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Three Years Later -- A Look Back at the Assassination

An Interview with Malcolm M. Kilgoff, Former Assistant
Press Secretary to President Kennedy

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Three Years Later -- A Look Back at the Assassination

MR. DAVIS: This is Sid Davis with a special "Washington Viewpoint." Our guest this evening is Malcolm M. Kilduff, partner in the firm of Horton and Kilduff, a company which specializes in industrial and public relations.

Mr. Kilduff was an Assistant Press Secretary to the late President John F. Kennedy, and he was the only Press Secretary on duty in Dallas when the President was assassinated.

Three years have passed since you broke the news to those of us here and to the world that John F. Kennedy was dead. Mac, do you believe, as the Warren Commission states, that Lee Oswald acted alone in killing the President?

MR. KILDUFF: I have absolutely no doubt, Sid, that Lee Harvey Oswald committed the act on his own and that there was no conspiracy involved, as has been insinuated in many books, and is a belief which is actually widespread in Europe. I just don't believe it.

MR. DAVIS: What do you think of these books? We've seen a rash of publications in magazines, published books, even lectures that question the conclusions of the Warren Commission report.

MR. KILDUFF: Well, I believe there have been some thirty-four books and articles written. I may be a few numbers off on that, Sid. But I think they are pure garbage. I think they are written by

people who have attempted to capitalize on the assassination of the President for their own personal gain. None of them have been written by people who were in Dallas at the time, or were privy to any of the conversations or to personnel in the White House. It just doesn't make sense to me. These people have been writing from theory, from pure theory.

MR. DAVIS: Some of them claim that the Warren Commission came out with its report too fast. Do you think that they took a deliberate amount of time?

MR. KILDUFF: I think they tried to do as thorough a job as would be possible. The Warren Commission Report came out in October of 1964 and I really think that they did as thorough a job as possible.

MR. DAVIS: The Commission concluded that two shots struck the President, and that the second bullet went through both the President and Governor John Connally of Texas. You were riding in the fourth car behind the President, as I recall. How many shots did you hear?

MR. KILDUFF: In my mind, there were three shots fired. I have verified that with other people who were riding in the same car. I have verified it with Secret Service Agents. I do not, however, agree -- and this is the only disagreement that I have with the Warren

Commission Report--that the shot that went through President Kennedy's neck then entered Governor Connally's shoulder, ribs, wrist and thigh. The Warren Commission Report shows a bullet, a perfect bullet. I have talked to ballistic experts, who say that it would not be possible for a bullet to travel through that much mass and come out in such perfect condition. It just plain isn't possible. When a bullet hits, it starts to tumble. That bullet would have had to go through too much mass to come out in the condition that it did. The picture shows, in a recent magazine, it to be in almost perfect condition, with the rifling complete, and that is the only finding, and this is a result not only of my own feeling, my own investigation, but also as a direct feeling of Governor Connally. I have discussed this with Governor Connally. Governor Connally heard the first shot. He started to turn.....

MR. DAVIS: By the first shot, you're talking about the one in addition to what the Warren Commission is talking about, is that right?

MR. KILDUFF: That's correct. Governor Connally feels, as I feel, that the first shot did hit President Kennedy in the neck. The second shot hit Governor Connally in the shoulder and came out below his right breast, and it then entered his wrist and part of it went into his leg. As a matter of fact, I have on the highest authority,

information that parts of that bullet are still in Governor Connelly's leg. So, therefore, it would not be possible, as the Warren Commission states, that that bullet came out as clean as it did.

MR. DAVIS: You're saying the Warren Commission has as evidence a bullet that is not missing a fragment, and you're claiming that a fragment of that bullet is in Governor Connelly?

MR. KILDUFF: That is correct.

MR. DAVIS: What is your highest authority? Do you care to tell me?

MR. KILDUFF: It comes from a former member of Governor Connelly's staff.

