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INTO THE NIGHTMARE: MY SEARCH FOR THE KILLERS OF PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY AND OFFICER J. D. TIPPIT

by *Joseph McBride*
September 12, 2013

The following is an excerpt from *[Into the Nightmare: My Search for the Killers of President John F. Kennedy and Officer J.D. Tippit](#)* by Joseph McBride (Hightower Press, Berkeley, California, 2013). Copyright © 2013 Joseph McBride. All rights reserved.

I laughed when I heard that President Kennedy was shot. But when I saw the look on the face of the boy who told me, I realized he wasn't joking.

I spun around, breaking from the cafeteria line at my Milwaukee high school and rushing past my classmates for whom this was still just a normal day....

The initial live news reports I heard on the radio that Friday afternoon [at a drugstore near my school] said that Kennedy had been shot from the front, from a railroad bridge. That first impression of shots from the front was repeatedly underscored for the next twenty minutes of the radio coverage. Then, around 1 p.m., the reports started changing.... All the shots were now said to have come from behind the president's limousine, from the building that seemed oddly named the Texas School Book Depository....

By the evening of November 22, I was not believing the official story of the assassination.

I was hearing the supposed assassin [Lee Harvey Oswald] furiously deny any involvement in the crime. But my early awareness of the shifting trajectory of the fatal bullet no doubt was what had laid the foundation for my disbelief. Since Oswald was said to have been in the School Book Depository at the time of the shooting, i.e., behind the president, how could he have shot Kennedy from the front? Why weren't authorities searching for *that* gunman? No one was bothering to explain that, which raised a red flag in my mind. Other unsettling contradictions began to appear in the press that very afternoon. Two doctors who treated Kennedy at Parkland Hospital told reporters at a news conference in mid-afternoon that he had been shot from the front. Although the transcript of the press conference would be missing for many years, and the film and sound coverage has disappeared, what doctors Malcolm Perry and Kemp Clark told reporters was widely reported that first weekend.... Nor did it seem logical to believe the emerging story about Oswald's alleged motive, that he had shot the president to achieve notoriety. Why then would Oswald be denying to all reporters within earshot that he had shot the president? Wouldn't such an assassin proudly proclaim his deed? Oswald's defiant and repeated denials seemed to contradict the emerging notion that he had killed Kennedy in order to go down in history.

The story didn't add up. The facts did not support the theory; the supposed assassin's motive didn't make any sense. And when Jack Ruby killed Oswald on Sunday morning, that only reinforced my realization that, as the smalltown Texas newspaper editor W. Penn Jones, Jr., put it in the 1967 documentary film *Rush to Judgment*, "I think all of us who love our – this

country should be alerted that something is wrong in the land.” Seeing the accused assassin slain in police custody was an unmistakable signal of conspiracy to large elements of the population abroad, as well as to many in the U.S....

My realization that the government was allowing the murder of the president to go unsolved was profoundly disorienting to my sense of order and justice; it went against everything I had been taught about the way the world works. By upbringing and education, I had been trained to believe official stories and follow authority. But my value system was suddenly in chaos, even if I did not, could not, fully understand what was happening to me at the time. I was still capable of being pulled back in the other direction. My initial skepticism about the official story gradually faltered under the onslaught of government and media propaganda surrounding the case in the following weeks and months. But the more I came to study the facts, the more I would find myself circling back to my initial reactions and conclusions....

Like most Americans, I was emotionally overwhelmed by the saturation [television] coverage during the four-day weekend. It was hard to have any perspective on the dizzyingly intense and often confounding coverage of the developments in the case that long weekend. But some moments of the television coverage stood out with more startling clarity and more unsettling dissonance, as if a curtain were briefly being pulled back on something hidden, something that made our country seem different from what we had thought it was....

The implications of all that happened on the weekend of November 22-25, 1963, would take some time — years — to fully form in my mind. My initial impressions of what I had seen and heard were obscured, for a time, by all the disinformation being spread by the government and the media about the “lone assassin.” The media lies did not erase my doubts about Oswald’s innocence, but they threw up a smokescreen that made it harder to understand what was happening in this already labyrinthine case. [And that fifty-year smokescreen of media disinformation continues to cloud many people’s perceptions to this day. -- JM] For anyone who had come early enough to the news from Dallas to witness it evolving, even

secondhand by radio and television, the dilemma was the one classically articulated by that eminent philosopher Groucho Marx: “Who are you going to believe, me or your own eyes?”...

