

Distorting the Life of Bobby Kennedy

As the 50th anniversary of his assassination is being remembered on Tuesday, it is vital to have a complete and accurate picture of the complex figure of Robert F. Kennedy, explains James DiEugenio.

By James DiEugenio *Special to Consortium News*



TV commentator Chris Matthews' book, *Bobby Kennedy: A Raging Spirit*, has been a best seller since it was released last October, but there's a lot of important material that Matthews left out about Kennedy, whose assassination on June 5, 1968 is being remembered on Tuesday.

In recapping his early life, Matthews tells the story of Kennedy graduating from Harvard and going on to pursue a law degree at the University of Virginia, where he was chair of the Student Legal Forum. In that role, he invited some high profile guests to speak in Charlottesville.

One guest, Nobel Prize winner Ralph Bunche, would augur Kennedy's later support for civil rights. Bunche, both a diplomat and professor at Howard University, was African-American, and the invitation was to a state where most of everyday life was still segregated. When Bunche told Kennedy he would not speak before a segregated audience, RFK appealed the issue through four levels of the college administration—saying he would not back down for moral reasons—and won. Bunche ultimately addressed an overflowing, integrated audience that was about one-third African-American. As Matthews correctly notes, Bunche stayed at Bobby's house that night, which was pelted with stones.

A Transformative Trip Abroad

In 1951, after he graduated, Bobby traveled with his brother, then Congressman Jack Kennedy, to the Middle and Far East to learn about U.S. foreign policy and raise his credentials in that area. Matthews mentions the trip, but omits the name of Edmund Gullion, a respected State Department diplomat whom the brothers contacted in Saigon to

assess whether France could win its war to re-colonize Indochina.

Matthews' excision of Gullion is inexplicable, given his importance: he told the Kennedy brothers that France could not win, since Ho Chi Minh had inspired the Viet Minh to fight until death, rather than return under colonialism's yoke. Gullion also said France could not win a war of attrition, because the home front would not support it.

Bobby later said Gullion deeply affected JFK's foreign policy views. Thus, soon after, JFK attacked both parties' positions on thwarting Communism in the Third World. That lonely campaign continued for six years, climaxing in the senator's speech protesting Eisenhower's second attempt to support France's desperate effort to maintain an imperial empire, this time in Algeria.

During the next year (1958), JFK bought 100 copies of the best-selling book, *The Ugly American*, one for each senator, a story Matthews fails to tell. The thinly disguised novel was an unsubtle critique of America's growing involvement in Indochina and the State Department's incompetence in dealing with the Vietnamese.

As JFK aide Arthur Schlesinger noted, when Senator John Kennedy opposed the Eisenhower/Nixon proposed intervention at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, RFK agreed, believing one could not consider anti-Communism in the Third World without considering colonialism's impacts. Bobby noted this in a 1956 article for *The New York Times Magazine*:

“. . .because we think that the uppermost thought in all people's minds is communism....We are still too often doing too little too late to recognize and assist the irresistible movements for independence that are sweeping one dependent territory after another.”

At a talk at Fordham University, Bobby told the audience that the fatal flaw of American foreign policy was the commitment to European colonialism, noting “We supported France in Indochina far too long.” Although this is a stunning critique, Matthews does not include it in his book.

RFK and Joseph McCarthy

By leaving out such stories, it seems Matthews is trying to position Bobby Kennedy closer to Senator Joe McCarthy than he really was to paint RFK as an ardent Cold Warrior. After Bobby successfully managed his brother's Senate campaign in 1952, his father suggested he work for McCarthy, who was Joe Kennedy's friend. Matthews devotes seven pages to this part of the history, though he omits some key points.

For example, Bobby resigned in protest from McCarthy's committee after only six months. During this time, he worked on what many think was the Committee's most valuable report, about how some American allies' trade practices benefited China and North Korea during the Korean conflict. Unlike Roy Cohn, McCarthy's choice for chief counsel, RFK's report did not accuse individuals of being traitors.

Further, RFK did not participate in Cohn's pursuit of alleged Russian spies in the State Department. In fact, in private, he clearly admitted his dispute with Cohn, whom he found reckless and pugnacious, attracting the wrong kind of publicity to the Committee. Once he resigned, he kept a low profile for a short while and then the Democratic minority appointed him their chief counsel.