MR. DAVIS: In due time, we're supposed to see what some people call the Kennedy authorized account of many important developments on that day in Dallas. I'm talking about William Manchester's book, "The Death of a President." Now Look Magazine has announced that it will publish excerpts from that book this January. I understand that you and numerous other people who were interviewed by Manchester were promised that his book would not be published for five years after the assassination. How do you feel about the agreement to permit Look Magazine to publish excerpts sooner than five years?

MR. KILDUFF: Well, very frankly, Sid, I feel a little bitter about it, for the simple reason that Bill Manchester stated to me,

according to my own diary, on the afternoon of April 4, 1964 that neither his book nor any part of his book would be published for at least a period of five years. I wrote Mr. Manchester about this last August. He replied to me in a letter in September that he was delighted to hear from me, not that that really means an awful lot. But he enclosed with a press release dated March 26, 1964 setting forth the terms under which he worked and is continuing to work, and also he gave me his assurances that all material was being treated with taste and reverence for history, and that wiser men than the author are sitting in judgment on the text. And that years later perhaps another edition may be published with material which will not be published in the first edition. Now, I happen to know that in the original agreement entered into between Robert F. Kennedy, then Attorney General, that the agreement stated that the complete text shall be reviewed by Mrs. John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy and the text shall not be published unless and until approved by them. It further states that the book may not be published before November 22, 1968, unless Mrs. Kennedy designates a prior date, and it shall be published at such date thereafter as shall be mutually agreeable to the contracting parties. I have reason to know that Mrs. Kennedy has at no time given either oral or written permission for publication of the book or any portion thereof prior to November 22,

1968. Therefore, my only conclusion has to be that Bill Manchester has violated this written agreement.

MR. DAVIS: Are you sure that the Look Magazine pieces will be excerpts from the book?

MR. KILDUFF: Yes, they have to be. And furthermore, they have to be drawn from information which he obtained as a result of interviews made in connection with the preparation of the book. So, therefore, no matter how you cut that mustard, it still turns out that he is violating the basic agreement that he signed in, I believe it was March 24, 1964, notwithstanding the fact that under a press release dated March 26, 1964, to which I just referred, there is a paragraph that says that this is a long-term project and publication of the book may not be expected before three to five years. This press release certainly does not override the written contract between Robert Kennedy and Bill Manchester.

MR. DAVIS: How did you come about giving Mr. Manchester an interview? And how long did you spend with him?

MR. KILDUFF: I spent about six or seven hours with him, a whole afternoon, actually, six or seven hours, I would say, with Manchester.

MR. DAVIS: Were you told to do this?

MR. KILDUFF: Yes, I was told to do this.

MR. DAVIS: There have been reports recently that the Manchester book--and these are only reports, of course, that the Manchester book may be upsetting to both the Johnsons and the Kennedys. This, you hear around Washington. Do you know of any developments following the assassination in Dallas that might be an embarrassment to either party?

MR. KILDUFF: Well, Sid, I think at a time like that, everyone was under a great deal of stress and strain, and a lot of things were said, and a lot of things were done that time would have healed. I see no reason for them to be brought up at this particular time. Yes, in direct answer to your question, yes. I think that there are things that happened, especially on the plane coming back, that could be embarrassing to both the Kennedys and to the Johnsons.

MR. DAVIS: What happened on the plane coming back?

MR. KILDUFF: Well, Sid, I've been asked on several occasions to reveal some of that material. Some of it has come out in a way. I've been offered a great deal of money, as a matter of fact, to write that trip. But I feel that, and I have so stated, that--in public--that when you have the privilege of serving a President of the United States, and I don't care whether he is a Republican or a Democrat, whether he is a Kennedy or a Johnson, that that privileged

information should remain privileged.

MR. DAVIS: A recent issue of the U.S. News and World Report indicates that there was some friction aboard the plane between the Johnson and Kennedy people, and they quote a source as saying that some of these little incidents, some of these little irritations took place on the way back to Washington. You were aboard the plane.

