George F. Kennan: An American Life

By John Lewis Gaddis

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REVIEWED BY JEFFREY G. BUCHELLA

Almost 60 years ago, when George Frost Kennan, the newly designated U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, presented his credentials to its figurehead president, he expressed, in fluent Russian, the hope that his actions in Moscow would "meet with the understanding and collaboration of the Soviet Government." Kennan received an icy response that was—as John Lewis Gaddis, quoting Kennan, writes—reinforced by "a propaganda campaign that exceeded 'in viciousness, shamelessness, mendacity and intensity' anything he had experienced before in the Soviet Union, or even in Nazi Germany." Less than six months later, the Soviets unceremoniously expelled Kennan from his post.

Among the signature traits of the complex subject of Gaddis' massive new authorized biography, *George F. Kennan: An American Life*, naïveté was not one. Official Russian fear of, and hostility toward, the outside world were many centuries old, as Kennan had taken pains to explain to the very first American ambassador to the Soviet Union, William C. Bullitt. When serving as Bullitt's aide in 1936, Kennan had prepared a report on the regime that relied almost entirely on the dispatches of Neill Brown, U.S. minister to the court in St. Petersburg from 1850 to 1853, who, in an echo from history, complained of an atmosphere of "[s]ecrecy and mystery," where a foreign representative was frequently not given "even the consolation of an insult."

George F. Kennan: An American Life, the culmination of 30 years of labor, is a painstakingly researched, richly detailed, and crisply written biography of a towering, yet underappreciated figure of 20th-century America. John Lewis Gaddis is the Robert A. Lovett Professor of History at Yale University, where he teaches courses in Cold War history, grand strategy, international studies, and biography. Gaddis has reviewed a vast archive of material, including the massive collection of Kennan's letters and diaries, and has interviewed the subject and many of the principal witnesses (some now deceased) in order to write what one reviewer has called "a triumph of scholarship and narrative." The book presents a complex and nuanced portrait of broad scope that enhances Kennan's image as the diplomat who authored the Cold War strategy of containment and who played a leading role in guiding American foreign policy through the four decades following World War II. Gaddis traces Kennan's long life from his birth in 1905 in Wisconsin, when the United States was still a largely isolated agrarian society, through his tenure in the foreign service from 1925 to 1952; through his career as an academic, elder statesman, writer, and philosopher; and to his death in 2005 at the age of 101, by which time the United States had become the world's sole superpower. Gaddis' book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in biography in April 2012.

A Chinese Puzzle

Like many larger-than-life figures, George F. Kennan was a man of wide-ranging talents, possessing a complex and enigmatic personality, which some found mysterious and even baffling at times. He was a deeply introspective man, who stirred in those around him an impulse to peel back the layers of mystery to reveal the nature of the man. One colleague would remember Kennan's capacity to "observe and to feel beauty, to drink it all in like a sponge." His eyes, this colleague thought, resembled Robert Oppenheimer's "extraordinary eyes, just absolutely riveting, those clear blue eyes." For Eugene Rostow, the former dean of Yale University's Law School and undersecretary of state for political affairs in President Lyndon Johnson's administration, Kennan was "an impressionist, a poet, not an earthling."

Although Kennan was known chiefly as a figure on the American foreign policy scene, his talents as a writer of memoirs would eventually be compared with those of John Adams' great-grandson, Henry Adams, whose memoirs remain in the canon of American literature. In addition, BBC Radio invited Kennan to give one of its annual Reith Lectures, previously given by Arnold Toynbee and Bertrand Russell, among others. When offered a position at Princeton University's Institute for Advanced Study, Kennan found Albert Einstein among his fellow professors. Isaiah Berlin, a historian of philosophy, became a close friend and defender of Kennan's. Kennan was awarded the Albert Einstein Peace Prize in 1981 and a Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1989. The Kennan Institute—part of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars—would become a major center for research on Russia and the non-Russian territories of the former Soviet Union. Yet some thought that, as a result of his impolitic and even impulsive decisions, Kennan had failed to reach his potential in the world of international affairs. Joseph Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva, some time after she was granted asylum in the United States and had lived for a while on Kennan's Pennsylvania farm, wrote that Kennan had been "born to be constantly misunderstood."

A Life in International Affairs

In an epilogue to this book, titled "Greatness," Gaddis counts as first among Kennan's gifts his abilities as a foreign policy strategist. It is both a great strength as well as a weakness of this biography that it has been crafted by a foreign policy historian, albeit a respected one. Gaddis' background as a specialist in Cold War studies allows him to treat Kennan's career as a Cold War diplomat and intellectual in a competent and even meticulous manner. Fresh from receiving an undergradu-

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ate degree from Princeton University, Kennan began his professional life with the U.S. government in 1926 with an appointment to the rank of foreign service officer, unclassified. Soon, he was appointed vice-consul in Geneva. After a period of Russian studies and with various short postings throughout Eastern Europe, as well as time spent in Germany just as Hitler was coming to power, Kennan began a diplomatic posting in Moscow in December 1933. His fluency in Russian and his knowledge of the culture helped him to appreciate the Stalinists' "justification for their instinctive fear of [the] outside world [and] for the dictatorship without which they did not know how to rule." Kennan foresaw, as did nearly no one else at the time, that the Soviet Union's existence would be "a transitory phenomenon: it was floating along on the surface of Russian history, and currents deeper than anything Marx, Lenin, or Stalin had imagined would ultimately determine its fate."

Kennan's central Cold War notion—famously expressed in his article, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," published under the pseudonym "X" in the July 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs*—was that the Soviet Union could be contained within its existing spheres of influence, until such time as it self-destructed and was no longer a threat to the West. Despite the mythology that has grown up around him, however, Kennan was not responsible for designing a foreign policy that sought to battle communism everywhere in the world. In his article, he had written, "the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of *Russian* expansive tendencies." (Emphasis added.) Others would later advance hard-line interpretations of Kennan's doctrine, sometimes on policy grounds, often simply for political reasons, but, until his death, Kennan believed that the Soviets had merely tended "to clothe [their] love for power in ideological terms."

