

'The Truth About the Assassination'-V

# U.S. Leaderless for 2 Hours on Fatal Day

## Confusion Made Parkland Hospital A Disaster Area

By Charles Roberts

Fifth of six articles from "The Truth About the Assassination" by the White House correspondent of Newsweek.

Parkland Memorial Hospital was a disaster area shortly after 1 p.m. that dreadful day in Dallas. The United States Government had been smashed at the top and for two hours no one seemed ready or able to pick up the pieces.

The atmosphere in the big hospital was not quite one of panic. It was just that no one knew, or was quite sure, what would happen, or what he should do next.

And then there was the almost unbelievable wrangle over the President's body. As undertaker Vernon Oneal arrived with an 800-pound solid bronze casket in which to remove the body, Dallas County Medical Examiner Earl Rose interposed.

"There has been a homicide here," he told Roy Kellerman, special agent in charge of the Secret Service detail on the Texas trip. "You won't be able to remove the body. We will have to take it down there to the mortuary and have an autopsy."

Legally, Rose was on solid ground. But he didn't reckon on Mrs. John F. Kennedy. She had made it known that she would not leave the hospital without her dead husband. Accordingly, Mr. Kennedy's top staff officers — Appointments Secretary Kenneth O'Donnell and Legislative Liaison Chief Larry O'Brien — had decided to fly the body back to Washington as quickly as possible.

With the late President's pal-

ace guard intimates — O'Donnell, O'Brien and Dave Powers — running interference, and with Mrs. Kennedy walking alongside the casket, the Secret Service did get the body out of Parkland. At 2:04 p.m., agents slid the bronze coffin into the rear of Oneal's white Cadillac hearse and took over the car. An Oneal attendant tapped on the driver's window and told agent Andy Berger, "I will meet you at the mortuary." "Yes, sir," Berger replied. Then he drove at break-neck speed to Dallas's Love Field.

This ghastly incident was the first of many misunderstandings in the tense hours following Mr. Kennedy's death. Some of those differences, particularly between the Johnson and Kennedy camps, have been magnified in the retelling.

Author William Manchester in "The Death of a President," a book authorized by the Kennedy family, has made both the Johnsons and the Kennedys look bad. As a witness to that transfer of power, I would like to record some first-hand impressions and perhaps correct some misimpressions of the event.

I write without authorization from anyone — not as a "Kennedy man" or a "Johnson man" but as a reporter who covered both Presidents.

The most common misapprehension, generated more by the advance publicity for Manchester's book than by the book itself, is that Lyndon Johnson was overeager to "seize" the Presidency, that he was "cruel" and "boorish" in

his takeover. In his book, Manchester does not make such a charge — at least, in those terms — but he gives the distinct impression that Mr. Johnson's "behavior" and "manners" were less than exemplary.

After referring to Mr. Johnson's decision to return to Washington aboard Air Force One with Mrs. Kennedy and President Kennedy's body, for example, Manchester says:

"To those who loved John Kennedy, the transition of power seemed needlessly cruel. Consolidating the two groups (Kennedy and Johnson) on one airplane was to prove extremely unfortunate and aspects of Johnson's behavior in a very understandable state of shock may have proven exacerbating, but the difficulty there was largely one of manners and managements. Johnson was not himself that afternoon — no man was himself then."

Manchester's last statement, that "no man was himself" that afternoon, is accurate; it was certainly true of the stunned members of Mr. Kennedy's staff. But beyond that, with a few conspicuous intervals of good clear reporting, Manchester and his sources seem to have been blinded by

prejudice and grief. Their bias may be understandable. There are many who loved Mr. Kennedy so much that they still consider Mr. Johnson a usurper or pretender to the office — a sort of interregnum caretaker until another Kennedy, presumably Bobby, can be restored to the throne. But the fact that they were once torn apart emotionally should not discolor the record of LBJ's assumption of office.

- Tolson
- DeLoach
- Mohr
- Wick
- Casper \_\_\_\_\_
- Callahan \_\_\_\_\_
- Conrad \_\_\_\_\_
- Felt \_\_\_\_\_
- Gale \_\_\_\_\_
- Rosen \_\_\_\_\_
- Sullivan \_\_\_\_\_
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- Tele. Room \_\_\_\_\_
- Holmes \_\_\_\_\_
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- The Washington Post  F-1
- Times Herald \_\_\_\_\_
- The Washington Daily News \_\_\_\_\_
- The Evening Star (Washington) \_\_\_\_\_
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- New York Post \_\_\_\_\_
- The New York Times \_\_\_\_\_
- World Journal Tribune (New York) \_\_\_\_\_
- The Sun (Baltimore) \_\_\_\_\_
- The Worker \_\_\_\_\_
- The New Leader \_\_\_\_\_
- The Wall Street Journal \_\_\_\_\_
- The National Observer \_\_\_\_\_
- People's World \_\_\_\_\_

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### 'Coolest Man in Dallas'

That takeover under harrowing conditions—he was the first President to witness the murder of his predecessor—was generally reported as “masterful” in 1963. As an unbiased witness to it, now that questions have been raised, I might add something more: It was careful, correct, considerate and compassionate.

Considering that it occurred at a time when no one knew the full implications of Oswald's deed, and considering there was no script to follow, it was a masterpiece of cool-headed improvisation. Johnson, in my eyes, was the coolest man in Dallas, or aboard Air Force One.

In Manchester's book, Mr. Johnson's performance that day was marred from the start by his decision to fly back to Washington aboard Air Force One—USAF 26000, the plane on which Mr. Kennedy flew into Dallas.

