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SURROUNDED BY ENEMIES: What if Kennedy Survived Dallas?

Introduction, by Bryce Zabel

It's now been half a century since the shots rang out in Dealey Plaza. To admit you lived through their shock and fury is to be of a certain age. Those of us who were children then, at the end of America's great Baby Boom, have forged countless different paths, but we share in common a question that, over the years, has haunted almost all of us:

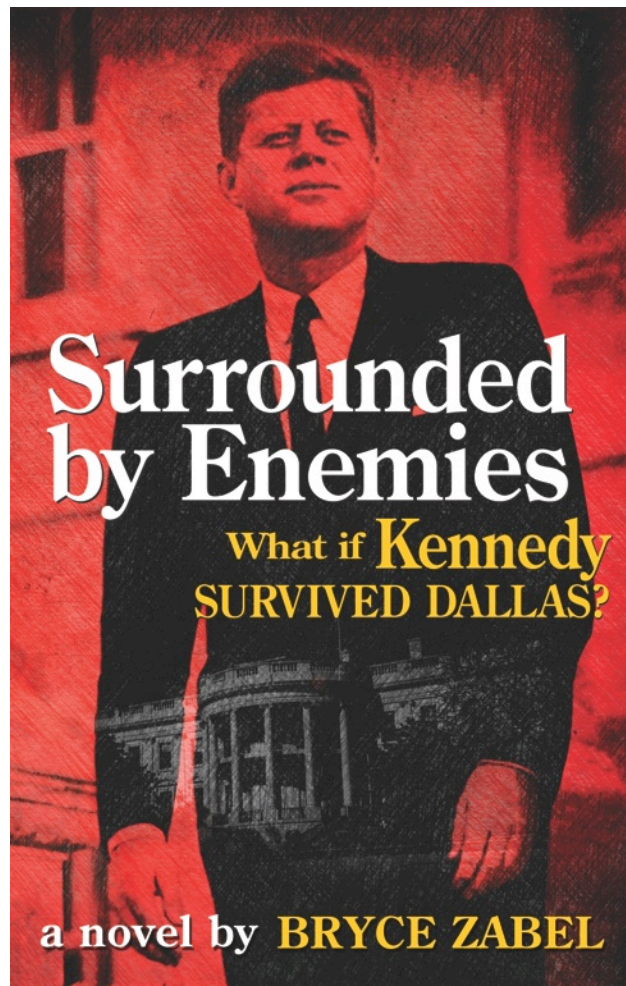
What if Kennedy lived?

Almost since the assassination, writers have speculated about the great things President Kennedy would have done for the country and the world had his life been spared in Dallas. It's commonly assumed he would have rolled back our Vietnam involvement, enacted landmark civil rights policy, made peace with the Soviets and even finished the attack on organized crime.

That upbeat scenario is probably wishful thinking. Kennedy had a definite to-do list for a second term, yes, but the forces in opposition to his presidency in 1963 were organized and powerful. Let's shade the question just a bit differently:

What if Kennedy survived Dallas?

This new question puts front-and-center the plain fact that Kennedy's survival could not exist in a story vacuum, as if November 22, 1963 were just



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another day. After all, whether or not Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, the President of the United States still had been targeted for execution in broad daylight on a public street before a global television audience. Life would not have pinged back to normal if the assassin's bullets had missed their target.

Investigations would have been launched to determine if what just happened was an attempted professional hit, a failed political assassination, or the work of a crazed, lone gunman. In any case, the world would have been turned upside down during this period, raising an avalanche of questions and blowback on multiple fronts, particularly since the President would have been alive and asking these questions himself, along with some of the world's most powerful allies, including a brother in charge of the U.S. Justice Department.

If there were conspirators, they and their target would have regarded each other like scorpions in a bottle. In a cascade of post-ambush cause and effect, these traitors who had plotted to achieve a coup d'état by public murder would have found President Kennedy now physically impossible to get at, protected by enhanced security. In this telling, the system comes unhinged, and the conspirators go after Kennedy by other means after their bullets fail.

There is no doubt that John Kennedy's presidency was a high point in our nation's history. What we did not know when we were living through it, however, was that President Kennedy's reckless behavior behind the scenes kept him always one headline away from disaster. Surviving a well-planned assassination attempt could not have made JFK's personal weaknesses any easier to disguise. He also had enemies with the means to lay bare the most intimate secrets of his private life. Had they done so, the President's dark side clearly had the potential to destroy any second term the voters might have granted him.