Kennan's views began to form in the 1920s, when he was in his early 20s, and they were well-formed by the time of Hitler's defeat in 1945. As early as 1932, Kennan had concluded that, because of its internal contradictions and the weaknesses of its political system, "Soviet Russia might be changed overnight from one of the strongest to one of the weakest and most pitiable of national societies." Kennan came to these conclusions, Gaddis writes, through a convergence of ideas derived from such disparate sources as Gibbon, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky, as well as Chekhov, who spoke about Russia's "resistance, however subtle, to revolutionary redesign." In 1968, when the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia, Kennan viewed the move as an expression of historically predictable Russian behavior—the sort of action Czar Nicholas II, the last Russian monarch, would also have taken. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the opening of Soviet archives confirmed Kennan's long-held view of the Soviet government as a "frightened, overstretched gerontocracy." However, in the 1950s, when it mattered politically, the Republican Party, as well as many Southern Democrats, was dominated by an alliance of isolationist holdovers and zealous McCarthyites, and, by the end of the 1950s, having been thrown out of Moscow in 1952, Kennan had become persona non grata in many West European and American foreign policy establishments.

A Steady Gaze into the Future

In a review of Kennan's *Memoirs: 1925–1950*, published 45 years ago (and followed by *Memoirs: 1950–1963*), historian John Lukacs summarized Kennan's diplomatic gifts by quoting what Charles James Fox reputedly said of Edmund Burke: that he is a "wise man; but he is wise too soon." Kennan's abilities as a strategist were based on many things, including his deep knowledge of European history and culture, and the fact that he tended to examine strategic questions within the context of centuries, even millennia, not, as others often did, in terms of weeks or months. His judgment was trusted too, in part because he seemed to have an almost instinctive ability to see into the future. In July 1940, when it was not obvious to many, he predicted that the United States would enter World War II within the year and that fighting would continue until at least the end of 1944. He anticipated the cruelty of postwar Soviet rule in the satellite countries of Eastern Europe; the eventual and inevitable disintegration of the Warsaw bloc; and the dangers that economic failure, if untreated, would pose for Western Europe. The Marshall Plan was largely Kennan's idea. He forecast with precision the impact that nuclear proliferation would have on national budgets, especially the U.S. budget, and he was among the first to predict a rapid militarization of American foreign policy. His Policy Paper Number 380, drafted in 1950, when he was director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, shaped the national debate on nuclear policy well into the 1980s.

In the early 1950s, Dwight Eisenhower assumed the presidency, Joseph Stalin died, and a new Soviet leadership, deeply unsure of itself, watched revolts break out in East Germany. An armistice was reached in Korea, and the Soviet Union embarked on a gradual but steady retreat from its previous occupations in Finland, Yugoslavia, Manchuria, and Austria. Winston Churchill and Kennan believed that the continuing division of Germany was a mistake, and both men lobbied Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to renegotiate the postwar settlement, particularly as it related to Germany. Eisenhower and Dulles were dismissive, however, and Germany remained divided until 1990. Gaddis does not seem to assign much importance to Kennan's proposal for reunification of Germany, but Russian sources made available after the breakup of the Soviet Union revealed strong evidence that the Kremlin was interested in such a renegotiation. As was so often the case, however, the course of history was beyond Kennan's power to change.

In 1950, Kennan prepared a long report to Secretary of State Dean Acheson in which he advised caution and restraint in America's relations

with Latin America, but the report was suppressed. It was not published until 1976, by which time a series of Presidents had deployed U.S. military and intelligence assets into nearly all the countries of Latin America, often with tragic consequences. Kennan issued early warnings against a war against "international communism" and specifically against proxy wars in the Third World, where, he believed, the prospects for the Soviets were "[f]ar from opportunities, these were liabilities, depleting strengths needed to maintain the status quo."

In 1950 in Korea, despite Kennan's warnings, the Allied military advanced beyond the 38th parallel, with near-disastrous results. When the war in Korea led the Truman administration to increase economic and military assistance to the French in Indochina, Kennan insisted that this amounted to "guaranteeing the French in an undertaking which neither they nor we, nor both of us together, can win." Fifteen years later, with American military involvement growing in Vietnam, he would express deep concern "about what our people are doing in Southeast Asia. It seems to me that they have taken leave of their senses." Kennan would eventually make the first written public critique of the administration's policy in Vietnam, testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chaired by J. William Fulbright. According to Gaddis, Kennan told the committee that "the United States could not continue to 'jump around' like 'an elephant frightened by a mouse.' Instead its standard should be that of John Quincy Adams: ... to 'go not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.'" Kennan added, "There is more respect to be won in the opinion of this world by resolute and courageous liquidation of unsound positions than by the most stubborn pursuit of extravagant or unpromising objectives." Kennan's testimony had, for the first time, made it respectable to oppose the war. Nevertheless, American troops would remain in Indochina for another decade.

In the face of official belief in a monolithic Communist threat, Kennan saw complexity. In 1960, what "interested him most about Yugoslavia ... was how delicately its leaders balanced the acknowledged absurdity of Marxism-Leninism against their need to preserve the ideology in whose name they had gained and retained power." Kennan predicted, correctly, that China would soon face the same dilemma.

Kennan also warned against American involvement in Afghanistan in the wake of the Soviet invasion on Christmas Day 1979—an intervention that some credit for the rise of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Decades in advance, Kennan foresaw a Western intervention in Iraq that he feared would be impulsive and born of soft-headed idealism. When he granted his last press interviews in late 2002, at the age of 98, Kennan condemned George W. Bush's plans to invade Iraq as well as the Democrats' timidity in not opposing Bush more vigorously.

An American Life

Kennan's public profile as a Cold War diplomat tended to obscure his lifelong concern for domestic affairs, especially his fear of the devolving character and culture of his own country. In the midst of World War II, he had witnessed European authoritarianism and worse, and, according to Gaddis, he came to believe that "the greatest danger to the United States ... could come from a homegrown dictatorship. The cause would be the 'petty-bourgeois jealousy which resents and ridicules any style of life more dignified than its own—a phenomenon of which we saw much in Nazi Germany'"—by which I think Kennan meant that, in the angry and sometimes irrational American populism, he saw some of the same kind of passions that among the German working classes had helped bring Hitler to power. Soon, tangible signs of domestic excess appeared, as Kennan saw close colleagues being investigated for possible disloyalty to the government. At great risk to his career, he defended some of these colleagues, including his former mentor, Robert Oppenheimer, who would eventually lose his security clearance and thereby his ability to continue nuclear research for the United States. Suspicion, paranoia, and government spying (shades of Red Square) pervaded the atmosphere of the times, and Kennan likely would have understood Tocqueville's comment about an earlier time in American history when it was "impossible to conceive of a more troublesome and garrulous patriotism." Kennan became the first person to publicly challenge, though not by name, Wisconsin Sen. Joseph McCarthy by delivering a speech that was sharply critical of the rising anti-Communist hysteria in the country. In a series of lectures he delivered at Northwestern University in 1951, Kennan analyzed the temptation facing democracies such as the United States to believe that they could defeat totalitarians by emulating them, but such a bargain could not be struck, he said, "without the selling of the national soul." At the end of World War II, Kennan predicted a postwar period of significant domestic disorder, involving matters of race, culture, and economics. His forecast was accurate—though premature.

