

"DID PRESS PRESSURE KILL OSWALD?"

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Mr. Grove

In hectic hours after the Kennedy assassination: What pressures hit Dallas police from press and TV? What was the world told about Dallas? About its "right wing"? How did police react? A Dallas newspaperman gives a new account in what follows.

Following are excerpts from an article by Larry Grove of "The Dallas Morning News" reprinted from the March, 1964, issue of "The Quill," a magazine published by Sigma Delta Chi, professional journalism society:

If it matters, as a preface to this piece—and perhaps it might—my personal politics are liberal. And, like many other reporters, I often quarrel with editorials appearing in the newspaper I work for.

I'm neither a native of Texas, nor a police-beat reporter. I'm not overly sensitive to criticism fired at the State of Texas.

What I mean is, I can take the Alamo or leave it.

I have never managed to get a traffic ticket fixed. And, so far as I know, our family has never produced a policeman.

And now, "Quill," the magazine for journalists, has asked me to explore the question: "Did press pressure kill Lee Harvey Oswald?"

From repetition alone, the question is one that should be explored—and, if possible, answered.

The American Civil Liberties Union bulletin charged in its January issue that the killing is "directly related to police capitulation to the glare of publicity." And further, that police in Dallas "arranged Oswald's transfer from the city to county jail to suit the convenience of the news media—and thereby exposed Oswald to the very dangers which took his life."

Cleveland Amory, in the January 4 "Saturday Review," made almost the same point with the comment that "if we can try to get on the moon, surely we can guard a man in a motorcade. . . . As for the aftermath in the Dallas station's subbasement, Dallas as a city will live it down; but for the police force, it's hard to find words that are, shall we say, subadequate. . . . It is high time to take a long, critical look at the often suprapolice powers of the ladies and gentlemen of the pressure."

It may be difficult to see how getting to the moon has anything at all to do with the difficulty of guarding a man in a motorcade. We have it on authority of a high Secret Service official that it is impossible to prevent an assassin from killing a President riding in an open car.

As a rider in the motorcade that President Kennedy rode in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, it would be my opinion that any

of the estimated 300,000 persons lining the motorcade route could have killed the President had they been willing to trade their lives for his.

But Mr. Amory's insistence on the examination of suprapolice powers of the press still is in order.

A logical start might be: What kind of pressure?

The man who drew the most criticism was Dallas Police Chief Jesse Curry. As near as words in news media can come to it, Curry was drawn and quartered.

Curry told me: "I think it was pretty obvious to everybody that there was a lot of pressure. There was no *direct* pressure, but there were pointed requests that the press should be allowed to see Oswald, the man who shot the President.

"Think what the American Civil Liberties people would have said if the press had not been allowed to see Lee Oswald.

"Some of the newsmen—and I don't mean the local reporters—were rather insistent. They were like a pack of animals.

"The pressure wasn't directly on me. But misrepresented reports and snide comments on television began to create an atmosphere that Dallas was to blame, as a city, for the death of the President.

"Had we kept news media away from Oswald, they were all too ready to accuse us of running a police state, a Gestapo. . . ."

A television newsman, shortly after Oswald was captured, showed a photograph and said, "This is what Lee Harvey Oswald looks like. . . ." He made a point of correcting himself to say the picture showed what Oswald DID look like and "we don't know what he looks like now after three hours in the custody of Dallas police. . . ."

Even Voice of America was telling the world that Dallas, Tex., was a center of extreme right-wing activity. This was a theme that caught on.

Radios and television sets and newspapers bristled with conclusions that the shooting "had to happen" in Dallas. Because . . . because, well, hell, because there was a vocal right wing in Dallas.

Strangely, this did not stop even after the killer proved to be an avowed Marxist, who had given up his citizenship in Russia as a means of expressing his contempt for the U.S.A.—one who had taken a Russian bride, and, months before, had ordered the rifle he used to kill the President.

On another day, the statements and the jumping at conclusions may have been merely libelous. On the emotion-packed afternoon and evening of Nov. 22, 1963, the careless indictments could easily have led to a bloody pogrom had not cooler heads in the news craft and cautious police work prevailed.

Dallas police were being subjected to unmerciful criticism from the time the shots echoed and a saddened world heard the news that the President had been killed.

It happened that this was the police force that had maintained order along a motorcade route lined with 300,000 people clamoring to see their President. Where the Secret Service had asked for 350 Dallas city policemen to assist it, the department put more than 400 at its disposal.

Police helped prevent what could easily have raged into

widespread panic when the assassin's shots struck the President and Texas Governor John Connally.