As RFK predicted, McCarthy and Cohn imploded on national television during the Army-McCarthy hearings. After this, Bobby took over the committee and retired two of its most controversial, even absurd, cases, against a Queens, NY dentist, Irving Peress and a Pentagon pastry chef, Annie Lee Moss. Also, the RFK-run committee never filed charges with respect to McCarthy's accusation about the infiltration of defense plants.

When the proceedings ended, Bobby wrote the minority report, which was so critical of McCarthy and Cohn that some Democrats would not sign it. It recommended the Senate take action for their abuses. The report provoked hearings on the subject of censure; which was the end result. However, Matthews spends significantly more time on RFK's earlier Committee work than on his later role, which was longer and more important.

Matthews skims over the next part of RFK's life, as Chief Counsel for the McClellan Committee. Here, the 31-year-old lawyer rose to national prominence as the foe of Teamsters' President Jimmy Hoffa and organized crime. Matthews captures little of the political complexity of this four-year drama. For example, the Committee Republicans, led by Sen. Barry Goldwater, were pleased when RFK began pursuing Hoffa since they thought it would weaken unions, in general. But they were unhappy when RFK expanded the focus to the Teamsters' relationship with the Mafia, since the Committee now sought to clean up corrupt unions.

It got even worse for Goldwater when, while Bobby was investigating a long strike against the Kohler Company in Wisconsin, he became close to Walter Reuther, the United Automobile Workers' president, who was running the strike. As chief counsel, RFK made him a featured witness before the Committee. This resulted in the largest fine ever levied against a corporation in a strike until that time. Again, Matthews omits this important biographical material.

JFK's Presidential Bid

In 1960, Bobby managed his brother's presidential campaign against Vice-President Richard Nixon. Matthews does note Bobby's 1959 visit to Johnson's ranch, where LBJ lied to him about his intention not to enter the 1960 race. Thus, when Johnson did enter, late in the campaign, RFK had to run a two-stage strategy: The first beating Senator Hubert Humphrey in the primaries; the second was to beat Johnson in the local and state delegations in states without primaries. Despite the extra load, Bobby held off Johnson and JFK won on the first ballot at the convention.

At this point, a group of advisors convinced JFK to abandon his original choice for vice-president, Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri, and instead pick Johnson, so he could win in the south.

Matthews' version of what followed differs from the dominant meme in the literature. Authors like Jeff Shesol and Robert Caro concluded that, after Johnson accepted JFK's offer, Bobby tried to get Johnson to leave the ticket. Matthews' interpretation is that JFK knew what

Bobby was doing and supported it, since he had not thought Johnson would accept the offer. Whichever version is correct, it made the LBJ/RFK relationship even rockier, and the two were antagonists for the next eight years—which ultimately fractured the 1968 Democratic convention.

The Kennedys and the CIA

Matthews correctly views the Bay of Pigs operation as one that was designed to fail. In his previous books, he didn't admit this, which is odd, since CIA Director Allen Dulles left a handwritten confession to that effect in his Princeton archives. Peter Grose, Dulles' biographer, discussed this in his 1994 book, *Gentleman Spy*. Thus, Matthews took two decades to present what Dulles admitted over 50 years earlier. So, finally, Matthews says the goal behind the deception was to have JFK send the Navy and Marines into Cuba to save the day. However, JFK refused, although Nixon—whom Kennedy defeated in 1960 for the White House—advised the President to declare a beachhead and invade. This discredits what Matthews observed in his previous book *Kennedy and Nixon*, where he implies there was an equivalency between the two presidents.

Matthews virtually eliminates the crucial role Bobby had soon after. The President appointed him as a member of a White House committee that was mandated to investigate the operation. During the inquiry, Bobby granted Dulles no quarter, since he already suspected what Dulles later admitted: that the CIA director had deceived JFK about the operation's chance of success, hoping he would approve an American armada to save himself from a humiliating defeat.