Kennan was critical of many aspects of American culture: its materialism, its occasional shallowness, and the mindless populism that interfered with wise decision-making, but he aimed his critiques at other Western societies as well—not least of which was his wife's native country of Norway. Ironically, Gaddis points to evidence of Kennan's own authoritarian bent, indisputably present in some of his writings, which at times seem to reflect a wry hope for refashioning the American political process into a system less hogtied by the constant and often corrupt conflicts of the democratic process. However, many of these ideas are found in his diary entries, where he vented his pessimism in moments of frustration or despair, or were composed in the 1930s, when he was still relatively young and when disillusionment with democracy, especially as demonstrated in Europe, was widespread. On the whole, any such impulses seem to have been more than counterbalanced by an enduring condemnation of the kind of authoritarianism he had witnessed in the Soviet Union and Germany. More important, Kennan was not given to simplistic views of the world. His thinking about democracy in general

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had many influences, including theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*, the thesis of which is that even in a democracy, the forces of good and evil are constantly at battle, sometimes with their respective proponents in unlikely disguises. Authoritarian societies such as the Soviet Union filled Kennan with a sense of personal horror, but he also condemned the social ills caused by unrestrained industrial capitalism, abetted as they were by national vanities and a failure to appreciate the limits of human nature.

Historian, Teacher, Writer

Gaddis focuses on Kennan as a diplomatic thinker. He notes that Kennan was seen as a leading theorist of international relations, and, along "with Lippmann, Niebuhr, and Morgenthau, as a founding father of post-World War II realism." As Gaddis points out, however, Kennan disliked international theory and did not envision himself as a theorist. In fact, Kennan's career as a historian, public intellectual, and writer was probably more important than his career in public service, although it is not clear that Gaddis would agree with this conclusion. Kennan received a National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize both for the first volume of his memoirs and for his history of the early Russian revolutionary period (*Russia Leaves the War*). The latter work also received the highly esteemed Bancroft and Francis Parkman Prizes for history. Kennan wrote sweeping surveys of European diplomatic history, including *The Decision to Intervene*, a study of the American military intervention in Russia in the wake of the revolution, and *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order,* a book in which he sought to chart the developments in late 19th-century Europe that would eventually lead to World War I. Gaddis writes that Kennan's letters, most of which have yet to be edited and published, "rival those of distinguished literary contemporaries, and his diaries, which run, with gaps, from 1913 to 2003, are arguably the most remarkable work of sustained self-analysis—and certainly self-criticism—since *The Education of Henry Adams*. ... [T]hey document yet another career for which Kennan should be remembered: that of philosopher."

Character

Whatever gave birth to its constituent parts, Kennan's personality was a highly refined compound of many elements, which many people puzzled over and attempted to explain. Joseph Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva thought that Kennan was not well-suited to official duties and formal service. He needed "freedom; travel; opened sea," she wrote. He was a writer, but not one born for academia, and a foreign relations expert, but not much concerned with what the world thought of him. He was not a vain man but was happiest when he could follow his own inner drives and impulses.

At least one former secretary of state has remarked that Kennan "blighted his career" by refusing to embrace the realities of foreign policy-making in the domestically troubled postwar American order. This same person said that, after Kennan left government service, he was unhappy to be without political influence, but this contention is dubious. Kennan's ambitions for learning, understanding, and work were not, on the whole, based on worldly goals. In this respect, he differed from many of his colleagues.

His loneliness, if that's what it was, derived not from being outside the circle of power, but from something deeper in his nature. Well into mid-life, Kennan expressed the feeling that he was an exile from his own time and place. "I am," he told an interviewer in 1976, "an 18th-century person." He was deeply reflective and philosophical. He was detached: a realist about the capacity of human will and a nonconformist, who was reflexively put off by many of the conventions of his time yet was fond of many of the commonplaces of bygone eras. Many years later, he would tell Gaddis that "people who are a little unusual—the *Bohème*—they understand me, better than do the regular ones."

Like Thomas Jefferson, weary of the strains of office and disillusioned, Kennan yearned for the farm and private life, though his habits of mind reflected a Scottish-Presbyterian upbringing that imbued him with a profound sense of duty, a Protestant work ethic, and a steely self-discipline—qualities that served him well in his official postings. The influences of Russian Orthodoxy, derived from his travel and study, left him with a somewhat fatalistic view of the world. The historian Arthur Link, whom Gaddis quotes, went too far, however, in contending that Kennan's perspective on life involved "the acceptance of things as they are ... that the world is fundamentally evil and that really there's not a great deal that you can do about it." Relying mostly on the word of others, Gaddis suggests that Kennan believed in predestination, but this concept is complex and has more than one intellectual and historical tradition. Kennan's views, at least judging by what he wrote in his letters and diary entries, came closer to a brand of stoicism that acknowledges that the world often seems to be fated—that it is pushed and pulled by forces more powerful than "the best human intentions," as Reinhold Niebuhr put it. Whatever the appropriate label might be, Gaddis makes what is perhaps a related point, that the death of Kennan's mother shortly after he was born had a deep and lasting emotional impact on him. It is not far-fetched to infer that such an introduction to life may have resulted in a skeptical man with a somber view of the world.

Gaddis Wrestles with His Subject

Gaddis strives to provide as complete an account of Kennan's life as possible, but the portrait Gaddis displays is unbalanced in notable ways. First, he fails to frame his subject's story so as to give fair attention to each portion and aspect of the man's life. Kennan occupied high office in the U.S. government for only a few years immediately following World War II, and his key role in helping to craft American foreign policy was confined to 1946 to 1952, yet more than two-thirds of the book is devoted to this

early period of Kennan's life. Kennan died in 2005, more than 50 years after leaving government service (except for a short stint as President Kennedy's ambassador to Yugoslavia). Gaddis gives the last 40 years of Kennan's life little more than 100 pages. This structure inflates the importance of Kennan's contributions as a diplomat and Cold War strategist, at the expense of delving deeper into his literary, historical, and philosophical interests and talents. In this sense, this book presents Kennan's life as told by a Cold War historian.

