

THE MAKING OF THE

Beginning --- Theodore H. White's Best Seller on U.S. Politics

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It was hot; the sun was blinding; there would be a moment of cool shade ahead under the overpass they were approaching.

But the trip, until this moment, had been splendid. For the President was beginning, with this journey, the campaign of 1964—testing the politics of his leadership, and hearing the people clap in the streets.

He had just turned easily, but with grace and precision as was his style, to wave at the Texans who cheered him—when the sound rapped above the noise.

It was a blunt crack, like the sound of a motorcycle backfiring (which is what his wife thought it was), followed in about five seconds by two more; then, suddenly, the sniper's bullets had found their mark and John Fitzgerald Kennedy lay fallen, his head in his wife's lap.

The Moment of Death

There is an amateur's film, 400 feet long, 22 seconds in all, which catches alive the moment of death. The film is soundless but in color. Three motorcycle outriders come weaving around the bend, leading the black presidential limousine; a gay patch of background frolics behind them—mint-green grasses, yellow-green foliage.

The President turns in the back seat, all the way around to his right, and flings out his hand in greeting. Then the hand bends quickly up as if

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to touch his throat, as if something hurts. His

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wife, at this moment, is also leaning forward, turning to the right. Slowly he leans back to her, as if to rest his head on her shoulder. She quickly puts her arm around him, and leans even farther forward to look at him. Then, brutally, unbelievably, the head of the President is jolted by some invisible and terrible second impact. It is flung up, jerked up. An amber splash flicks in a fractional second from his head into the air. One notices the red roses spill from her lap as the President's body topples from sight.

That is all. But one who has seen the filmed action knows that though, technically, his pulse beat for another 20 minutes and some flow of blood went on, President Kennedy had ceased to be from the moment the second bullet entered his skull. He had died quickly, painlessly, perhaps even without consciousness of his own end.

The faint recall of the President's wife a few days later may be the most accurate recapture of his sense of the moment—she remembered that, as he turned between shots, an expression of puzzlement, almost quizzical, crossed his face.

A New Direction

The time was 12:30 in Dallas—1:30 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, Friday, November 22nd.

1963. American history would be punctuated forever by this bloody date. Government would go on; but its direction, now, at this moment, was ruptured. All the next year and for years thereafter Americans would debate that direction.

The medical term later used for the President's condition on arrival at Parkland Memorial Hospital Trauma Room No. 1 was "moribund"—which means that all the skill the doctors showed in the next 20 minutes was only an exercise in medical technology. "Moribund" was

a word he would have loathed. He had said once after the stroke which crippled his father, Joseph P. Kennedy, that he would not want to survive such a blow; rather he would die quickly, completely, at once. He was alive to the very end—entirely alive, totally alive, alert, searching and seeking. And, thankfully, the bullet that tore out the brilliant mind of the 35th President of the United States took his life with it on its way.

What was on that mind at precisely the moment it ceased to be we shall never know. He was in Dallas on the kind of mission only an American President can set for himself—its purposes stretching from the grubbiest roots of American politics to the endlessly distant reaches of outer space.

Lone Star State's Role

He was there, as we know, chiefly for politics. The President had insisted that Texas was going to play a "very vital role" in the election of 1964; but the state's Democratic politicians were quarreling with each other.

The Lone Star State had, in the post-war years, lived through an industrial revolution, and new industries, new sciences, new cities were gathering together new kinds of people.

The Republicans had in 1961 elected a United States Senator from Texas for the first time since Reconstruction—and the growing political unrest of the South threatened the Democrats' traditional hold on this, the greatest state of the Southland. Yet the Democrats were split between their liberal Sen. Ralph Yarborough and their conservative Gov. John Connally and the President, as their national political leader, had

come, as Kenneth O'Donnell later testified, "to bridge the gap" between them.

Yet there was more than that to the trip. The President was trying to reach the people, too. He believed in showing himself to crowds around the country so that people could get the feel of their President, and he of them.

Though Dallas had a bad reputation, the President had thought it was a reputation made by a few noise-makers; the average American in Dallas, he felt, was about like the average American anywhere else. Thus, he had been delighted by the throng in downtown Dallas—friendly, cheerful, respectful.

And there was a broader purpose even than this

to his visit—for he was the leader of all Americans and he wanted, from Texas, to discuss outer space and America's role in a changing universe. It irked him that the Russians had outstripped America in the black and measureless reaches of space. The newest space center of the nation had been placed in Texas—so, from this platform, the President proposed to tell the nation how he hoped, soon, to loft the most powerful rocket ever built, the Saturn, into the sky, hoping thus to gain a lead in mankind's first primitive probing of the galaxies.

