

Dallas, 1963: Chaos at Noon

By PETER LISAGOR

Washington, Nov. 22 (CDN)—Those of us who traveled with President Kennedy in Dallas that mindless day three years ago can testify that memory is a treacherous ally.

Each of us saw and heard the same things differently. We remembered scenes and words spoken in that unbelievable hour through interior private screens that were jolted out of focus by the enormity of the crime.

Yet of two things—even now—I am reasonably convinced: The act was that of a single deranged mind.

Doubts about Lee Harvey Oswald's sole guilt will be embedded in the mythology of our violent times, no matter how often the case be reopened in the future.

The myths still live after Lincoln, as they will live after Kennedy. The amateur sleuths now attacking the Warren Commission's findings with their books and articles will elaborate



President and Mrs. Kennedy, with Texas Gov. Connally, as they began their fateful ride from Dallas' Love Field.

for decades the contradictions and inconsistencies surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The history of murder—or of auto accidents—establishes that there is nothing incontrovertible about the testimony of the most observant eyewitness.

The questions now being raised about a second assassin, a co-conspirator, and the theory of a single bullet passing through Kennedy's body and hitting Texas Gov. John Connally will keep the doubts alive, and intrigue and beguile the historians.

No reporter in the Presidential motorcade—not those in the press pool car up ahead or those, like myself, in the press buses—can be even reasonably certain about the sequence of events.

My own impressions of that day were personal and cumulative. We were driven by instinct and a cold detachment to get what information we could and to report it to our papers. Getting a telephone call through to Chicago from Parkland Hospital posed a professional crisis of the first magnitude, and to this day I wonder how I managed to stay coherent through it all. When the shock finally hit, hours later, it had an almost paralyzing impact for having been so long pent up.

There were dozens of incidents that proved how undependable one's memory can be in a crisis. Tom Wicker of the New York Times has since written that I said I was on the first press bus in the Dallas motorcade when he thought he was on the first bus. I can easily explain that.

I had lingered at the fence holding back the crowds at Love Field, because I wanted to see how the people of Dallas would react to the President and his wife. As they moved along the airport barricade shaking hands, Jacqueline Kennedy had a distaste for politicking, but she had come to Dallas on the first strictly political trip she had ever made with her husband.

A Bouquet of Roses

And now there she was, cradling a bouquet of red roses in one arm and shaking hands with the other like a practiced politician, and apparently enjoying it thoroughly. The people were warm, friendly, and even thrilled by the presence of the couple. "She's like a queen," one woman said after Jackie shook her hand and moved on.

When I started for the buses, I noted the first bus was crowded and so I got on the second one. But in the customary melee in moving out of the airfield, the second bus got in front of the first one, and thus was ahead of it in

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the motorcade when we approached Dealey Plaza where the tragedy occurred.

As we rode along we were so impressed with the warmth of the street crowds that we were indifferent to the sudden sound of—was it a shot or a firecracker? Bob Pierpoint of CBS stood up and observed that it appeared to be shots, and I thought I heard three of them, but I wouldn't swear to it.

Outside on the greensward, I saw men and women scurrying in abrupt disarray, and one man flung himself across a woman and a child in a

tableau of terror. A young reporter on our bus began to scream that he wanted off, but the driver drove slowly and relentlessly into the triple underpass, where we could see none of the cars ahead. They had sped out of sight.

It was then I noticed something that puzzled me, until I saw it corroborated later in the Warren Commission testimony. A motorcycle policeman tried to drive up the embankment straight ahead as if in pursuit of someone, but his vehicle overturned and he was stymied. This was offered as "proof" that he thought the shot came from the vicinity of the overpass instead of from the Texas book depository building to the rear of the motorcade.

The buses raced to the Dallas Trade Mart, where the President was scheduled to speak, and we

found only the luncheon guests there, no Presidential limousine. We ran through the cavernous building searching for phones when someone said, "The President and Gov. Connally have been shot and taken to Parkland Hospital. The Governor's in serious condition."

As we ran from the building, knocking over the trays of food, something akin to panic began to take shape among the guests. Some hysterical Texan invited several reporters, including myself, Robert Donovan of the Los Angeles Times, and Jerry Ter Horst of the Detroit-News, as I remember, to get in his station wagon for the ride to the hospital. He ran through red lights and almost got us all killed, but we beat the buses to the hospital by many minutes.

Lady Bird at Hospital

Gen. Chester V. Clifton, the President's military aide, later claimed that he rode in that station wagon with us. The other reporters didn't know whether he did or not. I knew he had not.

My memories at the hospital were of Mrs. Lady Bird Johnson walking past Jack Bell of the AP and Merriman Smith of UPI, both of them clinging to telephones in the hospital lobby, and Bell asking the distraught woman, "is the Vice President all right?"

The rumor as we reached the hospital was that LBJ also had

been hit, but Mrs. Johnson scotched it immediately as she groaned with visible grief. It was then I "knew," without really knowing, that the President probably was worse than we thought. A nurse rushed out with blood plasma, and she too was fighting hard to remain calm as she hurried down the hall.

Outside, the other reporters had been barred from the hospital were waiting for Malcolm Kilduff, the assistant press secretary, who was the only press officer with us in Dallas, to come and authorize their admittance. I had been directed to a telephone at the other end of the building, and rushed out, pausing long enough to brief them on what I had learned inside.

There, I had another curious remark. Texas Sen. Ralph Yarborough, who had been riding in the same car with Lyndon Johnson, had been almost incoherent as he talked to reporters. He was deeply perturbed, and he said at one point that he had smelled powder all the way to the hospital.

He wasn't questioned about the remark because none of the reporters could know then that the shots had come from the

sixth floor of a building far back of the motorcade. As I think back on it, I believe that Yarborough was too unnerved to be held to anything he might have said then.

The other vivid memory I have is the faces of Dr. Malcolm Perry and Dr. Kemp Clark as they tried to explain the causes of death and spoke in technical jargon, still too aggrivated themselves to attempt to use laymen's terms. They fought to remain impassive and professional, as we were doing, and Dr. Clark became confused when describing what he thought to be a wound in front of the President's neck. Later, they concurred that the neck wound was an exit wound. They had not known as they worked over the virtually lifeless man that he had been shot in the back as well as in the head.

These fragmentary glimpses, in the retrospect of three years, confirm my earlier judgment that each of us moved in a narrow orbit and caught only minor patches of a black awesome canvas that was a distortion unless pieced together whole, as the Warren Commission sought to do.