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**A Personal Journey into the JFK Murder:  
Joseph McBride's Into the Nightmare**

**By Joseph Green**

It has been nearly fifty years since the assassination of John F. Kennedy became the baptismal event for the sickness that burnt the American dream like a draft card. Vietnam followed, Malcolm fell, then Martin, and Bobby, the left got old and turned right, and somewhere along the line many lost the taste for fighting back. Meanwhile, the media have been stacking skeletons ever since, but that closet grows ever more full, stale, and rotten. Still, the pretense continues: In our age, most mainstream journalism has become a kind of exercise in organized non sequiturs, like artless Beckett, farce without wit.

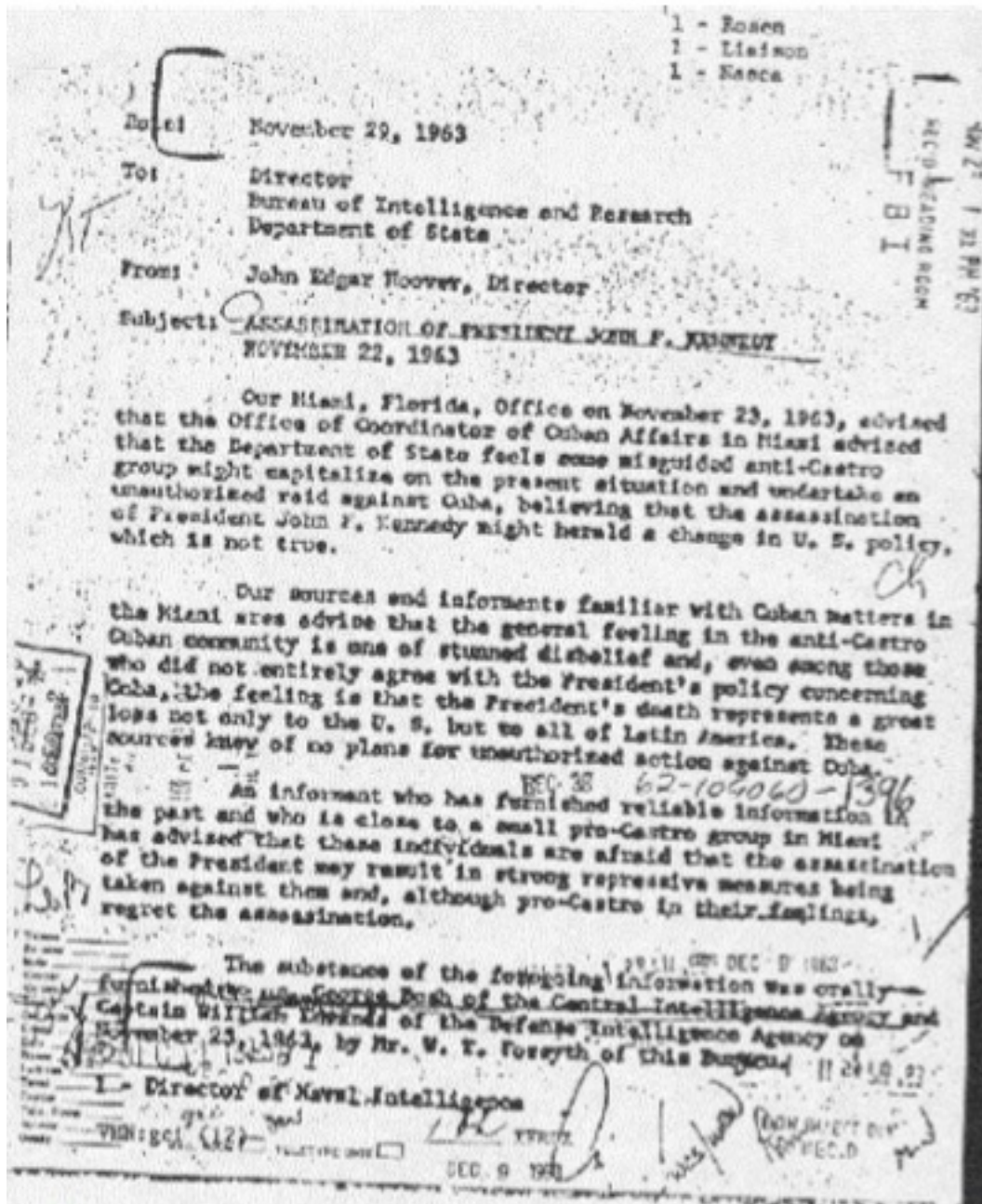
The premise is objectivity, we are told. Fair and balanced, we are told. Modern investigative reporting, by the available evidence of television and print media, often seems to regard objectivity as reporting all issues as if they have two sides -- no more and no less, and to draw no conclusions regardless of how inane one side's claims may be. This seems frequently to be true even in trivial matters, but it gets worse the more controversial the issue. Network news seems to take its cues from intelligent design activists who just want schools to Teach the Controversy.

