

MAFIA MURDER?

Published in Flagpole Magazine, p. 11 (November 26, 2008).

I shall now review 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, or that the assassination was committed for the purpose of halting Robert Kennedy's anti-Mafia crime-busting activities. In addition to the leading work, Lamar Waldron and Thom Hartmann's *Ultimate Sacrifice* (2005), the books espousing the mob plot theory include Peter Noyes, *Legacy of Doubt* (1973); Dan E. Moldea, *The Hoffa Wars: Teamsters, Rebels, Politicians, and the Mob* (1978); G. Robert Blakey and Richard N. Billings, *The Plot to Kill the President* (1981); David E. Scheim, *Contract on America: The Mafia Murder of President John F. Kennedy* (1988); John H. Davis, *Mafia Kingfish: Carlos Marcello and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy* (1989); Sam Giancana and Chuck

Giancana, *Double Cross: The Explosive, Inside Story of the Mobster Who Controlled America* (1992); Frank Ragano and Selwyn Raab, *Mob Lawyer* (1994); and Antoinette Giancana, John R. Hughes, and Thomas H. Jobe, *JFK and Sam: The Connection Between the Giancana and Kennedy Assassinations* (2005).

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.)

Agreeing and Disagreeing with the Warren Report

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. Tippett, 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 Tippett is unpersuasive. 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 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.

- "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.

Lee Harvey Oswald: Mafia Hitman?

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 killers 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. Here is a case in point. Albert Guy Bogard, then a salesman at a Dallas automobile dealership situated near the Texas School Book Depository building where Oswald worked, gave two statements to the FBI, the first on the day after the assassination, the other two weeks later. In essence, Bogard told the FBI that Oswald visited the dealership 13 days before the assassination, expressing interest in buying a used car and giving his name as Lee Oswald; that Oswald looked at every car in the showroom and on the lot; that with Bogard in the passenger seat Oswald drove a demonstration car at speeds of 75 to 85 mph; and that Oswald expressed interest in purchasing a red Comet hardtop but refused to post a down payment on the car, saying that he would pay cash for it in a few weeks because he would soon be receiving some money ("I've got it coming"). Bogard's statements were corroborated in some parts but not others by employees of the dealership. Largely because Oswald apparently did not know how to drive a car, the Warren Commission rejected Bogard's assertions and concluded that it was not Oswald who visited the

dealership.

Warren Report critics agree that the person who allegedly visited Bogard was not Oswald, but suggest that the person was an impostor who, working in behalf of the assassination conspirators, was trying to frame Oswald. They therefore think that Bogard's statements indicate that Oswald was a patsy who weeks before the assassination was being set up to take the fall for killing JFK. (There were, incidentally, other pre-assassination episodes which strongly suggest that one or more "false Oswalds" were engaging in attention-drawing conduct designed to wrongfully incriminate Oswald.)

The Road to Dallas concludes that Bogard's story is "probably one of the most powerful direct pieces of evidence that the assassination of President Kennedy came about through a conspiracy" because the fact "[t]hat Oswald was expecting to receive a large sum of money was devastating evidence of a conspiracy [involving Oswald and his gangster co-conspirators]." Coming from a trained academic, this conclusion excites wonder. First, Kaiser seems to believe that someone retained to murder the president would not receive an advance payment, which seems extremely unlikely. Second, it preposterously means that a man about to be paid by the Mafia for murdering a president would be going around telling total strangers that he would soon be coming into money. Third, it even more preposterously suggests that a man about to shoot the president from a building where he worked and from which he would flee suspiciously after the assassination, a man whose name and face would instantly become notorious, could truly believe that after killing JFK it would be safe to return to a car dealership within sight of that building and purchase a car!

Assuming that Bogard and the other dealership employees did not make up their accounts of the prospective customer, the most likely explanation for what happened is that either Bogard and his fellow employees were mistaken about the identity of the person who came to the dealership (as the Warren Report concluded), or that the incident at

the dealership is one more indication that Oswald was a patsy (as Warren Report critics say). Bogard's story is not potent evidence that was Oswald was a hired assassin.

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.