....It is neither our position nor our circumstances that define us... but our response to those circumstances; when destiny crushes us, small heroic gestures of courage and service can bring peace and fulfillment. In applying our shoulder to the stone, we give order to a chaotic universe. Of the many wonderful things my father left me, this philosophical truth was perhaps the most useful. In many ways, it has defined my life.

By writing *American Values: Lessons I Learned from My Family*, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. has named the plague and entered the fight. His father would be very proud of him. He has defined himself.

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