MR. KILDUFF: I think some of the old 1960 wounds were reopened, rehashed, thought about, and again I say that this is as a direct result of, if you will, the intense emotional feeling at the time.

MR. DAVIS: Was there a conscious effort to block President Johnson's leaving Air Force 1 here in Washington as U.S. News indicates, by a member or members of the Kennedy family or staff?

MR. KILDUFF: President Johnson did feel that he should accompany Mrs. Kennedy from Air Force 1 as the body of the late President was being brought down the steps. When we arrived at Andrews Air Force Base, we found the forklift waiting there, rather than a pair of steps. The people, and these were members of the Kennedy staff, plus certain Secret Service Agents, had so filled up that forklift that it was not possible for President Johnson to get on. It just physically wasn't possible. I jumped off the plane and rode down on the forklift and almost got caught up in the gears. That forklift remained in place so long that President Johnson never got

a chance to get off the plane.

MR. DAVIS: What I'm asking you is, was there a deliberate effort to prevent President Johnson from leaving the airplane with the official party?

MR. KILDUFF: Well, whether or not this was a deliberate effort or not, I would not care to speculate on it. But, certainly, if it was deliberate, it worked, because there were so many people in the rear of the plane that it was impossible for President Johnson to get off the plane with the casket and to pay his respects to Mrs. Kennedy before the ambulance departed and before we were able to get a set of steps up for President Johnson to get off the plane.

MR. DAVIS: Three years ago, right after the assassination, I recall interviewing you and you recounted some of the President's behavior right after the shooting, to use your words, some of his quick thinking, etc., concern for some other people. Now, three years later, can you take a look back at your conversations with the President?

MR. KILDUFF: As you'll recall, the first conversation I really had with now President Johnson was back in another emergency room where I asked his permission if I could announce the death of President Kennedy. At that time he stated that he thought I should wait fifteen or twenty minutes until he was able to clear the hospital,

together with other members of the party, because he had no idea whether this was part of Communist conspiracy or not. From that point on, I, in retrospect, I can't help but feel that he showed the utmost concern and personal concern for Mrs. Kennedy, all members of the Kennedy family, and the whole Kennedy party that was with us. Once he got on the plane, he continued to show that concern. There was no grossness on his part, as has been implied by others in the recent past. He immediately started to issue orders. His reactions were immediate, well thought out, and really, Sid, I can't feel that he acted anything other than what we would expect the President of the United States to do.

MR. DAVIS: Mac, I know this is a very academic question, do you suppose there is any way to prevent an assassination of a President of the kind that happened in Dallas?

MR. KILDUFF: I will state what other people have stated many times. If any one person makes a private decision to kill the President of the United States, I really don't feel that there is any way that it can be prevented, and especially with respect to President Johnson because he insists, from what I've seen, and that's the only criticism that I have to make of him as a President, of putting himself in jeopardy and he does it every time he appears in public.

MR. DAVIS: While you were not a special assistant to

President Kennedy, you were on his immediate White House staff, and conducted briefings on the affairs of his Administration. When do you plan to write a book? And if not, why not?

MR. KILDUFF: I have no present plans to write a book or any articles. I refer to my previous statement that I was privy to privileged information. I feel that some of the books, and I refer especially to Arthur Schlesinger's book, were based on privileged information. I think that Mr. Sorenson's book is an academic work. I think that Mr. Salinger's book is a recount of personal experience which was done in good taste. But Mr. Schlesinger's book, I think, violates the rule of privileged information. Yes, I have privileged information. I have what you might refer to as sensational information. But here again, I think it would be a violation of that privilege to serve a President of the United States, and I do not have any present plans to write any articles, or certainly to write a book.

MR. DAVIS: I notice you said present plans. Thank you very much. This has been a special "Washington Viewpoint" with Malcolm M. Kilduff, former Assistant White House Press Secretary to President Kennedy and Johnson. This is Sid Davis in Washington.