Shel Hershorn

John F. Kennedy addresses a capacity crowd in the Dallas Memorial Auditorium while campaigning for president.

'Dallas 1963,' by Bill Minutaglio, Steven L. Davis - San Francisco Chronicle

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Dallas 1963
By Bill Minutaglio and Steven L. Davis
(Twelve; 371 pages; $28)

In April 1963, two years after he resigned from the military, following revelations that the "Pro-Blue" education program he developed for his division featured articles, books and lecturers from the ultraconservative John Birch Society, Maj. Gen. Edwin Walker issued a warning to the American people. "The Kennedys say there's no internal threat to our freedom," he declared. But "there are plenty of people on the other side. ... I've been saying the front was right here at home ... in Dallas."

The city was, indeed, headquarters to many right-wing organizations. Dallas was home to the Committee of American Freedom Rallies, the Committee for the Retention of the Poll Tax, and the Committee to Impeach Earl Warren. The Dallas Freedom Forum advocated reducing the Soviet Union "to a mass of glass for a thousand years." Eager to distinguish his group from its competitors, the chairman of the National Indignation Convention pointed with contempt to "the liberal taint of the John Birch Society."

In "Dallas 1963," journalist Bill Minutaglio, the author of biographies of George W. Bush and Alberto Gonzalez, and Steven L. Davis, curator of the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University in San Marcos, focus on these extremists to help us understand "the parallel universes" that bumped up against each other on Nov. 22, the day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated 50 years ago.

Written in the present tense and filled with speculation about the inner thoughts of its subjects, "Dallas 1963" is a taut, suspenseful moral melodrama. Minutaglio and Davis vividly bring to life a right-wing rogues' gallery that includes Walker; billionaire oilman H.L. Hunt; Republican Rep. Bruce Alger; the Rev. W.A. Criswell, who presided over the largest all-white Baptist Church in the United States; and Ted Dealey, publisher of the Dallas Morning News. The authors' short list of Dallas moderates features Stanley Marcus,
the owner of Neiman Marcus department store, and African American civil rights advocates Rhett James and Juanita Craft.

"Dallas 1963" misses few opportunities to foreshadow the tragedy that will end the book. In January 1962, Minutaglio and Davis write, as anticommunist zealot Robert Morris arrives at a meeting with Ted Dealey, he "can also see, just a one-minute walk away, the steam heat rising by Dealey Plaza and the Texas School Book Depository."

As Lady Bird Johnson prepares to return to Dallas in November 1963, they indicate, the thought that something ugly might happen "keeps crossing her mind" and she notices that her hands are trembling. At almost the same moment, they point out, JFK reminds Jackie Kennedy "we're heading into nut country today," walks to a window, looks outside and ruminates about how easy it would be to shoot a president with a high-powered rifle from a tall building.

For good reason, "Dallas 1963" is awash in hints of conspiracy. Unfortunately, however, the authors do not adequately measure the appeal or influence of the city's reactionary or moderate institutions. They imply, for example, that the Dallas Citizens Council, on which Marcus sits, maps out the city's future in "hushed dining rooms," private clubs and pastors' offices, ensuring that "it has never exploded," but tell us very little about who is on it and how it works its will.

At the same time, they claim that it "can easily occur to many" that Fred Smoot, H.L. Hunt's rabidly anticommunist associate, speaks "for most of the city - or a significant portion of the people who run it." They assert, implausibly, that a bill prohibiting the display of the U.S. flag on any building funded with tax dollars was sailing through the Texas Senate until a lawmaker denounced it as appeasement of "the lunatic fringe." And they suggest as well that affection for President Kennedy in Dallas was "almost tangible at times - except when it seems to be sucked inside the drowning pool created by a handful of misguided souls in the city."

Nonetheless, Minutaglio and Davis are right to frame their narrative as a cautionary tale, a tract for our times, aimed at a society gripped by the politics of personal destruction, about what happens when many zealots are "twisted, coiled, in hysteria, in abject fear" and something holds moderates "back from condemning [its] worst impulses."
Although, as Alger observed in a letter to President Lyndon B. Johnson, the assassination of John F. Kennedy could have occurred in any city in the United States, the authors leave no doubt that Dallas, in many respects, was primed and ready for Lee Harvey Oswald, whose dreams dissolved in the Soviet Union but who remained attracted to communism, to take a loaded weapon to the Texas Book Depository.

Other notable books about the JFK assassination

The Day Kennedy Died

50 Years Later Life Remembers the Man and the Moment

(Time Home Entertainment; 192 pages; $50)

Life's impressive book includes all 486 frames of the Zapruder film - never before seen in print - and features essays, remembrances and a full reprint of the magazine's Nov. 29, 1963, issue on the assassination.

Reclaiming History

The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy

By Vincent Bugliosi

(Norton; 1,612 pages; $79.95)

Bugliosi's mammoth 2007 work - in which the former Los Angeles County prosecutor resolutely backs the findings of the Warren Commission - has been released in a new edition.

A Cruel and Shocking Act

The Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination

By Philip Shenon

(Henry Holt; 625 pages; $32)

Shenon, the author of "The Commission: The Uncensored History of the 9/11 Investigation," takes a hard look at the Warren Commission: "The truth about the Warren Commission, as most serious historians and other scholars will acknowledge, even those who fully support its findings, is that its investigation was flawed from the start."

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