Thus, the President had authorized the Bay of Pigs given false information; and when RFK understood Dulles' deceptions, he conferred with his father, who arranged for his son to meet former Secretary of Defense Robert Lovett, who admitted he and David Bruce (at State) had tried to get Dulles fired in the 1950s. But Dulles was protected by his brother, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.

Lovett advised JFK that he now had the perfect opportunity to do what he, himself, could not. Thus, on Bobby's and Lovett's advice, the

President fired not just Allen Dulles, but Deputy Director Charles Cabell and Director of Plans, Dick Bissell. Feeling duped by the CIA and the Pentagon—which had also approved the disastrous project—Bobby now became JFK's trusted advisor on foreign affairs.

Operation Mongoose

Matthews omits these episodes and then writes that 1962's Operation Mongoose was Bobby's idea. Mongoose was the secret campaign of sabotage and covert actions against Cuba that, after seven months of memo shuffling, was authorized in November 1961 and launched in February 1962.

The definitive record of the memoranda—*Foreign Relations of the United States, Volume X*—shows that it was hardly Bobby's idea. In fact, it was Walt Rostow, Assistant to National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, who began the discussion by focusing on the "Cuba problem" and suggesting a blockade or an invasion. Others, like Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and CIA officer Tracy Barnes, joined in later; and it was Barnes' option to infiltrate and sabotage shipping that was ultimately supported.

President Kennedy appointed Bobby to be a kind of ombudsman over the project, since he did not trust the CIA. As David Corn revealed in *Blond Ghost*, a biography of Ted Shackley, Mongoose's day-to-day supervisor, Bobby insisted on seeing every plan for every foray into Cuba. He also demanded that every plan include a detailed, written description. To put it mildly, after the freewheeling days of Allen Dulles, the Agency chafed at this studious procedure for Mongoose. This is another point Matthews' ignores.

Battle for Civil Rights

Matthews begins the Kennedys' battle for civil rights with Bobby's role as Attorney General and his intervention in the Freedom Riders' attempt to integrate inter-state busing in the south. However, this is not the whole story. During JFK's campaign in June 1960, he said he was prepared to win the Democratic nomination without a single vote from the south at the convention. As author Harry Golden noted, after

he was nominated, he told his civil rights advisors that he would break the walls of segregation through legal actions based on three statutes that his predecessor, Dwight Eisenhower, did not use to any significant degree: the Supreme Court's Brown vs. Board decision of 1954, and the 1957 and 1960 Civil Rights Acts.

And this is what Attorney General Bobby Kennedy did, filing more civil rights cases in his first year than Eisenhower filed during his two full terms in office. By the end of 1961, he opened 61 new investigations and by 1963, five times as many lawyers were working on civil rights cases than under Eisenhower.

This approach had been planned by the Kennedy campaign's civil rights advisor, Harris Wofford. Before Bobby became attorney general, Wofford had written a long memorandum on the issue, saying it was not possible to pass an omnibus civil rights bill through Congress in 1961, and probably not in 1962—since the Senate would filibuster it. Thus, the Attorney General and White House would be wise to use executive orders and legal actions to build momentum.

This happened, and faster than Wofford anticipated, because some of the things JFK had done before he was president encouraged the civil rights movement in a way that Eisenhower had not. For example, in 1957, he spoke in Jackson, Mississippi, stating that all Americans must accept the Brown vs. Board decision as the law of the land. Further, during the 1960 campaign, JFK called Coretta Scott King to comfort her about her husband's arrest, while Bobby worked behind the scenes to get King out of prison. In May 1961, as the new attorney general, Bobby declared at the University of Georgia Law School that he would enforce the Brown v. Board decision.

Matthews ignores almost all of this. But without this information, the story of the meteoric success of the civil rights movement from 1961-1963 is incomplete. Vivian Malone, one of the first black students to enroll at the segregated University of Alabama, did so although Governor George Wallace stated he would stand in the schoolhouse door to prevent it. When Vivian's sister was asked why Vivian did such a dangerous thing, she said her sister trusted that

Bobby Kennedy would protect her. And he did, sending over 3,000 troops under General Creighton Abrams to the campus. Matthews simply does not explain this crucial link between the civil rights movement and the Kennedys' actions.

Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam

Nor does he shed light on the Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam in 1963. As to the former, Matthews notes that Bobby proposed an air strike to destroy the missiles on the island, tracing this to the first meeting of President Kennedy's advisors. However, I could not find this quote in the meeting's transcript. In fact, RFK cautioned his brother against both an invasion and bombing campaign at the first meeting. Although he mentioned more aggressive actions at the second meeting, he qualified them with words like 'if' and 'whether.' Thus, these were contingencies, not commitments.

Matthews then says the brothers acknowledged former Secretary of State Dean Acheson's view, which is completely inaccurate. In one of the most famous incidents during that two-week crisis, Acheson wanted no negotiations, and rather pushed for a sneak attack on the missile sites to eliminate them. Bobby, then attorney general, recoiled, saying it would be the equivalent of what the Japanese did to America at Pearl Harbor.

The transcripts show that JFK asked about each option—an invasion, bombing campaign, and surgical air strikes. For each, he considered the number of casualties. The President even questioned Chief of Staff Maxwell Taylor about the number of fatalities with a "surgical strike." And when the President visited the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he was appalled by their opposition to his choice of a blockade. What really startled the brothers was when the congressional leaders they called to the White House said they also thought a blockade was too meek—including liberal Senator William Fulbright, who favored an invasion.

Feeling isolated, JFK had Bobby work as his back channel to the Soviets; thus, Bobby communicated with Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and worked out a deal: the Russians would remove the atomic weapons from

Cuba in return for the U.S. not invading the island and making a silent promise that JFK would later remove American missiles from Turkey.

If we understand Bobby's role here, we understand what JFK was doing in Vietnam in 1963, and also RFK's position on the war from 1964-1968. Nevertheless, Matthews seems unable to deal with the ramifications of NSAM 263, President Kennedy's October 1963 order to begin withdrawing American advisors from Vietnam; and, Bobby's prime role in designing it.

The President had sent Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and General Taylor to Saigon that fall to report on the conditions that would support NSAM 263. But since he didn't trust the two to write what he needed to justify his withdrawal plan, he summoned General Victor Krulak and Colonel Fletcher Prouty to the White House. As historian John Newman notes, JFK asked Bobby to supervise their report, which was sent by jet to Hawaii where it was given to McNamara and Taylor to read on their flight to Washington. But you will not read one sentence about this in Matthews' book.

LBJ and RFK's Decision to Run for President

This omission points to a larger vacuum. One reason Bobby decided to run for president in 1968 was because he felt that though Johnson had said he wanted to continue JFK's policies, he obviously had little intention to. As John Bohrer notes in *The Revolution of Robert Kennedy*, even in early 1964, the Attorney General was advising Johnson not to militarize Vietnam. His advice, of course, was ignored.

Bobby also figured that Dean Rusk, the hawkish secretary of state, would now urge Johnson to escalate the war to heights he and his brother had never contemplated. But it was Johnson's signing ceremony for the civil rights bill in 1964 that was a turning point: LBJ asked RFK to pass around pens, after LBJ had already given one to racist FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. Bobby had had enough. He left the Administration and successfully ran for senator from New York. After this, he headed the "Kennedy wing of the Democratic party."

In 1965, Bobby asked Johnson to fire Rusk and tell South Vietnam the U.S. would no longer fight its war. He also railed against the NRA's influence, insisted on warning labels for cigarettes, and even asked that "right to work" laws—which weakened unions—be repealed. You can read about these courageous stands in John Bohrer's book, but not in Matthews'.

One thing LBJ did to reverse JFK's foreign policy was to appoint Thomas Mann to key positions on Latin America. Bobby suspected that Johnson did this to deliberately undo one of JFK's key diplomatic creations—the Alliance for Progress. Thus, Bobby, as senator, traveled to Latin America to find out what was going on. Matthews gives one page to this central event. Yet some of the things RFK said and did before, during and after this trip are crucial to understanding who he was at the time.

After the State Department briefed him about whom he should meet and what to say, Bobby told a colleague, "It sounds like we're working for United Fruit again." He told a crowd in Lima, Peru they should imitate great Latin American revolutionaries like San Martin and O'Higgins. At almost every other stop he ended his speeches by saying, "The responsibility of our times is nothing less than revolution." He made it a point to visit the ancient capital of the Inca empire in Cuzco and, on his way back, children were cheering "Viva Kennedy."