This context makes Joseph McBride's new book *Into the Nightmare: My Search for the Killers of President John F. Kennedy and Officer J. D. Tippit* a jagged reminder of old-school reportage. Going against the grain, he asks difficult questions and tries hard to answer them. And even if every question cannot be answered satisfactorily, much compelling information surfaces throughout.

One of the many unusual things about this book is that McBride is, on the surface, a resolutely mainstream figure. A longtime journalist with numerous publications to his credit, including *The New York Review of Books*, *Cineaste*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Sight & Sound*, and *The Nation* magazine, *Into My Nightmare* is his 17<sup>th</sup> book. Included in his previous works are biographies of Steven Spielberg and Frank Capra, as well as a soon-to-be-reissued long-form interview with Howard Hawks, *Hawks on Hawks*. However, he been leading a double life. In the background to his work in film and as a college professor, he has literally spent a lifetime researching this case, having worked for the Kennedy campaign in 1960 at the age of 12. The shock of the president's murder three years later drove him to question the initial

reported facts of the case and grow to understand the terrible reality of our times. Hence the nightmare -- deeply personal for the author, but deeply relatable for anyone interested in truth.

McBride is already known to the JFK research community as, among other things, the man who discovered the Hoover memo, which has been written about and referenced many times over the years, particularly in Gaeton Fonzi's superb *The Last Investigation*. Russ Baker also made the Hoover memo a central part of his investigation into the Bush family, *Family of Secrets*. The Hoover memo is, of course, the peculiar document dated November 22, 1963, sent by the FBI leader in which a "Mr. George Bush of the Central Intelligence Agency" is noted to have been debriefed on the matter of the assassination.



The Hoover Bush memo by Public Domain - government document

### THREE ACTS

The book, like a well-crafted screenplay, is broken up into three acts. The first section covers McBride's personal history as a young man and his involvement as a Kennedy supporter. Included is a photo of the president taken by the author himself during a campaign visit to Wisconsin, as well as a thank-you letter from Kennedy after achieving

the presidency. It goes into his early interest in journalism, his initial shock at the murder, and finally his disbelief in the story and pursuit of the trail leading to this book fifty years later.

The second section of the book is a kind of survey of the evidence. McBride has done his homework, both in terms of familiarity with the published work on the case, the internal documents themselves, and direct interviews with many of the involved parties. He cites many of the best works in the genre -- Fonzi, Peter Dale Scott, James Douglass, John Armstrong, and others, but also makes it clear he follows the John Simkin's [forum](#) and [Bill Kelly's website](#), among others. In short, he has seemingly been following every available lead in his off hours.

The third and longest section of the book largely concerns his deep investigation into the murder of J. D. Tippit. The general public is typically not aware that Lee Harvey Oswald was never arraigned for the murder of the president, but rather for allegedly killing a police officer called Tippit. McBride has done excellent work in this area, and included in this book are excerpts from interviews done with Tippit's father, as well as his wife Marie and his mistress Johnnie.