The Range of the Mind

His mind may well have held thoughts about all these matters at the moment—as well as an instant crowd estimate. But there was so much more in that mind. All things. Care for the old and concern for the black; missiles and destruction and beauties and plazas; cities and personalities and budgets; peace and war and education and wonders. The range of the mind was immense, its reach dazzling.

The mind had become part of all Americans' thinking in the three brief years of his Presidency—their link with the future. It was as if, at that moment, the link had been ripped away. Yet it was not in response to his mind that America now reacted; it was to the man. For the man had loved America, and now, suddenly, Americans became aware

of their answering love. It is with this instantaneous surge of emotion that the politics of 1964 began.

Within the 30 minutes of his passing, between the crack of the first shot and the intoning of Extreme Unction by a priest, the tragedy had been told all across America. The news struck the East Coast at

mid-lunch, the Pacific Coast in mid-morning; it stopped all presses in their run; interrupted all TV screens; stabbed with its pain men and women in the streets, knotted them about TV sets and paralyzed them in postures first unbelieving, then stricken. Not until he was dead and all men knew he would never again point his forefinger down from the platform in speaking to them, never pause before lancing with his wit the balloon of an untidy question, did Americans know how much light the young President had given their own lives—and how he had touched them.

Moment to Remember

It was, for Americans, an episode to be remembered, a clap of alarm as sharp and startling as the memory of Pearl Harbor, so that forever they would ask one another—Where were you when you heard the news?

In New York a young woman was driving up Manhattan's East River Drive when her car radio reported that the President had been shot; when she reached the toll gate of the Triborough Bridge, a detail of guards had just left their stations and were lowering the flag to half-staff. She burst into tears, for now he was dead; and she remembers the drivers of cars in adjacent lanes sobbing, too.

In Chicago a reporter on Lake Street noticed a passer-by approach a shabbily dressed Negro who held a transistor radio. "What's the news?" asked the passer-by. "He's dead," said the Negro, and then after a moment he gripped the stranger by the lapel and said, simply, "Pray, man."

At Harvard, under the elms of the Yard where he had strolled as a student, no one spoke; on the grass under the elms only the gray squirrels stirred. A British reporter heard the bells in Memorial Hall

begin to toll and saw the flags fall to half-staff. One student hit a tree with his fist; another lay on the grass on his stomach—he was crying. Uncontrollably, across the country, men sobbed in the streets of the cities and did not have to explain why.

Fragments From Dallas

In Washington, men were even more directly touched; they hung now on the radio reports which, minute by minute, were relaying each fragment of happening in Dallas. His body was being wheeled out of Parkland Hospital. A bronze coffin was being brought. The body was being taken to Love Field, then hoisted into the Presidential plane, Air Force One. The plane was taking off. It was due in Washington by 5:30 or 6:00 p.m.

Across the nation and across the world, no patrol flickered; no submarine was called off station; no radio operator reported a failure of monitoring or communication; in Vietnam the war went on.

At the White House, where the housekeeping administration had taken the occasion of the President's absence to redecorate and repaint his office, service personnel continued to replace his furniture and rehang his paintings as if he were not dead.

The Military District of Washington drew from its contingency files the fully elaborated plans for ceremony and procedure at the death of the Chief of State. Nearly all that night a group of seven scholars in the archives of the Library of Congress were to research every document on the funeral rites of Abraham Lincoln in 1865, so that historic tradition might be joined to the formal military plan.

For Services Performed

Sometime in the next few days the machinery of the Accounting Office, turning by itself, brought in its final results too, crediting John F. Kennedy, President, with pay up to November 22nd, 1963, for service performed, and paying him that day for precisely 14/24ths of a day's work, death being assumed as 2:00 p.m. Washington (Eastern Standard) time, rather than 1:00 p.m., Dallas time.

On the apron at Andrews Base stood a shifting, tearful, two-score individuals, all masterless, no connection between them, except the binding laws of the United States, until Lyndon Johnson should arrive and tell them in which direction he meant, now and in the next year, to take the American people. Out of that direction would come the politics of 1964—except that, whichever way he went, he would have to start from the politics of the man now being borne, dead, to this city.

All politics in 1964 would proceed from the new base of understanding that John F. Kennedy had established in the three short years of his leadership.

The making of the President, 1964, was to take place in a new landscape of America. It was as if a starshell had soared into a dark sky and then burst, illuminating distances farther than one could ever see before.

The next installment—Lyndon Johnson takes over—will appear in Monday's Times on Page 6, Part 2.