And, 90 minutes after the President was slain, the same Dallas police force had the assassin in custody and safely spirited to jail ahead of a glowering and angry crowd.

One brave policeman, J. D. Tippit, gave his life. Oswald killed him.

Alone, the department, by 9:30 p.m. that same November 22, had gathered a mass of evidence that would have convicted Oswald in any court in America.

To reassure the world that Oswald's rights weren't being trampled upon, the prisoner was brought before the live television cameras that evening.

Oswald was sullen, surly. And he looked, for all the world, as he had looked before he was taken into custody by Dallas police.

Even so, an examination of tapes of radio and TV programs and copies of newspapers on the following morning shows a central theme: Dallas, Tex., had killed the President. The police department allowed this to happen.

What else could one expect in a city in which its right wing was allowed to be vocal?

Overlooked in most of the stories that developed the theme that Dallas is a mean, mean city were some pertinent facts:

The Secret Service is directly charged with protection of the President. Dallas police gave more help than was asked for.

The FBI was aware that Lee Harvey Oswald—defector, potential assassin, Marxist—was working in a building along the President's motorcade route. It had not notified the Dallas police department, nor the Secret Service.

This was part of the evidence which Capt. Will Fritz, chief of the Dallas police department's homicide bureau, knew about and had questioned Oswald about.

What was the name of an FBI agent—James Hosty—doing in Oswald's notebook?

Had this evidence been hared at the time, perhaps some of the police department's detractors may have turned their fire on the FBI. Perhaps they would not have turned their fire at all.

But would the nation have been prepared, in that hour, to receive the news that the FBI had been aware of Oswald's whereabouts before President Kennedy stepped in his car for his fateful ride in the motorcade?

Police Chief Curry elected to suffer in silence while his city took the worst that irresponsible members of the outside news media could dish out.

Not all of us had the rare opportunity on the century's biggest presidential story that my energetic colleague, Hugh Aynesworth, had.

Only Aynesworth—among the hundreds of newsmen who converged on Dallas that tragic November week-end—was witness to the three biggest stories.

(1) He eye-witnessed the assassination of President Kennedy from a position in the crowd near the School Depository Building;

(2) He was one of only three newsmen who went inside the Texas Theater with police officers when they arrested the assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, and

(3) He was present when Jack Ruby, a strip-tease-club operator, lunged through a crowd of newsmen and fatally wounded Oswald. . . .

If, for no other reason than his spectacular work and widespread use made of facts he gathered under difficult circumstance, Aynesworth should be allowed an opinion on the topic at hand.

How did press pressure relate to the slaying of Oswald? Says Aynesworth: "I doubt that many of the newsmen, among the dozen I talked with that week-end, believed, police actually would move Oswald during the daylight. Naturally, the television people would have preferred the move to be made during the daytime hours.

"But the story would have been covered well, regardless of the hour Oswald was moved from city jail to county jail.

"Many newsmen remained around the clock, waiting. Many others were staying at the Statler-Hilton, just a stone's throw away. A telephone call would have brought all of them running.

"To say that 'press pressure' was responsible for Oswald's death, I think, is overdrawing a point. It didn't. There is no doubt in my mind that the large numbers of newsmen working the story hindered police.

"My own credentials were checked twice as I passed through the cordon of officers guarding the station. I didn't see Jack Ruby until he brushed through the crowd, pushed a radio newsmen aside, and fired the shot into Oswald. . . ."

Jim Ewell, regular police reporter for the "News," said he is certain the insistence of the press, notably television people, forced the police department to call moves that it would not normally have made.

And the great number of newsmen, he believes, hampered the interrogation of Oswald.

"The walls couldn't have held out all the noise from the newsmen standing thick in the hallways. Under anything like normal conditions," Ewell said, "I am sure in my own mind that Capt. Will Fritz would have obtained Oswald's confession.

"I have seen many, many hardened criminals break and confess under the captain's interrogation; Fritz is a thorough, soft-spoken man. . . ."

From another angle, Ewell believes police could have eased the chaotic situation themselves—"by appointing a liaison man to brief reporters and prevent their running over the whole place."

There were instances of radio newsmen barging into offices, grabbing police telephones and relating their stories for broadcast in distant cities. Invariably, the broadcasts berated the same police department whose officers were extending courtesies. . . .

There is a lesson to be learned from the tragic November week-end in Dallas.

And, in one newsmen's humble opinion, some members of the press of America haven't yet learned it.

CHIEF CURRY of the Dallas police, surrounded by newsmen after assassination of President Kennedy

—"Dallas Morning News" Photo