Part memoir, part investigative journalism, part cultural analysis, McBride uses well lessons learned in his long and successful career in media. One of the real strengths of the book is how smoothly written it is, a difficult task when writing about the complexities of the Kennedy assassination. Like Jim Douglass's *JFK and the Unspeakable*, the book will have appeal to general readers as well as research specialists, and the style has a great deal to do with it. Armed with a cultural knowledge not generally employed in JFK books, McBride sprinkles in allusions and connections that aid understanding and even occasionally startle. In addition, it is the work of someone who has seen the assassination not as a singular incident in our nation's history, but as part of a context and continuum of understanding. McBride employs a wide scope to bear in his analysis, bringing in literature, cinema, as well as a journalist's understanding of how history as it is recorded can differ from history in fact -- indeed, how it must be so. This gives his work a breadth that is sometimes missing in the dry, even when notably incisive, work of researchers whose focus is narrower. For example, he writes about the strange and peculiarly American refusal to look at the past as it was:

The effect is a pervasive atmosphere of unreality surrounding postwar American history, a willed decision by most citizens (even some who know better) to live in a fantasy America rather than the far messier place we actually inhabit. The fact that none of the official explanations for all the major events in modern American history -- the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.; the Vietnam War; Watergate; Iran/contra; the Gulf War; 9/11; and the Iraq War -- makes sense when the evidence is examined with care should be enough to make even the most trusting American citizen realize he or she is being duped by our own government. (136)

He does not back away from making specific criticisms within the community as well. For example, his assessment of Mary Ferrell is that she was a disinformation agent, based on his personal dealings with her. Ferrell, of course, personally disliked Kennedy despite collecting an enormous quantity of information about the assassination, which survives as [The Mary Ferrell Foundation](#). McBride also believes that Ferrell's release of the audio tape to the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) near the end of their run was done so only to provide a kind of escape hatch for Robert Blakely to suggest a conspiracy without being forced to investigate its origins. He relates that the first-generation researcher Penn Jones told him to "stay away from her." (218-221)

In general, McBride does an excellent and thorough job of giving the reader a sense of the complications in the case without getting bogged down in relentless detail. As far as where he stands on some of the more controversial issues in the case, he is with David Lifton and Doug Horne on body alteration and believes that John Armstrong has effectively proved his two-Oswald thesis in *Harvey & Lee*. (100) One of the strengths of the book, however, is that McBride reports, rather than polemicizes; even if one disagrees with aspects of his view on the case, one can hardly fault the approach.

He also calls attention to what is still one of the greatest pieces of investigative journalism ever in the Kennedy case, Edwin Black's [article on the Chicago plot](#). As McBride points out, the parallels are incredible. In this case, a designated patsy named Thomas Arthur Vallee filled the

bill as Oswald-style patsy to an amazing degree. Vallee "was a thirty-year-old-ex-Marine who had been assigned to a U-2 base in Japan, had been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic by military doctors, and later had trained anti-Castro Cubans to assassinate Castro. Vallee had a job in a warehouse overlooking Kennedy's planned motorcade route." (307) He also points out a remarkable "coincidence" -- had Kennedy not cancelled the November 2, 1963 Chicago visit, in part because of an anonymous tip called in by someone identifying himself only as "Lee" -- he would have possibly been murdered in Chicago *on the same day* that the Diem brothers were being murdered in Vietnam. One of the advantages of McBride's position in the mainstream media is that he was able to secure interviews not only with peripheral people related to the assassination, but also with notable public figures. Who among us would not like to ask Donald Rumsfeld about George H. W. Bush's appointment to head of the CIA? McBride notes that Rumsfeld, in that 1988 interview, "deflected my questions for eleven minutes with the seemingly befuddled language for which he would later become notorious" (357) McBride asked television talking head Cokie Roberts about the death of her father, Hale Boggs. Boggs, a known dissenter who served on the Warren Commission, had died in 1972 when his plane went down under somewhat mysterious circumstances. "I have no conspiracy theories about my father's death," she answered him. (164) He also spoke to Senator Ralph Yarborough, who spoke candidly about Lyndon Johnson's comportment the morning before the assassination (worried about the hearings going on about him at that very moment) and some odd remarks about the Secret Service behavior that day. (385)