In an unusual and shocking display of candor on CBS’s twenty-fifth anniversary documentary on the assassination, *Four Days in November*, [TV newsman Dan] Rather described the Kennedy assassination as having been “the answer to my prayers.” Rather’s reporting for CBS-TV and Radio from Dallas in 1963, though often at odds with reality, has provided him with endless material for reminiscing on television and in print about his pivotal role in the assassination coverage. But it was not always the day of the actual shooting that Rather found most significant. On *Four Days in November*, he offered

a personal note, based on the many years CBS News and I have spent investigating, thinking about these four days. It was a day we haven’t shown that also has a lot of meaning for me — the fifth day, Tuesday. On Tuesday, America went back to work. The Constitution of the United States provides for the orderly transition of the presidency, and that’s what took place. So it is Tuesday I often think of. Some two hundred million people went about their business, and America continued on course.

On the contrary, I remember that Tuesday as a day of the most profound bleakness and desolation. I returned to high school that day feeling utterly lost. The transition of the presidency I had seen on television was brutal, not “orderly.” I felt no sense of order or reassurance or triumph. Nor did I have any sense that life was “returning to normal” or that America was continuing “on course.” To believe that would have been a final insult to the memory of President Kennedy. Getting back to our daily business in the wake of the president’s murder evidently meant that we were expected to go on as if nothing had happened, in a world that had changed in ways we could not yet begin to imagine. Those selling the idea, as many in the media were, that “the system worked,” that the machinery of government was running smoothly, that Kennedy’s death was inconsequential, a mere bump in the road caused by the inexplicable actions of a madman, seemed

either in denial or disingenuous. The psychological pressure to “get back to normal” was an assault on an open wound, and if the wound remains open after half a century, the callousness of that assault is a large part of the reason why.

At root, the question of whether the assassination was a temporary lapse for American democracy or whether it signaled the start of an ongoing crisis of public trust in our institutions is what divides those who, like Dan Rather, accept the consolatory explanation of events from those who take the tragic view of modern American history. Like many other Americans, I remember feeling, without entirely knowing why, that the opposite was true, that America had irrevocably and forever changed. If the agenda of Rather and others in television and radio and the print media was to lay those feelings to rest, it was, at most, a transitory achievement. There seemed no clarity anymore, no place to stand, no future. Going back to normal seemed a cruel joke. What was normal now?...

The broadcasting of the [president's] funeral attempted to transform an inadequately explained national crisis by bringing a sense of catharsis and apparent dramatic finality to those tumultuous events. After the initial shock and the public's traumatic reactions to the news, the televised killing of Oswald — the ritualistic sacrifice of the scapegoat — and the grand “final act” of the funeral and burial service provided a spurious sense of what would later become known as “closure.” When the wall-to-wall television coverage ended on Monday night, the implication was that the play was over and life could now go back to “normal” the following day. Following that shared ritual, the benumbed nation should have been ready, according to the cold calculation of the news media, to resume business as usual.

But that awful modern word “closure,” whose vogue would come later, conspicuously does not apply to the Kennedy funeral. As most bereaved people eventually come to realize, closure is an illusory notion; grief never entirely heals. This is even more true when the death is that of a national leader, his murder is never properly investigated, no one is ever brought to justice for the crime, the transition of government is not what it seems, and further catastrophic events result from the killing. The televised ritual was only a temporary solace, a way of keeping the American public off the

streets and their minds off the subject of what actually happened to Kennedy in Dallas. Far from finding a comforting sense of closure, we have been forced to live all these years with an open wound that festers more virulently the longer it remains neglected and unhealed....

Our president's murder in broad daylight on a public street fifty years ago, and the new government's refusal to bring his killers to justice, meant nothing less the end of our long experiment in democracy. We now live not in a democracy but in what more accurately can be termed a limited police state, and that is the ultimate legacy of the Coup of 1963.

[Into the Nightmare: My Search for the Killers of President John F. Kennedy and Officer J. D. Tippit](#) is available on Amazon.com in both paperback and Kindle eBook editions.

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Joseph McBride was a volunteer in John F. Kennedy's Wisconsin presidential primary campaign in 1960. McBride has been a journalist since 1960, writing for such publications as *Life*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Los Angeles Times Magazine*, and, on this subject, *The Nation*. An internationally renowned film biographer and historian, he has written acclaimed biographies of John Ford, Frank Capra, and Steven Spielberg. McBride lives in Berkeley, California, and is a professor at San Francisco State University.