Second, the tone of this book at times seems excessively deprecating of its subject. Gaddis writes that frustration was Kennan's "normal state," Kennan's State Department Policy Planning Staff papers were "strikingly solipsistic," "[s]olipsism showed up as well in Kennan's conviction that only he could reverse MacArthur's course in Japan," and the fact that Kennan "expected theory to trump subjectivity—was in itself a solipsism that led to failure." This solipsism theme begins to run like a thin crack through a piece of china. The frequency and liberality with which Gaddis uses the term lays bare a tension that seems to have existed, or at least eventually developed, between Gaddis and Kennan. Gaddis might have chosen other words to describe his subject, some of which at least approach the general meaning of solipsistic (contemplative, thoughtful, meditative, inner-directed), but he didn't, so he must have intended the pejorative term. This is all well and good, if he is convinced that his subject deserves this appraisal, but, if Kennan was rather wiser than his peers and they did not heed his advice, is solipsism to blame? The general tone of complaint makes one skeptical of Gaddis' intentions. We hear from Gaddis (and, in all fairness, from people whom Gaddis quotes) that Kennan was gloomy, pessimistic, and hyper-self-critical, and Gaddis contends somewhat mutedly that Kennan's criticism of American culture was a product of all the aforementioned negative characteristics, as well as being odd—perhaps a sign of personal weakness. However, this may say as much about Gaddis and his witnesses as it does about Kennan. Whatever else one may say, Kennan's critiques of American society were consistent with those found in many powerful currents of thought that came to the fore during his generation and the next.

For some of Kennan's contemporaries quoted in this book, and for Gaddis, Kennan's shortcomings included his "prolixity," the fact that he "tended to ramble," and that he "was self-absorbed" and had an "inability to insulate his jobs from his moods." Gaddis sees Kennan's advice in favor of U.S. military and political restraint in Latin America as a sign of his pessimism, which "was consistent with his own view of life." Gaddis also bemoans the impracticality of Kennan's policy proscriptions, writing that Kennan turned his mood swings into "prophetically impractical policy memoranda"—this last criticism referring back to Kennan's final memorandum to Dean Acheson, in which, among other things, Kennan issued strong warnings against an improvident American involvement in Indochina. When Kennan leaves the U.S. Foreign Service for academia in 1952, Gaddis has him departing for his own "empyrean"—a word he uses repeatedly and not in a manner that appears complimentary.

Moreover, Gaddis' sources for this book are almost exclusively from the United States, and it eventually becomes evident that Gaddis' narrative has been crafted by a native looking out on the world from his own shores.

John Gaddis: American Cold War Historian

Admittedly, few biographers are capable of complete detachment from their subjects. A biographer's own emotions, ideas, and prejudices necessarily intrude into the process. Gaddis has been described as the dean of Cold War historians. He received a National Humanities Medal from President George W. Bush in 2005 after the 2004 publication of his book, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience*, which was an implicit defense of Bush's foreign policy. A fellow Texan and confidant of the former President, Gaddis admired what he viewed as George W. Bush's boldness and strategic vision. Gaddis was a keen supporter of the war in Iraq and helped draft the ex-President's second inaugural address, which was notable, in the words of one reviewer, for "its deep devotion to American foreign policy's messianic traditions." None of this would have pleased Kennan.

Gaddis' 2005 book, *The Cold War: A New History*, which located the cause of the Cold War in the person of Joseph Stalin, was criticized for its ideological bias. The late historian Tony Judt wrote that Gaddis had presented a "partial viewpoint" of the conflict—that of an "unapologetic [American] triumphalist," and that Gaddis' "provincialism" resulted in a view of the Cold War that lacked a broader accounting of all its costs, such as the fact that proxy wars in the Third World had created the failed states of our times and had done long-term damage to America's reputation. Liberal historians tend to view authors such as Gaddis as apologists for American power and sometimes even as court historians, as American diplomatic historian Robert Buzzanco has suggested. It is fair to ask how much Gaddis' perspective influenced *George F. Kennan: An American Life*.

An Unexamined Side of Kennan

This biography might have been called *George F. Kennan: A Life in Diplomacy*, rather than *George F. Kennan: An American Life*. But Kennan's life was not just a life in diplomacy. The Kennan who was a fine, if not great, historian, writer, philosopher, and even poet, as Eugene Rostow suggested, is not greatly in evidence in this book. In addition, Kennan's life was not entirely an *American* life. Like all great men and women, Kennan transcended his own time and place. Gaddis tends to downplay this fact or to view it unfavorably. Kennan wandered the world, living abroad most of his young life, and later went back and forth between his Pennsylvania farm, Washington, D.C., various foreign capitals, and Princeton. In *Sketches from a Life*, Kennan wrote

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that he was "a sort of Nordic cosmopolitan, truly domiciled only in the natural beauty of the seas and countrysides of this northern [European] world: in its seasons, its storms, its languid summers, but occasionally also in its vanishing urban settings, the half-remembered ones. ..."

In the same book, Kennan saw himself as "an expatriate in time rather than in place: an expatriate from the Wisconsin of the first years of this century, not from the Wisconsin of this day. The imprints of childhood are the strongest and most enduring stamp of personality. ... To the Wisconsin of that time I was never lost. But that Wisconsin is largely lost to me. ... And I, without it, am, like many an older person, an expatriate to be sure, but an expatriate as much within my own country as outside it. ..."

Gaddis quotes neither of the above passages from *Sketches from a Life*, nor the one with which I will close this review. His book would have had greater depth had it given a stronger impression of Kennan not only as diplomat and foreign policy thinker but also as a philosopher and writer—a deep and sensitive soul with a spiritual and at times almost mystical bent, who left behind diary entries that are at once history and poetry, as shown by this extract:

> May 26, 1929—Riga
>
> Summer has come to the Baltic, and with it the long white nights. Driving back from the shore at one in the morning, I see that the first drops of the dawn are diluting the darkness. The waters of the Duna have taken on a bluish tint from the lightening sky, and the lights from the distant quai throw down across the water their rugged yellow paths, against which the forms of masts and stacks and roofs and bridges are still colorless and distanceless.
>
> At noon—Sunday noon—a summer sun bathes the city in golden, vibrating warmth. ... There is a confusion of human voices, talking in Russian or German, a hum of invisible insects, a rush of warm breeze through the fresh foliage. ... [H]ow shall we receive this sudden surfeit of warmth and tenderness? ... We would like to clutch it and hold it, but it is too immense, too illusive, to be grasped ... We can only walk, blinking and bewildered ... in the disturbing knowledge of a glory we cannot share. **TFL**

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The Abolitionist Imagination

By Andrew Delbanco, with commentaries by John Stauffer, Manisha Sinha, Darryl Pinckney, and Wilfred M. McClay

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Reviewed by Henry Cohen

The Abolitionist Imagination consists of a 53-page essay by Andrew Delbanco, responses of about 20 pages each by four other scholars, and a brief reply by Delbanco. Delbanco takes a nuanced approach to abolitionism. He wishes "to get away from the heroes versus villains narrative and to suggest some reasons why people of conscience ... tried desperately to find a middle way." Such people might have been appalled by slavery, "but also aware of the fragility of the republic and the likely cost of radical action."