One fascinating "get," which is reproduced at length, is an interview with Dallas homicide detective Jim Leavelle. Leavelle, of course, was the man in the white hat in one of the most famous photos in history -- the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby. Jim Leavelle's description of what they should have done in the Tippit murder is astonishing. "The one thing that we didn't do that we should have done -- and this is an afterthought, and I didn't, and I'm responsible for that . . . what I *should* have done was canvass those door-to-door like I have done in other murder cases and gettin' evidence. But I had a good, clear-cut case, as far as I was concerned." (243) This is an astonishing admission. I worked as a private investigator myself and have done neighborhood canvasses many times, sometimes in criminal



cases. It is absolutely standard procedure and the idea that he didn't bother to have this done boggles the mind. Together with the other crazy violations of procedure -- the Dallas police not recording Oswald's interrogation or even bothering to take notes, FBI agent James Hosty burning his notes on Oswald, and Dr. Humes burning the notes on Kennedy's autopsy -- a reasonable person begins to conclude these things go well beyond incompetence and into cover-up.



*Jim Leavelle at the Oswald shooting by Creative Commons*

However, in addition to these interviews, McBride, in his long Tippit investigation, was able to get previously untapped people on the record. For example, in 1992 he spoke with Edgar Lee Tippit, the father of J. D. Tippit. This enables him to fill in some background on the young J.D., and also the crucial observation by his father that he was a fine shot, conflicting with his police service records which suggest he was mediocre. Combined with his personnel file, McBride draws the conclusion that Tippit, among other things, may have been suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from his war experiences.



*Into the Nightmare* has the most detailed and constructive analysis into Tippit of any book I have seen thus far, with considerable legwork behind it. In the last section of the book, McBride floats his theory of Tippit's connection to the Kennedy assassination, placing him nearer to the center than previously imagined. It's an interesting thesis, one which is somewhat weakly supported in my view, but it hardly matters in the overall context. Just as one need not believe Armstrong's *Harvey & Lee* thesis to recognize the vitality of the research between its covers, so it is with *Into the Nightmare*.

Also weakly supported, based on the evidence provided, is his assessment of Kenneth O'Donnell as a possible figure in setting the parade route. McBride suggests that O'Donnell was instrumental in choosing the famous hairpin turn that morning, but the quotes he uses tend to show him as acquiescing to the wishes of Governor Connelly, if anything. (541-542) It also follows Gerald Blaine's *The Kennedy Detail* in wishing to spread blame onto O'Donnell, a thesis which is argued against very cogently by Secret Service specialist Vince Palamara in his [review](#) of that book. McBride also relies in part on Seymour Hersh's extremely dubious *Dark Side of Camelot* to establish the possible scandals in O'Donnell's life that might have led him to betray the Kennedys. The [problems with Hersh's work](#) has been well-documented, beginning with his willingness to believe phony documents that were taken out of his book only just prior to publication.

McBride's book, taken as a whole, relies on much better sourcing than this particular discussion. Having no specific feelings one way or the other about O'Donnell myself, it is hard for me to say what is going on in this section. In any event, it's a minor issue compared to the wealth of information in the rest of the work.

## THE MEDIA

The strongest part of the book, in my estimation, is the analysis of the media. McBride has had direct experience with the walls thrown up by publishing institutions. When he started publishing articles about the Hoover memo in *The Nation* magazine, editor Victor Navasky had another editor, Richard Lingeman, rewrite sections of the article. McBride reproduces one of the passages deleted from his original article, which concerned Bush's prior involvement with the CIA and his direct quote, "I'd come to the CIA with some general knowledge of

how it operated." (Hilariously understated, that.) Although he did not know it at the time, McBride later found that Lingeman had served in the U.S. Army Counter Intelligence Corps in the fifties and had become friends with Navasky as a young man in Yale Law School. (349-354) Another unnamed *Nation* staffer also attempted to defend Bush from CIA association by eliciting quotes from Richard Helms and William Colby, two of the least believable sources imaginable. (353)