This alternative history, then, is not a time-travel story with a protagonist sent back to save JFK (a continuing fascination right up through last year's Stephen King book *11/22/63*). That kind of political science-fiction usually sees an idealized and heroic JFK through rose-colored glasses. Rather, this narrative sheds light on the shadowy events of late 1963 in the context of the constitutional crisis they easily could have triggered. To the best of my knowledge, this is a new way to examine the what if of JFK and ends up illuminating what the stakes were in our own timeline.

Because Kennedy was the most mediagenic political figure of his time, and possibly of all time, I have created a media vehicle uniquely suited to tell his story. Top Story magazine was, in this alternative historical reality, a struggling newsweekly routinely getting its lunch eaten by the publishing powers-that-used-to-be until it hitched its wagon to the charismatic young President's star-crossed descent into scandal. A story as big as this demands all the resources a full-fledged news outlet like Top Story would have at its command: teams of

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reporters, exhaustive research capabilities, a definitive Rolodex. As it happens, all these elements already existed in my own imagination.

So JFK's epic tragedy is also, tangentially, the chronicle of how one media outlet at the brink of obscurity clawed its way to prominence on the Kennedy coattails. It only makes sense then that I've chosen to write *Surrounded by Enemies* as a book published by Top Story magazine on the anniversary of JFK's survival of the shootout at Dealey Plaza.

Here's a world where, fifty years earlier, history's tree grew another branch. Where journalism and the counter-culture ignited a political explosion over Watergate in the 1970s and led to Nixon's impeachment in our world, Kennedy's battle with the treasonous forces of conspiracy in the 1960s in the alternative scenario probably would have triggered an implosion in JFK's reputation. Rather than the steady drip of scandal we've experienced over the past five decades, the events surrounding a failed JFK assassination might have gotten seriously out-of-hand, and fast.

Many people now see The Warren Commission Report as the greatest work of American fiction published in the twentieth century. Still, it's been impossible to ignore the importance and validity of the "Oswald acted alone" pushback we've seen recently, from Stephen King's book to Bill O'Reilly's *Killing Kennedy* to legendary prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi's *Reclaiming History*. And it's nothing new. Even back in the immediate aftermath, the Byrds rewrote the popular folk song "He Was a Friend of Mine" to say, "His killing had no purpose / No reason, no rhyme." In my opinion, that is the wrong sentiment wrapped up in a classic melody.

After a lifetime of casual reading on the topic compounded by this recent intensity of research, I'm simply swayed that whatever role Lee Harvey Oswald actually played on history's grand stage, his was not a one-man show but one populated by and synchronized with multiple unseen actors. That is the point of view from which I've written this fictional account.

Since we live in a time of often bitter polarization, it is also worth noting that I'm a lifelong Democrat who remembers when America's two great political parties at least tried to work together for the good of the country. I write this book because, to me, its scenario is a fascinating what if, not because of any agenda involving President Kennedy. This alternative history depicts Kennedy — accurately, I believe — as an enormously charismatic man whose intelligence, political mastery and legendary charm could not, ultimately, disguise his deeply human flaws.

Surrounded by Enemies is not a research book. I have changed names, compressed events and, in the interest of presenting an alternative history, made up some things completely. I have tried to do all of this with a healthy respect for

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the actual facts of the matter, but there is no question that I have taken many liberties. On the other hand, I also ask that everyone who sees a real name in this piece of fiction understand that the person in question is a character in a story that takes place in a parallel universe. In a world that accepts stories about Abe Lincoln as a vampire hunter, this story should not offend, but intrigue.

In several instances, I have taken existing documents and quotes from the Nixon and Clinton impeachments, lines from past State of the Union speeches, etc., and modified them to fit this story. In this context, I hardly think this sampling is a literary sin, but a device to show just how possible it is to see JFK in a similar context. In any case, very little of this book contains this type of historical transposition. I have not footnoted my work with tedious accounts of its accuracy or fabrication, because it is meant to be read as an immersive piece of fiction; to undertake such an academic challenge would only distract the reader. Those engaged by the events of this story are encouraged to begin their own research and draw their own conclusions.

The plain reality is that Jack Kennedy had a lot of things he was hiding and there were numerous powerful men who wanted him dead. If those conspirators had taken their shots and missed, President Kennedy would have come back at them not only with a vengeance, but also with a carefully constructed strategy. The very existence of Attorney General Robert Kennedy and his family loyalty guarantees that. I've come to see this entire story, despite its many working parts and vastly different points-of-view, as the story of two brothers. Had the shots fired in Dallas, Texas missed their target on November 22, 1963, they still would have set the 1960s ablaze, turning John and Robert Kennedy into the original conspiracy theorists. Their story from this alternate world needed to be told and I've enjoyed telling it.

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