Delbanco considers abolitionism not only as the movement to end slavery in the United States, but also as a broader concept—as a position that people take on a variety of causes, including opposition to abortion. He agrees that, although abolitionism can be a "healthy means by which we challenge our constant tendency to fall into moral complacency," it can also be "something perfervid and dangerous, rigid and inhumane, even Ahab-like in its narrow focus and fierce, singular intensity."

Speaking of Ahab, Delbanco, who has written an acclaimed book on Herman Melville, considers the attitudes of Hawthorne and Melville toward abolitionism. Delbanco sees Hawthorne as "hovering between two views" and notes that Hawthorne's biography of his college classmate Franklin Pierce, which Hawthorne wrote for Pierce's 1852 presidential campaign, "contains hints of ambivalence on the slavery question." Delbanco, however, may be too generous to Hawthorne. He does quote Hawthorne in the Pierce biography as calling slavery "one of those evils which divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances, but which, in its own good time ... it causes to vanish like a dream." But Delbanco does not quote Hawthorne's comment in the Pierce biography that the "two races ... now dwelt together in greater peace and affection ... than had ever elsewhere existed between the taskmaster and the serf." Nor does Delbanco quote Hawthorne's praise for Pierce for loving "his whole, united, native country ... better than the mistiness of a philanthropic theory." To Hawthorne, in other words, the abolitionists were unpatriotic. If patriotism required appeasing the slave states so that they would not secede and destroy the Union, then Hawthorne may have had a point. But it is astonishing that a writer as sensitive as Hawthorne was not more moved by the plight of slaves.

Melville, by contrast, denounced slavery as a "sin ... no less;—a blot, foul as the crater-pool of hell." But Delbanco sees Melville, like Hawthorne, as "squeamish about the abolitionist response" to slavery. Delbanco believes that Melville's squeamishness stemmed from his sense "that Armageddon was coming—and that, if abolitionists and fire-eating slaveowners had their way, it would come soon."

The first two commentators in this book, John Stauffer and Manisha Sinha, defend abolitionism from what they see as Delbanco's centrist perspective. They believe that abolitionism arose as

a result of the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which allowed Missouri to enter the Union as a slave state but prohibited the spread of slavery into the territories north of the 36° 30´ parallel. This brought the issue of slavery to a head. Prior to the Missouri Compromise, there seemed to be an understanding among both slaveholders and their opponents that slavery was an evil that had been sanctioned by the Constitution as a compromise but that would gradually disappear. "Over the course of the 1820s," however, Stauffer writes, Southerners "repudiated the belief ... that slavery was a sin, and began to envision an empire of slavery. In response, the North witnessed the rise of 'modern' or immediate abolitionism. ..."

Delbanco responds that he finds himself "agreeing substantially with my critics while not always recognizing what I wrote in their critiques." His aim, he writes, "was neither to denigrate nor celebrate" abolitionism, but "to propose some reasons why serious people of conscience could have withheld themselves from the abolitionist crusade for as long as they did. My hope was to discourage the kind of hagiography and demonology into which writing about this subject often descends."

The third commentator, Darryl Pinckney, does not respond directly to any of Delbanco's points but contributes an essay on black abolitionists, on whom Delbanco did not focus. Wilfred M. McClay, the final commentator, generally supports and elaborates upon Delbanco's analysis. He praises both Lincoln for his pragmatism and the abolitionists for their vision, noting that, "[b]ound in a tense and fractious alliance, they accomplished together a goal that neither could have accomplished separately."

I close by taking issue with a statement of Delbanco's that none of the commentators addresses. Delbanco writes, "Civil War scholarship seems to be turning away from the full-throated Unionism of James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988) ... toward a more muted assessment of the conflict as a vastly tragic, perhaps even avertable event." Delbanco offers little evidence for this statement, merely citing two recent books that "focus on the devastation the war wrought" rather than on merits of the Union cause, and one recent book—David Goldfield's *America Aflame*—that takes a negative attitude toward abolitionism. As for the first two books, not to focus on the merits of the Union cause can be consistent with full-throated Unionism. One might take for granted Abraham Lincoln's assertion that slavery "was, somehow, the cause of the war" and, for that reason, also take for granted the necessity of the war. As for Goldfield's book (reviewed in the October 2011 issue of *The Federal Lawyer*), it is too early to tell what effect it may have on historians.

Delbanco continues, "Reasons for the change in tone in Civil War scholarship are not far to seek." He suggests several such reasons, but none is particularly cogent. The first is that modern-day liberals' opposition to "two American-led wars that were justified, in large part, as acts of liberation on behalf of innocents living in conditions akin to slavery" makes it possible to imagine that, if we lived in the 1850s, we might not favor "intervention in what people of advanced views today might call 'the indigenous culture' of the South." The flaw in Delbanco's reasoning here is that most liberals did not believe that the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan (which I assume are the wars to which Delbanco refers) were, in fact, intended as acts of liberation.

Delbanco's second explanation for current scholars' reduced enthusiasm for the Union cause is that "most of us live quite comfortably today with our knowledge of cruelty and oppression in nation-states whose exports are as essential to our daily lives as slave-grown cotton once was to the 'free' North—yet few of us take any action beyond lamenting the dark side of 'globalization.' Are we sure we would have sided with those who insisted that all Americans ... had a duty forcibly to terminate the labor system of a region that many regarded, to all intents and purposes, as a foreign country?" Here Delbanco confuses taking a position with taking action. Yes, few of us take any action beyond lamenting the cruelty and oppression of nations whose products we import, but that doesn't mean that we oppose the abolition of such cruelty and oppression. Likewise, if, in the 1850s, we might not have taken action to oppose slavery, it would not follow that we would have opposed the abolition of slavery.