USAF 26000 was then the newest of four Boeing 707 jets converted into luxurious flying offices for use by the President and other VIPs. (There is, incidentally, much public misunderstanding of the term “Air Force One.” The Air Force uses it to designate any plane on which the President is embarked, whether it is a 707, a Jet Star or a puddle-jumping Convair. Thus any plane Mr. Johnson might have taken from Texas automatically would have become Air Force One.)

Manchester suggests—by invoking a Kennedy staffer who was “dumbfounded” by LBJ's action — that Mr. Johnson should have left town on Air Force Two, the Presidential backup plane on which he had been flying. He quotes the witness, Kenny O'Donnell, as saying that “one plane was just like another” and implies that USAF 26000 should have been reserved as a flying hearse for Mr. Kennedy.

### A Better-Equipped Plane

The fact is that Mr. Johnson discussed taking “the plane” with O'Donnell twice before leaving Parkland at 1:30 p.m. Under pressure from the Secret Service to get out of Dallas, where other assassins might be lurking, he conferred

with his bodyguards and Kennedy staffers on the possibility of moving “the plane” to nearby Carswell AFB. (The idea was dropped in favor of going directly to Love Field.) There is no reason to assume that Mr. Johnson referred to any plane other than 26000. He was then President.

In any event, after leaving the hospital with his head down on the back seat of an unmarked police car driven by Dallas Police Chief Curry, Mr. Johnson was delivered by his security-conscious Secret Service guardians to the newer ship.

There was a solid reason—never mentioned by Manchester—for Mr. Johnson to board the plane on which Mr. Kennedy had arrived. USAF 26000 then contained far more and better communications equipment—transmitting, receiving, coding and decoding—than any of the backup jets. What orders the new President would have to give during that return flight no man knew. It would have been reckless for LBJ to take any but the best-equipped plane.

The President boarded at about 1:45 p.m.—19 minutes before Mr. Kennedy's coffin ran the gantlet of local officials at Parkland and headed for Love Field, with Mrs. Kennedy sitting in the rear of the ambulance next to the casket. Mr. Johnson had discussed arrangements for Mrs. Kennedy's return to Washington before leaving the hospital.

“O'Donnell told me that Mrs. Kennedy would not leave the hospital without the President's body,” he recalled later. “I did not want to go and leave her in this situation. I said so, but I agreed that we would board the plane and wait until Mrs. Kennedy and the President's body were brought aboard the plane.”

### Half an Hour Ahead

Manchester's next implied criticism of Mr. Johnson is that he somehow forced the Kennedy party to wait an unconscionable length of time before riding back to Washington with him. The truth here is that President Kennedy's Air Force aide, Brig. Gen. Godfrey McHugh, in charge of air transportation for the whole Texas trip, assumed

that Mr. Johnson would move out on the backup plane, USAF 86970, and made arrangements to put the dead President's body and his aides aboard USAF 26000.

By the time the Kennedy hearse arrived at Air Force One, at 2:18 p.m., Mr. Johnson had been aboard for more than half an hour, using the communications equipment to talk to officials in Washington and trying to track down a local Federal judge to swear him in. Crewmen had removed two rear seats from the small after cabin of the plane, opposite the rear galley, to make room for the bronze casket.

O'Donnell and O'Brien were not aware that the Johnsons were aboard until they straightened up, after putting the casket in place, and saw them commiserating with Mrs. Kennedy. Both were surprised. O'Brien was surprised “not because I thought it was bad taste or poor protocol or anything except that none of us knew where the new President was at that moment.”

Fearing that police or local health authorities might still try to retrieve the President's body for a Dallas autopsy, O'Donnell ordered McHugh forward to get the plane airborne immediately. “I was in a highly desperate strait,” he said later. Not until he headed for the cockpit himself, annoyed that the plane was still on the ground, did he discover that Mr. Johnson was waiting to be sworn in.

### Less Than White Heat

Between O'Donnell, a tough former Harvard quarterback who was calling signals for the Kennedy team, and Mr. Johnson, a headstrong man, there was, then, a clash of interests: O'Donnell wanted to take off and Mr. Johnson wanted to wait until he had taken his oath of office. But there is a paucity of evidence that this conflict of plans generated the blazing controversy Manchester later perceived.

At least two high-ranking passengers, Mrs. Johnson and O'Brien (later to become Postmaster General), were never aware of it. And in his testimony before the Warren Commission, O'Donnell said he didn't think he even broached

the subject to the President.

“He said to me that he had called the Attorney General,” O'Donnell recalled, “and that the Attorney General had indicated that it was, if not mandatory, at least preferable that he be sworn in prior to the aircraft taking off. I didn't describe what I saw as the problems. I realized it was an inevitable delay. So I don't believe I commented on it. I just listened to him. We sat there.”

(In his book, Manchester has O'Donnell “saying over and over, ‘We've got to go.’ ‘We've got to get out of here.’ ‘We can't wait.’ Each time Johnson's reply was the same: ‘No, I have word from the Attorney General.’”)

If the difference between Mr. Johnson and O'Donnell ever reached the white heat indicated by Manchester (who describes O'Donnell's face as being drawn to a point “as though the muscles had been tightened by a single drawstring within”), it had simmered by the time I boarded the plane, right behind U.S. District Judge Sarah T. Hughes, an old political ally of Mr. Johnson's, at 2:30 p.m.

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FRIDAY: Johnson is Sworn In.



United Press International

The trauma room at Parkland Hospital where President Kennedy died.



KENNETH P. O'DONNELL    LAWRENCE F. O'BRIEN  
... not aware the Johnsons were aboard USAF 26000