

How We Took the 'Shot

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We all remember exactly where we were when we heard the news. Nov. 22, 1963, was a dreary Friday afternoon. The week was winding down, our minds were on the weekend, and into that half-lived day came the stunning, shocking news that President Kennedy had been shot.

People in the nation's newsrooms faced an incredible situation. Throughout that afternoon they struggled with their own shock and a never-ending barrage of unbelievable, unconfirmable, sometimes contradictory reports. It was bad news but a fantastic story, and it had to be put out in great detail, in good taste, and in very little time.

The nightmare went on for four days. Millions of newspapers were sold, but not all of them were read, or even saved in the trauma. Television had us all mesmerized.

TODAY, in commemoration of that horrifying weekend 10 years ago, the Library of Congress is opening an exhibition of 11 foreign and 20 domestic newspaper front pages, dated

Nov. 22 through Nov. 26, 1963.

Bernard Bernier, head of the serial division of the library's reference section, has more than 1,000 microfilms of the newspaper coverage, but most of the papers themselves have turned into a substance like "shredded wheat," he said. He has chosen the 11 front pages that held up best over the decade.

The domestic front pages are reduced facsimiles from a book of 91 American front pages published after the assassination by United Press International. The book, which has been unbound for the duration of the monthlong exhibit, is from Bernier's own collection.

The papers handled the same story in astonishingly different ways. Most wiped all the other news off the front pages as details of the assassination came in, but others, with some persistent notion of balance, left slim and unrelated feature stories on Page 1.

Editors took excruciating pains in selecting the words for the banner headlines. "Kennedy Murdered," screamed *The Press Courier* of Oxnard, Calif., while the *Santa Barbara News-*

Release said simply: "President Kennedy Is Slain in Dallas." *The Berkshire Eagle* of Pittsfield, Mass., printed a brutal "Kennedy Is Shot Dead," while *The New York Times* designed a three-line headline for Saturday morning: "Kennedy Is Killed By Sniper/As He Rides in Car in Dallas;/Johnson Sworn In on Plane."

THE ALBERTAN of Cal-

gary, Alberta, used as its first banner "Ex-Marine Charged in Kennedy Slaying," then changed the "Ex-Marine" in a later edition to "Pro-Cuban."

"You remember," said Bernier, "that this was our first assassination in many years, and our first thought was that the country was falling apart, that some widespread conspiracy was being launched. When assassin Lee Harvey Oswald's

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Heard 'Round the World'

Cuban connection came out, the *Albertan* immediately thought it important enough for the banner."

At least one paper — *The Sheboygan Press* — immediately noticed the unprecedented effect of the assassination on ordinary citizens. The paper ran a story on Page 1 headlined "Disbelief Numbs News Staff," and observed that the tragedy had turned us into a nation

of stunned creatures, too crushed to be panicky.

ALTHOUGH the copy was different, the pictures used were much the same everywhere. The first editions with the tragic news carried the President's grim formal portrait. Then, as they came in over the wire, there was the picture of the back of the President's limousine, with a Secret Service man bending to cover the

President, and Mrs. Kennedy leaning over him, her pink pillbox hat just visible. There is the closeup of Oswald in handcuffs, flourishing his fists, and later, the swearing-in picture on Air Force One. Lyndon Johnson took the oath of office while Mrs. Kennedy stood near, with bloodstains on her pink wool skirt.

They are historical clichés now, but when we first saw them we pored over

every grainy detail, hoping to find some understanding, some clue.

The Library of Congress exhibition is small, tucked away into a single glass case in the Newspaper and Periodical Room on the first floor of the Annex. But it is powerful in the memories it revives, not just of horror but of an innocent, respectful, even adoring attitude to the office of the president, and the way we were then.