A third reason that Delbanco sees for "the shift in tone in contemporary writing about the war against slavery ... is the abolitionists' militant religious voice"—that of Harriet Beecher Stowe, John Brown, and others. Delbanco adds, "Today, when the language of holy crusade has been appropriated by jihadists abroad and the Christian right at home, the religious accent sounds a good deal less congenial to many who seem themselves liberal or progressive." But, apart from the fact that many abolitionists, such as Henry David Thoreau, were New England Transcendentalists and not conventional—let alone fundamentalist—Christians, many secular liberals, despite their opposition to jihadists and the Christian right, continue to admire Harriet Beecher Stowe and (to a lesser degree) John Brown. Commentator Wilfred M. McClay writes that Delbanco's point that the abolitionists' cause grew out of their brand of Christianity "strongly supports the claim by religiously based foes of abortion rights in our own day that the mantle of the abolitionists is theirs." But religion has always been used to justify causes both good and evil; many supporters of slavery, for example, cited scripture in support of their position. McClay might reply that support for abolitionism, unlike support for slavery, depended on religion—"No religion, no abolitionism: it is that simple," he claims. But he cannot know that the abolitionists were not psychologically inclined to oppose slavery and would have done so even without religion. *The Abolitionist Imagination* raises many such provocative questions. **TFL**

Henry Cohen is the book review editor of The Federal Lawyer.

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Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation

Edited by Alfred F. Young, Gary B. Nash, and Ray Raphael

Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 2011. 452 pages, $32.50.

Reviewed by Charles Doskow

History is not only about kings and presidents and generals. In fact, as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "All history is a record of the power of minorities, and of minorities of one."

The three distinguished historians of the American Revolution who edited *Revolutionary Founders*, and who each contributed one of the book's 22 essays, asked "prominent scholars to discuss men and women who are representative of larger historical currents." Most of these men and women were associated with popular movements and were people of lesser renown who either influenced or embodied the Revolutionary era. In that sense, they were "Revolutionary Founders."

Many of the individuals discussed in the book were far from ordinary people, and they made outstanding contributions to American history, even if they have largely been unrecognized. The editors characterize them in the subtitle as "rebels, radicals, and reformers," contrasting them with the Founding Fathers, who were content to accommodate slavery in the Constitution.

Of the 22 subjects of these essays, only Tom Paine and Abigail Adams are generally familiar to contemporary Americans. Paine's varied and peripatetic contributions on two continents are summarized in a brief essay evaluating his accomplishments and his influence on the Revolution. Abigail Adams, wife of the second President and mother of the sixth, was an early advocate of women's rights and was known for the letter she wrote in 1776 to her husband, then a member of the Continental Congress, advising him to "Remember the Ladies." She also had the temerity to write her will at a time when a woman's property was considered to belong to her husband.

Two other women are also featured in this book. Judith Sargent Murray, like Abigail Adams, was an advocate of women's rights; her landmark essay, "On the Equality of the Sexes," published in 1790, predated Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" by two years. Murray's three-volume book of poems, essays, and plays—published in 1798 and titled *The Gleaner*—established her as an advocate for women's equality, education, and economic independence. The second woman featured in the book is Phyllis Wheatley, an African-American and a freed slave, who wrote poetry. Historian David Waldstreicher calls his essay about her, "The Poet Who Challenged the American Revolutionaries." Phyllis Wheatley wrote elegies, patriotic verse (one about the Boston Massacre), and poems about the complex issues raised by slavery.

Philip Mead's essay focuses on the memoirs of Private Joseph Plumb Martin, a soldier in the Continental army. Martin had an extensive military career, rising to the rank of sergeant and participating in many successful and unsuccessful battles, skirmishes, bivouacs, mutinies, and marches. His observations about the deficiencies of the Continental army provide the perspective of the grunt soldier and leave no doubt of his lack of respect for most of the officers who commanded him (though he had a high opinion of George Washington). Martin's memoirs were written many years after the war, yet, according to Mead, the soldier's recollections check out with remarkable accuracy against other accounts of the war. His book became "a classic among military historians and Revolutionary War enthusiasts as a unique insight into the mind of a soldier of the Revolution."

Alfred F. Young's essay details the contributions of Ebenezer Mackintosh, a shoemaker, to the pre-Revolutionary unrest in Boston. Massachusetts was the cradle of the Revolution, and Young titles his essay, "Boston's Captain General of the Liberty Tree." In 1765, Mackintosh was an instigator of five major actions, including hanging effigies from an elm tree—known as the "Liberty Tree"—to protest the Stamp Act. Of the Boston Tea Party in 1773, Mackintosh boasted in old age that it was "my chickens that did the job." Young credits Mackintosh with having influenced the three leaders of the Revolutionary movement in Massachusetts: John Adams, Samuel Adams, and John Hancock.

Other essays in *Revolutionary Founders* describe the several local revolutions that antedate 1776; the struggles of the Baptists in Virginia against the established Church; and the "radical caucus" that, during the summer of 1776, immediately after independence, gave the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania the most democratic constitution ever written to that date. The post-Revolutionary activities of a group that the editors call the "Black Founders," as well as the activities of certain Indian tribes, are also the subjects of essays in the book.

In the introduction, the editors suggest that two early uprisings have been given titles that fail to reflect their true nature. The Whiskey Rebellion (1794), a challenge to Alexander Hamilton's finance program, was given that name by Hamilton to caricature it; the book's editors prefer to call the participants "regulators," who sought to enforce their right to pass judgment on (or "regulate") their rulers. The editors further contend that Shays' Rebellion (1787) had several leaders and should not be attributed to a single disgruntled individual. The editors write, "This misnaming may seem trivial, but it is suggestive of greater obfuscation," specifically, as an attempt to portray the protestors as "wild radicals [who] lost out to more reasonable men." These uprisings were expressions of the people, many of whom were dissatisfied with their government for having failed to carry out the promise of the Revolution. The editors believe that the leaders of these uprisings, like the other subjects of the book, deserve greater recognition in American history.

Revolutionary Founders succeeds admirably in providing such recognition. Each of its essays stands on its own, has its own bibliography, and illuminates our picture of the Revolutionary War era. **TFL**

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The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power

By Robert A. Caro

Alfred A. Knopf, New York, N.Y. 2012. 712 pages, $35.00.

Reviewed by Christopher Faille

Robert Caro has been working on a multivolume biography of the 36th President, called *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, for more than 30 years. The first volume of the set, *The Path to Power*, appeared in 1982. We ought to begin a discussion of the book under review—the fourth volume—with some account of its precursors, as it builds upon those earlier volumes. Someone with a general idea of where U.S. politics stood in the late 1950s *can* treat this book as a stand-alone, but I trust the following paragraphs will prove helpful for such an adventurer.