Unfortunately, this sort of thing is not at all unusual in our corporatized media. As McBride points out, not only had *Life Magazine* publisher C. D. Jackson served in the Eisenhower administration as a CIA-Pentagon liaison, but had a background in psychological warfare. This made his interest in the Zapruder film, which *Life* purchased shortly after the assassination, something less than innocent, particular considering his boss was the notoriously CIA and Pentagon-cooperative Henry Luce. (97)

Many of us who write about sensitive subjects on a regular basis have experience with the sort of thing on a smaller scale, but it is fascinating to read about how it operates at this level. There are many more details in the book concerning these experiences, and it makes riveting reading. Armed with these experiences, it also lends weight to McBride's more general analysis of the state of reporting in our country. He correctly notes that, for example, longtime CBS anchor Dan Rather "owed his career to the Kennedy assassination, and it keeps paying dividends for him, because he has long been a leading figure in the coverup. In an unusual and shocking display of candor" Rather described the Kennedy assassination as having been "the answer to my prayers." (69). Rather is far from the only one, but is perhaps the most prominent.

McBride also writes brilliantly in observing that the JFK assassination was also the birth of narrative news. Stories have always been shaped, but now of course we get wars with their own theme music and embedded reporters who sell believability from beneath their Army helmets. Jerry Mander had seen this back in the 1970s in his classic *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, but McBride sums up the situation very well:

What we experienced in front of our televisions that weekend was, in effect, a remarkably sophisticated four-day

docudrama about the assassination, the first of many attempts to shape and package the chaotic events into a manageable dramatic and ideological form. The spectacular television extravaganza, a live drama on an unprecedentedly outsize canvas and duration, offered a shockingly violent opening featuring the "unexpected" death of the protagonist, suspenseful twists and turns, a lurid cast of characters, and most importantly, a simplistic, neatly tied-up conclusion, including the death of the antagonist on the third day and the reassurance by the ending of the fourth that the state, although wounded, would survive. (72)

One key point made by McBride is the way the media plays with language. Oswald, according to all mainstream sources, has always been the assassin, despite the fact that he denied all the charges and never lived to see a trial. "This posthumous verdict . . . was a serious breach of journalistic ethics, showing the *Times* to be more an organ of government propaganda than a disinterested seeker of truth . . . the 'paper of record' has kept calling Oswald the 'assassin' ever since. The word 'alleged' rarely appears in conjunction with Oswald's name in the mainstream media." (111) This is absolutely correct and occurs with other assassinations and situations which the government has an interest in covering up. I found this same phenomenon, in an opposite direction, when writing an article called "The Open Assassination of Fred Hampton." Using only articles from the *New York Times* (in order to demonstrate how obvious it was that Hampton was murdered in cold blood, without provocation, by the police), I found that twenty years later, the *Times* still insisted on using language congenial to the state. For example, it described the scenario as a "shootout" despite the fact that hundreds of bullets went in but no bullets were ever proven to go out, and that Hampton was asleep, drugged, at the time of the murder. In other words, opinions on the incident, just like with Lee Harvey Oswald, froze at a certain point in time and became impervious to evidence.

This situation is bad for all of us and drives the many movements to take back our media. *Into the Nightmare* is an excellent example of doing precisely this, as well as being a superb entry into the Kennedy assassination literature. McBride's work should go on the shelf of

books that contain information that cannot be found elsewhere -- like Armstrong's book and Barry Ernest's *The Girl on the Stairs* and so many others where there is tremendous legwork involved. It is the summation of a fifty-year effort at assessing the truth, and although one may disagree about one point or another within the work, it is an honest and creditable work. *Into the Nightmare* serves as a solid introduction for the uninitiated and a wonderful new source for the researcher.

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He is the author of the books *Dissenting Views*, *A Slew of Unfortunates*, *Clowntime is Over*, and *The Very Wrath of Love*. He is a member of the Coalition on Political Assassinations (COPA). He also sings in the electropop band Fanfic.

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