In Brazil, when sugar cane workers told him they were paid only for three days while working six, the senator walked to the landlord's house and yelled that he was swindling his workers. After this, he visited Brazil's president, who had been installed by a CIA-sponsored coup after JFK was killed. While driving back to his hotel room he saw soldiers striking some of the crowd and trying to keep them away from his car. As Bohrer writes, he jumped out and shouted, "Down with the government! On to the palace!" I have to share these key incidents with the reader because they are not in Matthews' book.

That journey south is a fitting prelude to Bobby's last campaign. Matthews does include a couple of important incidents in the prelude to RFK's decision to run against President Johnson. First, he

describes a meeting between Bobby and Walter Cronkite, where the CBS broadcaster told he him must run in order to end the Vietnam War. Second, he quotes Bobby saying in November 1967 that his brother would have never committed half a million men to Vietnam and, in fact, was determined not to send combat troops at all. But Matthews doesn't write how Bobby came to that conclusion.

An Incandescent Crusade

Matthews' description of Bobby's remarkable 85-day campaign is fairly prosaic and doesn't come close to capturing what was perhaps the most bold and brilliant presidential campaign in the last 60 years. Here was the last crusade of the 1960s—the last hope of a generation that had already witnessed to this point the murders of JFK in 1963 and Malcolm X in 1965. Martin Luther King was relying on Bobby to enter the race, and when he did, was overjoyed, saying he would make an outstanding president. RFK had King, Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta on his side.



At his first formal campaign appearance at Kansas State University, before Johnson exited the race, RFK called the president's Vietnam policy "bankrupt" and "deeply wrong." He then quoted the officer who said that after the Battle of Ben Tre, "We had to wipe out the village in order to save it." Bobby then asked, "Where does such logic end?" Later he said, "We cannot send American troops to assume the burden of fighting for corrupt and repressive governments all the way round the globe. . . ." Then, in Indiana, he echoed King when he said black Americans were dying in the war in disproportionate numbers than whites.

King was gunned down in Memphis on April 4, 1968 during the Indiana primary campaign. Kennedy had a rally scheduled in a predominantly African-American area of Indianapolis that night, which the police told him to cancel, since they couldn't assure his safety.

Nevertheless, he went and made one of his two greatest speeches. The other had been his “Ripple of Hope” address in Cape Town, South Africa on June 6, 1966, exactly two years before his death. Bobby pleaded with the crowd in Indianapolis not to give in to racial polarization, to hatred and bitterness. As many have noted, almost every major city in America went up in smoke that night, but Indianapolis did not.

Kennedy won Indiana and Nebraska, two primarily agricultural states outside the northeast. He also won every primary he entered except for Oregon. And he climaxed his triumphant crusade with his greatest victory in the California primary. As journalist Jack Newfield and others have pointed out, something exceptional happened in California. Chavez and Huerta got the word out about RFK all the way down to Los Angeles; and King’s followers did not forget RFK’s speeches in Cape Town and Indianapolis.

When the polls opened that morning, Kennedy’s workers drove around East LA to check the turnout and were shocked to see Hispanics and African Americans lined up before the doors opened. For the first time in the city’s history, the turnout on the poor east side surpassed the wealthy west side. Bobby had given the poor a reason to vote, which is why he beat Eugene McCarthy. A few moments after declaring his victory and saying, “On to Chicago, and let’s win there,” he was killed—the last of four major 1960s’ assassinations. Matthews doesn’t mention how they brought the end to a remarkable decade. Nor does he mention how his death caused the violent Chicago convention and how its influence led, among other reasons, to the victory of Richard Nixon, the anti-RFK candidate.

Why does Matthews continually ignore these points? If one thinks, as his employers at MSNBC do, that Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are the liberal ideal, then what Bobby Kennedy represented in 1968 was radical: Can you imagine either of these politicians telling Brazilian citizens to storm the palace? Not even on *Saturday Night Live*.

James DiEugenio is a researcher and writer on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other mysteries of that era. His most recent book is *The JFK Assassination : The Evidence Today*.

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