The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Volumes I and II

The Path to Power related the first 33 years of Johnson's life, including his first election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1937, which was a special election for the district that included Austin and the hill country that surrounds it. Through that campaign and the following years, Johnson was—at least on the surface—a devotee of the New Deal, and he was associated in particular with the cause of rural electrification. But Caro sees all of Johnson's devotions during the Roosevelt years through the lens of Johnson's already overweening ambition. In this 1982 volume, Caro stressed that a close tie to the Rural Electrification Administration gave Johnson an instrument that he could and did use to build his own personal political machine.

The second volume, *Means of Ascent*, was published in 1990 and moved us on to Johnson's elevation to the U.S. Senate in the election of 1948. The key votes, in the essentially one-party Texas of that time, were generally those cast in the Democratic primary, and Johnson's opponent in the party primary in 1948 was a formidable one—former Governor Coke Stevenson. Caro argues that Johnson's defeat of Stevenson was blatant theft. Indeed, not only does Caro charge that Johnson stole this election and his resulting Senate seat but he also says that the theft was so blatant as to violate "even the notably loose boundaries of Texas politics." Nonetheless, the Democratic Party's state convention upheld Johnson's victory, and he prevailed against Stevenson's lawsuit with some help from attorney Abe Fortas, a man he would in the fullness of time put on the U.S. Supreme Court.

Volume III: *Master of the Senate*

Caro's third volume, *Master of the Senate* (2002), discusses Johnson's time as a U.S. senator. features Johnson's assumption of the leadership of his party in that body while the Democrats were still the minority, with that assumption making him majority leader in January 1955, when the Democrats gained control of the Senate. This book takes the story to January 1961—the end of his last term in that institution.

Along the way, Caro introduces us to Bobby Baker, who had been associated with the U.S. Senate for a long time, having become a Senate page as a teen-ager in 1942. He was still a Senate page at the age of 20, when Johnson was elected to that institution in 1948. Johnson soon understood (according to the story as Caro told it in this volume) why Baker was important and said to him, "Mr. Baker, I understand you know where the bodies are buried in the Senate. I'd appreciate it if you'd come by my office and talk to me." That quote, which Caro takes from a memoir Baker wrote in the 1970s, displays Johnson at his most charming: both politely solicitous and disarmingly frank about his own ambition.

In 1951, Johnson would arrange for Baker to get a more adult-sounding title than "page." He became "assistant, Democratic cloakroom," a nebulous position invented precisely for him. Later, when Johnson became the majority leader, Baker's title became still grander: "secretary to the majority." Then, when Johnson became vice president, Baker stayed on as secretary to the majority in the Senate, under the new majority leader, Mike Mansfield.

One impression that everyone who reads Caro's biography of Johnson receives is that of a paradoxical combination of "Big Picture" architectonics with a passion for particularity. Here's an example from near the end of *Master of the Senate*. Caro takes us to a meeting at which Johnson is giving Senator Hubert Humphrey a dressing-down. Humphrey had disappointed him by counting votes inaccurately, forcing Johnson to use last-minute parliamentary maneuvers to avoid the passage of a bill that Humphrey had erroneously assured him would not require such maneuvering because it didn't have the numbers to pass. Caro describes the scene this way:

> He started to lead Humphrey to his office. As he was crossing the Senate Reception Room, he saw Anthony Lewis, the *New York Times* Supreme Court reporter, coming down the stairs. Grabbing Lewis' arm, Johnson brought him along, and Reedy as well, and the four men settled down for a talk, the Majority Leader behind the big desk, the three men facing him. Every twenty minutes or so, a secretary would come in and hand Johnson a fresh Cutty Sark and soda, which he would gulp down.

The Big Picture here concerns nothing less than the system of checks and balances, because the bill in question was one that would have limited the jurisdiction of the U.S. Supreme Court (a common desideratum at the time for conservatives lashing out at the judicial

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revolution of Chief Justice Earl Warren and his colleagues). Caro included the allusion to Cutty Sark, not for that Big Picture (and not as a product placement), but because he knows enough about narrative to give the scene its pull. This isn't political philosophy or even political science: this is old-fashioned narrative biography on the grandest scale but with a wonderful sense of detail.

Volume IV: *The Passage of Power*

There is some chronological overlap in the coverage of *Master of the Senate* and in Caro's new book, *The Passage of Power,* because the latter begins in 1958, when Johnson was still in the Senate, and continues into 1964). But there is little thematic overlap, because the earlier chapters of this new volume focus not on legislative maneuverings but on the jockeying underway for the Democratic Party's nomination for President in 1960.

Because I am writing a review and not a multivolume biography of my own, I'll skip forward, past the primary campaign (when, Caro believes, Johnson dithered away a real chance to be the Democratic Party's nominee in 1960) and past Kennedy and Johnson's defeat of Nixon and vice presidential candidate Henry Cabot Lodge. The outline of this much of Caro's story is well known.

The book picks up interest and novelty when Caro returns to the matter of Johnson's relationship with Bobby Baker. At some point (Caro doesn't tell us exactly when), Baker became associated with a vending machine company, Serv-U. This firm sold a lot of machines for use in military contractors' manufacturing plants, where Baker turned out to have connections for reasons that, even not especially cynical folks surmised, had some connection with his years on Capitol Hill. In September 1963, a competing vending machine concern filed a lawsuit against Serv-U and Baker, alleging that Baker had not only taken bribes but also had then double-crossed the people who had bought him fair and square. He had supposedly taken bribes agreeing to allow a competing company to sell its vending machines to certain government contractors but then seen to it that the contractors in question bought from Serv-U anyway.

Johnson's response to the first unfavorable headlines about Baker and Serv-U was to claim that he hardly knew Baker. He tried to sell the idea that the secretary to the majority is a post filled independently of the wishes of the majority leader and, indeed, that the two people who fill those respective posts have little contact. And he stopped taking Baker's telephone calls. That tactic wasn't going to work. Every reporter who had been on Capitol Hill during the 1950s was aware that there was a close tie between Johnson and Baker (the usual language for it was that of mentor and protégé).

Life Insurance and *Life* Magazine

The Baker story grew, and the Johnson connection to Baker tightened when a life insurance broker named Donald Reynolds began talking to Republican Sen. John J. Williams. Reynolds said that he had come to know Bobby Baker in 1957, and that Baker had introduced him to Majority Leader Johnson, who, at the time, had been having trouble buying life insurance because of his history of heart trouble. Reynolds sold him a policy.

