

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 1988

David S. Broder

Remembering JFK, the politician

AUSTIN — It was sheer coincidence to be back in the Texas capital 25 years, almost to the day, after I had flown here to report a story on the political problems that faced John F. Kennedy in the Lone Star State. The president was to arrive later in the week for a two-day swing through five Texas cities, winding up here in Austin. The journey was deemed necessary to begin repairing Kennedy's damaged political fences well in advance of the 1964 campaign.

Alan L. Otten of the Wall Street Journal was on a similar mission, so we went in together to see Gov. John Connally. It was a very different time. The high-tech revolution had not transformed Austin's economy and skyline. The political revolution which would carry Connally and many other members of the Texas establishment into the Republican Party was somewhere over the horizon, as well.

Connally was candid as always that day, ascribing Kennedy's political problems in Texas not only to the growing assertiveness of the civil-rights movement but to what Connally saw as a leftward administration drift on everything from economics to arms control. Even with Lyndon Johnson on the ticket, he said, it would not be easy for Kennedy to carry Texas in 1964. And if there were any truth to those rumors about "the Kennedys" dropping Johnson from the ticket, they could forget about Texas.

The interview remains vivid after 25 years, clearing away the clouds of sentimentality that have gathered about Kennedy's "final journey." He did not come to Texas as a conquering hero; he was a politician on a political mission, doing vital groundwork for an approaching campaign.

The itinerary had been constructed with that goal in mind. He flew into San Antonio, the political capital of south Texas with its emerging Hispanic vote. He went on that eve-

ning to Houston, where an ambitious, attractive young businessman named George Bush was making the Democrats nervous by improving the Harris County Republican organization and preparing for a 1964 Senate bid.

He stayed overnight that Thursday in Fort Worth and began Friday

at a breakfast for Rep. Jim Wright — already a rising power in Congress and Texas politics. Then the schedule called for him to show the flag in Republican Dallas, with a luncheon address to business leaders at the Trade Mart, before the final event — a Texas Democratic Party dinner at the municipal auditorium here in Austin.

Even the "nonpartisan" events had a clear political purpose. But for Kennedy, politics was always one part exhortation, one part education and one part celebration. He made it joyful, exhilarating.

Like almost no one else, Kennedy could mock the rituals and rhetoric of politics even as he showed himself the graceful master of the art form. In Houston, for example, where he was paying tribute to Rep. Albert Thomas, a notoriously skillful tapper of the federal pork barrel who had just snagged the NASA space flight center for his district, Kennedy "stumbled" as he bragged that the United States was about to fire "the largest payroll — payload — into space." As the audience roared, Kennedy smiled and said innocently, "Well, it will be the largest payroll, too."

At the Friday morning breakfast for Wright, Jacqueline Kennedy was conspicuously missing from her place at the head table. Her husband brushed away any intimations of a snub by remarking, "Mrs. Kennedy is organizing herself. It takes longer, but of course, she looks better than we do when she does it."

At Dallas' Love Field, as at previous stops, there was a visible commotion as the ranking Texas potentates — Johnson, Connally and their battle-scarred liberal antagonist, Sen. Ralph Yarborough — milled around, jousting to see who would ride in which car in the motorcade.

Grinning, Kennedy sent a staff aide over to the press bus with a message that the president hoped reporters were noting "the wonderful demonstrations of unity" in the Texas Democratic Party.

As everyone knows, it was Connally who was in the car with Kennedy when it rounded the corner in Dealey Plaza, when the shots were fired, and when the mad dash to Parkland Hospital led to the an-



nouncement that cut short the laughter.

Many remember and revere Kennedy as a president. I think of him in those last days and moments of his life as a politician, a man who enjoyed and enhanced politics as much as anyone it has been my good fortune to cover.

In the prepared text for the Austin speech Kennedy did not live to deliver, he was to tell his fellow-Democrats:

"Our duty as a party is not to our party alone, but to the nation, and, indeed, to all mankind. Our duty is not merely the preservation of political power but the preservation of

peace and freedom.

"So let us not be petty when our cause is so great. Let us not quarrel amongst ourselves when our nation's future is at stake. Let us stand together with renewed confidence in our cause — united in our heritage of the past and our hopes for the future — and determined that this land we love shall lead all mankind into new frontiers of peace and abundance."

It is as good a legacy and credo as a politician could leave.

David C. Broder is a political columnist with The Washington Post Writers Group.
