

Bill Rea ? I remember 54 years ago

In the next couple of days, we will mark the 54th anniversary of the assassination of American President John F. Kennedy.

I will be 60 in a couple of months, meaning I was five when Kennedy was cut down. I guess there are some people younger than I who have memories of that day, but not many.

I was in kindergarten at the time, attending morning sessions at my local school in the west end of Toronto, meaning I was at home in the afternoons, including this particular Friday afternoon. But I wasn't to be at home for long.

My mother and aunt were planning to attend a bazaar at Royal York United Church, which was within a convenient drive from where we lived (when was the last time you heard of a church holding a bazaar on a Friday afternoon?), and I was given the honour of tagging along on the excursion, as if I had a choice. We were also a one-car family in those days, so Mom would drive Dad to work Friday mornings so she could have the car to do the grocery shopping and tend to other business, like dragging me to bazaars. We drove to pick up my mother's sister at her apartment, where she lived with my uncle and six-month-old cousin. They lived on the fourth floor of the building, and my mother thought nothing in those days about taking the stairs as opposed to the elevator. I would raise a fuss about the strain climbing four flights of stairs put on my little legs. But she was a fit woman in the process of graduating from her mid-to-late 30s who could handle the chore, and she was living in a time when parents didn't have to give a damn what their kids wanted. This particular day, however, she had an out. The elevator in the building was under repair. Indeed, it was parked on the fourth floor, with a guy working on it. Since I already understood the concept of 'out of order,' I realized I had nothing to do but climb.

We were standing on there threshold of the apartment while my aunt got her things together (I admit I have no memory as to whether my baby cousin accompanied us that day, apart from wondering where else she would have been, if not with us).

It was the elevator repairman who changed the day for us. I do not and never will know this man's name. In our brief encounter, lasting 30 seconds tops, I gleaned (from memories 54-years-old) he was a rather young, stocky fellow with dark hair that he was starting to lose. He evidently had a transistor radio (all the rage in those days), which he had playing while he worked, because he got some news that he felt the understandable need to spread.

I remember this man poked his head around the corner of the hallway, calling out to my mother, 'Did you hear President Kennedy's been shot?'

A moment frozen in time, the memory of which that little boy who was myself will carry to his deathbed. I was far too young to appreciate the historic significance of it all. But I was able too understand that the world in I was living had somehow been robbed of something.

Politically, I am essentially a conservative. That means I would have a hard time being a fan of JFK, but I also believe history should have had more time to pass its judgement, and without the help of one or more assassins.

But as we all know, the story about the assassination of President Kennedy did not end there.

Those of us who are old enough have seen a wide spectrum of stories that have come from that terrible event. And as most of us know, the stories can easily be boiled down to one simple theme, addressed through the question, who killed JFK?

The official line, of course, says that Lee Harvey Oswald committed the deed all by himself. The Warren Commission, established by Kennedy's successor Lyndon Johnson, asserted that fact. But is that conclusion infallible?

Earl Warren was at the time the highly respected Chief Justice the United States. Then congressman Gerald Ford, who later became president, sat on that commission. Ford's administration was the first one I was old enough to follow, and I have always admired his performance in office, despite what historians might say. The commission also included Allen Dulles, who was one of the architects of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, who JFK canned shortly thereafter for that very reason.

Was this a body set up to find the truth, or was it a body created to come to a politically desirable conclusion? Alas, I don't think there's any way any of us will ever know for sure.

There was a lot of attention paid recently to the release of some documents concerning the assassination. But from what I read, I don't think there were any earth-shattering revelations. And just how do we know that those documents haven't been tampered with? One must assume they have been kept secret for more than 50 years for a reason, and if the events were the result of a government conspiracy, which many believe, then I can see a good reason for never releasing them.

For what it's worth, I think Oswald was involved in the assassination, but I don't think he acted alone. I believe it was the work of a small group of well-placed people in the American military ? it would have had to be a small group or the secret would not have lasted as long as it has. And I think Jack Ruby was exactly what he presented himself to be, and had nothing to do with the plot to kill Kennedy.

Of course, this is all just one man's opinion. There are lots of other people out there with opinions of their own. And unfortunately, it's very unlikely that any of us will ever learn the truth.