The check to pay the initial premium was written on the account of the "LBJ Company" and signed not by Lyndon Johnson but by Lady Bird. Therein hangs another tale. The LBJ Company, supposedly Lady Bird's project, without any input from Lyndon at all (if one considers that they had the same initials if she were to use her nickname rather than her actual name), owned a chain of radio and television stations across Texas—a chain that Caro says had been the recipient of "a twenty-year long string of strikingly favorable rulings by the Federal Communications Commission." The LBJ Company also owned "11,000 acres of ranchland and major shareholdings in nine Texas banks."

Lyndon Johnson's denials of any involvement with that company were as incredible as his denials of any significant contact with Bobby Baker. Texas, after all, was a community property state. As a matter of law, Johnson owned the half of his wife's interest in that company that had been accumulated during their marriage. Even more to the point: if the LBJ Company's assets weren't in any sense his, then why was that company paying for his life insurance?

On the morning of Nov. 22, 1963, the Senate Rules Committee was holding a hearing on Bobby Baker's shenanigans. Also that morning, in the offices of *Life* magazine in New York City, an editorial meeting on the direction of that periodical's coverage of the Baker story was taking place. The LBJ angle of the Baker story had spun off into something new—an inquiry into the vice president's net worth and the sources of his wealth generally.

Days before, William Lambert, the associate editor of *Life*, had said to George P. Hunt, the managing editor, that he was sure LBJ "had used public office to enhance his private wealth." Johnson had been in public-sector jobs all his adult life, yet he was a multimillionaire. On Nov. 22, 1963, Lambert and Hunt were discussing a perspective on the Baker stories as only one window into how that had happened—and they were discussing the likelihood of other windows.

An Assassination in Dallas

That morning, at 11:38 in Dallas (12:38 in Washington, D.C.), Air Force One touched down. Around that time, two investigators for the Senate Rules Committee decided not to break for lunch but to continue questioning Donald Reynolds, who had sold Johnson the life insurance policy. The investigators found the material so fascinating that they sent a secretary out to get sandwiches to avoid the need for a nutritional interruption.

At about 12:30 in Dallas, LBJ and everyone else in the motorcade through Dealey Plaza heard an ominous crack. At the same time, the *Life* editors were dividing up their planned coverage of the "LBJ's wealth" story and assigning tasks to their reporters. Also at that time, in Washington, D.C., Reynolds was handing copies of potentially sig-

nificant documents to the committee's investigators.

Reynolds told investigators that he had paid kickbacks on the insurance premiums he had received from Johnson. Specifically, he had paid for advertising time on KTBC-TV. (He was running an insurance brokerage in *Maryland*, with no Texas connections at all. He had no need to buy air time on a Texas television station except, of course, as tribute to Majority Leader and then Vice President Johnson.) The documents that Reynolds handed over around 1:30 p.m. were the canceled checks on these advertising/kickback payments.

The above paragraphs will have to suffice to give some sense of the tangle of issues that Johnson faced as the inquiries into Baker's various shenanigans intensified. Read the book for much more.

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy brought an end to such inquiries, at least for a time. The sense of crisis made stories about old-fashioned kickbacks seem trivial, and Johnson's new position created a patriotic appeal in his favor—the idea that he should be given a breathing space before being pressed on such a matter. It was *only* a breathing space, though. In August 1964, *Life* would run the story it had scotched the preceding November, and other periodicals would be back in the hunt for dirt on Baker and Johnson.

Presumably, we'll read more about Baker, Reynolds, and issues of petty corruption in Caro's fifth volume. This fourth volume ends in March 1964. By that time, according to Caro, the period of transition was over; Johnson had made the White House his own. The end of the transition is reflected, for example, in the fact that Pierre Salinger, a close Kennedy associate, whose continued presence after the assassination Johnson had plaintively requested, left the administration with unexpected suddenness on March 19, 1964.

Coincidence and the Conspiracy Card

One reason the Baker scandal is historically important is that the timing has fed into certain conspiracy theories. The fact that Reynolds was handing over documents involving Johnson to investigators the morning of Kennedy's assassination and that the hearing (and the investigation) came to an end as soon as the participants heard the news from Dallas has been catnip for theorists. Nonetheless, you won't find any support in this book for any particular conspiracy theory about the murder of the 35th President of the United States—in particular, you'll find no support for any theory that would paint Caro's protagonist as complicit in the assassination.

For Caro, the coincidence of the timing of those two Baker-related investigations and the murder of President Kennedy is precisely that: a coincidence. "[N]othing that I have found in my research," he writes, "leads me to believe that whatever the full story of the assassination might be, Lyndon Johnson had anything to do with it."

Typical of Caro's view (and typical of his way of presenting his views) is a brief allusion near the end of the book to the claims of "publicity-hunting New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison" to have "discovered that the Dallas shootings … were part of an elaborate conspiracy." Caro then tells us that Robert Kennedy once discussed Garrison's views with Frank Mankiewicz, his press secretary. Kennedy asked Mankiewicz whether Garrison "had anything," to which Mankiewicz replied, "No, but I think there is something." Bobby replied, "So do I."

Caro, likewise, doesn't believe that Garrison or any other theorists had anything. Caro isn't sure that there is nothing to be found, but he appears to want us to consider the possibility that one of the Attorney General Robert Kennedy's investigations—perhaps his pursuit of the Teamsters' boss, Jimmy Hoffa—had backfired, and that Robert Kennedy's own grief accordingly had "explanations … beyond the obvious ones"—that is, that it was mingled with and reinforced by guilt.

In addition, Caro observes that Johnson was perfectly willing to play the conspiracy card himself, when he thought that it would help him. In that awful weekend after President Kennedy's murder, one of the many calls that the new President placed was to Ed Weisl, a prominent securities lawyer and LBJ's best connection to Wall Street. LBJ told Weisl that "your folks" (his clients in the securities business, presumably) should take the hint that "this thing ... this assassin may ... have a lot more complications than you know about. ... It may lay deeper than you think." The message clearly was that Wall Street should show its own faith in and solidarity with Johnson, because he was going to save the system that had made them all rich from the shadowy forces represented by the assassin.

We can leave the story there. I heartily recommend this book. Caro is building a great scholarly monument with this multivolume work. We have the privilege of watching him build it in real time. Those of our descendants who care about the history of the mid-20th century will see it only as a thing made, not one in-the-making. **TFL**

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