

Decades Later, Yale Law School Graduates Remember Investigation into JFK's Assassination

By Rebecca Beyer



A portion of the Warren Commission staff: (left to right) R. Stuart Pollak, Alfred Goldberg, Arlen Specter '56, Norman Redlich '50, Wesley Liebler, J. Lee Rankin, David Slawson, Samuel Stern, Howard Willens '56, Albert Jenner, David Belin, John Hart Ely '63, Burt Griffin '59.



Howard P. Willens '56 and Burt W. Griffin '59 were part of a small team of Yale Law School alumni who worked on the Warren Commission's investigation into Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby.

When Howard P. Willens '56 was looking for a publisher for his firsthand account of the bipartisan presidential commission created to investigate President John F. Kennedy's assassination, he received more than two dozen rejections.

Willens, the last surviving member of the three-person supervisory team that oversaw the Warren Commission staff's work, recalls what they told him: "It's not a conspiracy book; there's nothing new."

Which was exactly his point. Willens called his 2013 book *History Will Prove Us Right: Inside the Warren Commission Report on the Assassination of John F. Kennedy*, echoing the words of then-U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren whom President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed to head the commission. In his book, Willens argued that, after 50 years, no new facts had been produced to dispute the commission's findings that there was no credible evidence of a conspiracy to assassinate Kennedy and that a single man—Lee Harvey Oswald—holding a single rifle had committed the crime.

And yet, despite Willens' book, despite multiple investigations into the Warren Commission that largely corroborated its conclusions, conspiracy theories continue to abound about Oswald and the man who killed him, Jack Ruby. Those theories posited that Oswald had been assisted by a far-left group in the United States, that Oswald had been assisted by a far-right group from the United States, or that Oswald had been assisted by the governments of Cuba or the Soviet Union, among other claims.

Even at a September 2019 premiere of *Truth is the Only Client: The Official Investigation of the Murder of John F. Kennedy*, a new documentary timed for the 55th anniversary of the Warren Commission's report, Willens says he was approached by those who don't believe the findings of the report.



A Warren Commission staff reunion

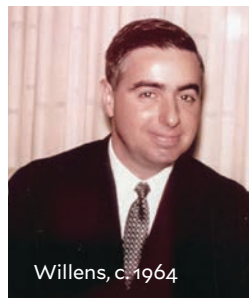
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—Howard P. Willens

In 1963 and 1964, Willens was a major part of the Warren Commission’s efforts to explain the assassination. He sat in on meetings with other relevant government agencies, including the CIA and the FBI, and helped compile and edit the final 469-page report (with 410 additional pages of appendices). He was also part of what became a small army of Yale Law School graduates who worked on or had a hand in the commission’s creation.

The Yale connection started two days after the assassination when Yale Law School Dean Eugene V. Rostow ’37 placed a call to Bill Moyers, who worked for Johnson, recommending the formation of a presidential commission to head off the possibility of multiple investigative bodies—Congressional committees, state and local law enforcement in Texas, the FBI—conducting simultaneous inquiries. The next day, Nicholas Katzenbach ’47, the second-in-command at the U.S. Department of Justice under Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, wrote a memo to Moyers suggesting the same.

After President Johnson created the commission (which included future President Gerald Ford ’41), Katzenbach tapped Willens to help



Willens, c. 1964

run it, and Willens, in turn, helped the commission’s general counsel, J. Lee Rankin, hire the team of staff attorneys who would take the lead on gathering evidence. There was no time to post job notices or conduct an in-depth interview process. Willens and Rankin largely relied on word-of-mouth recommendations or chose people they knew personally, including Norman Redlich ’50, Arlen Specter ’56, John Ely ’63, and Burt W. Griffin ’59.

That several Yale Law School alumni were selected for the commission’s roughly 15 assistant counsel positions was purely coincidence, Willens says.

“No one cared what law school you went to,” he explains. “It was, ‘Can you manage the facts? Can you work hard? Are you a good colleague?’”

Today, only Willens and Griffin remain of the Warren Commission’s Yale Law School cohort. They both consider their work on the historic investigation to be one of the most significant experiences of their careers.

“Let’s be clear: The Warren Commission was the largest, most

comprehensive criminal investigation in the history of the United States,” says Willens, now 88.

Griffin, then in private practice in Cleveland, moved to Washington, D.C., with his wife and young children for the duration of the work. He was assigned, along with a more senior attorney, to investigate everything about Ruby. Even today, at 87, he can still recall the most intimate details: Ruby’s love of dogs, his trip to Western Union to pay a dancer from one of his strip clubs just minutes before he shot and killed Oswald, and his visit in the relevant time period to a drive-in restaurant.

“I saw our job as to question everything,” Griffin recalls. “I knew that the nation’s security depended upon us finding whether or not there was a conspiracy.”

Although commission members concluded that there was no credible evidence of a conspiracy, they were careful not to assert that no conspiracy took place.

After all, as Willens told an audience in 2013, “it is always impossible, analytically, to prove a negative.”

That reality, combined with the fact that Ruby, by killing Oswald, had denied the nation a criminal trial at which Oswald could have been publicly prosecuted and defended, has allowed conspiracy theories to flourish.

“People want something they can wrap their arms around,” Willens says.

In 1977, during a congressional subcommittee’s review of the Warren Commission’s findings, Redlich gave his opinion on conspiracy theorists.

“I think there are simply a great many people who cannot accept what I believe to be the simple truth, that one rather insignificant person was able to assassinate the president of the United States,” he said.

Each of the Yale Law School alumni who worked on the commission went on to distinguished careers. Ely taught at Yale Law School and became dean of Stanford Law School; Griffin became a judge in his home state of Ohio; Katzenbach became Johnson’s attorney general and later served as general counsel of IBM; Redlich became dean of New York University Law School; Specter was a U.S. senator; and Willens had a long career in private practice that included work on behalf of the Northern Mariana Islands in the Western Pacific.

Today, Willens and Griffin continue to speak out about the commission and its findings. In addition to their appearance in the recent documentary, they debate critics, engage in an online forum about the assassination, and present at conspiracy theory conferences.

“A lot of these people, they’re not persuadable,” Griffin says. “I don’t attempt to persuade them.”

Instead, he hopes to demonstrate, by virtue of his presence and participation, the integrity of the commission’s work.

“I hope people understand that we are honest people and we tried as hard as possible to find out why the president and Oswald were killed,” he says. 🍷



In 2013, Griffin and Willens attended a legal seminar on “JFK’s Assassination and the Law: 50 Years Later” hosted by Judge Brendan Sheehan of the Cuyahoga County Court.