

JFK After 50 Years

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I never met President Kennedy although I have a letter from him, on my ninth birthday in 1961, expressing hope that I might grow up to be as good a Democrat as my father “but possibly of a more convenient size.” On the day he was shot I was at school. I remember above all Mother’s gray face, and the small clumps of men gathered on the Cambridge sidewalks, talking quietly as we drove home.

Dad was in Washington. His message home was, “it’s the worst day of my life.” Realizing that the White House would no longer be hers, he arranged for Mrs. Kennedy to stay at Averell Harriman’s house in Georgetown. A few days later, he wrote a first draft of President Johnson’s address to Congress. It was not the one Johnson used.

For thirty years afterward I barely thought about those days. In our family – I now realize – they were walled off by pain. Vietnam, Watergate, career, marriage and divorce came and went. And then, by happenstance in 1993, I started thinking again. There were by that time some 600 books on the assassination, or so I heard.

I read perhaps one-tenth that number, in those days when the topic gripped me. What did I learn? That contested history is hard. Length does not correlate with depth. Authorities and endorsements mean nothing. Footnotes matter. To plumb the murder of John F. Kennedy you have to know how to read.

I have contributed to the history. One issue concerned Kennedy’s decision, made in October 1963 with the support of Robert McNamara, to order the withdrawal of all US advisers from Vietnam by the end of 1965. The fact of that decision was later suppressed. To re-establish it, even with clear evidence, took a battle among historians that lasted fifteen years. And the battle goes on. On October 27, Jill Abramson published a long essay in The New York Times Book Review that includes this statement: “...the belief that [Kennedy] would have limited the American presence in Vietnam is rooted as much in the romance of “what might have been” as in the documented record.”

The record of meetings, tapes and memoranda demonstrates otherwise. One from General Maxwell Taylor to his fellow Joint Chiefs of Staff, dated October 4, 1963 and conveying the President’s decision states plainly: “All planning will be directed towards preparing RVN forces for the withdrawal of all U.S. special assistance units and personnel by the end of calendar year 1965.”

The other topic was America’s nuclear war-fighting plans. Twenty years ago my student Heather Purcell discovered in the Vice Presidential security file for 1961 that the US strategic plan foresaw a nuclear first strike on the USSR and China, to be launched on an unspecified pretext in late 1963. Kennedy’s reaction to this was fury. It was not for nothing

that President Johnson, staring out of the window on the flight from Dallas, remarked to Bill Moyers, "I wonder if the missiles are flying." Did these matters play a role in Kennedy's death? And if they did, what was their importance, compared with (say) the possibility that Kennedy might have been about to normalize relations with Cuba - or even to end the Cold War?

I could state my view but it would not help. Over fifty years, the JFK controversies have destroyed the credibility of official views. Understanding cannot be handed down: not by the Warren Commission, not by the House Select Committee on Assassinations, not by Oliver Stone, and not by me. Let me only share something that Mikhail Gorbachev said to me, when we met in Italy in 2010: that when he visited the sixth-floor museum at the Texas School Book Depository, he wrote in the guest book, "I think I know why."

Fifty years later, it's not so very difficult to get a good grip on the basic facts. It's possible to separate the honest inquiry from the inept. Many people have already done this. But it does require work, in the form of careful, critical reading, aided by discussion in private groups. You have to study, take notes, argue, and figure it out on your own, for yourself and along with people you trust. Democratically. Truth to tell, I'm not as good a Democrat as my father. But perhaps the hope that President Kennedy expressed for me long ago has been realized, in a small way, after all. ****

James Galbraith teaches at the LBJ School of Public Affairs. His father, John Kenneth Galbraith, tutored John F. Kennedy at Harvard and served as his Ambassador to India from 1961 to 1963. He stood 6 feet, 8 inches tall - a most inconvenient size.

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