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ROB CLAYTON

the Man Oswald missed

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**IN HIS LAST INTERVIEW,
GEN. EDWIN WALKER
DEFENDED HIS PLACE
IN HISTORY.**

BY ROBERT WILONSKY



When Dallasites read the news that Maj. Gen. Edwin Walker died peacefully at 83 in his modest North Dallas home, most of the city's residents struggled to remember who he was.

If they remembered the general at all, it was for his brief brush with infamy. Walker narrowly survived a bullet from Lee Harvey Oswald's Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, only seven months before Oswald would cut down John Kennedy with the same weapon a few miles away in Dealey Plaza.

A front-page obituary in the *Dallas Morning News* and a large one in *The New York Times* helped Dallasites fill in the blanks, bringing the general into uncomfortable focus, particularly when they recalled the Dallas of the 1960s that Walker personified: Commie-bashing, antidesegregationism, Kennedy-baiting, and right-wing fanaticism.

Walker's Halloween death from lung disease, no doubt from a chain-smoking habit, was a surprise only to those who **Continued on page 22**

Walker

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thought the general—for so many years silent—had died long ago. He spent the last years of his life like an aging boxer, too tough and too proud and too punch-drunk to hear the bell.

As Walker told the *Dallas Observer* in an interview given just weeks before his death, "Our fight is not necessary now in the way it was then. It was bringing out an understanding of what the enemy was and what a communist was and was capable of. Even the Kennedys couldn't understand that."

"You can't understand the demise of communism unless you saw it in action," Walker said. "You're living in an age that's trying to back out of all the things it did. It was a vicious time. Everything was deceitful, from bottom to top. It got into everything, politics; and everybody doesn't get straight in one day."

Whether you liked him or hated him—if only because he was a grim reminder of an ugly, mean-spirited time—there's no denying Walker's place in Dallas' history.

For one brief but indelible moment in the early 1960s, for the world at large, retired Maj. Gen. Edwin Anderson Walker was Dallas. The ramrod straight general embodied the city's

attitude and ideology at a time when men like congressman Bruce Alger and businessman H.L. Hunt had Dallas' rich and powerful running around like frightened children, fretting about the Red Menace and the threat of weak-kneed liberals like Kennedy and Johnson. Walker took Dallas' eccentricities to a national audience in 1961 when *Newsweek* featured his stately face on its cover, casting him as an important spokesman of the extreme right-wing.

Yet with just a few notable exceptions—

like those two times in the 1970s when he was caught and charged with trying to pick up male undercover cops in Dallas park bathrooms—Walker's name hadn't been in the papers in three decades. The days of the Kennedy Camelot, communism, and the Berlin Wall have passed. And the John Birch Society, the National Indignation Committee, the Christian Crusaders, the Minute Men, and every other extremist right-wing movement that



Gen. Edwin Walker being led away by U.S. marshals after being arrested on charges of inciting a riot on the Ole Miss campus

Walker founded or drew strength from are dead or moribund. And, finally, the general himself has died, in obscurity.

When reached by phone in late September, Walker refused to be interviewed. He said he had had enough of the media, which was "always getting things wrong." Visitors weren't allowed to his house and weren't allowed to call—though, till his dying day, the general's phone number and address were

listed in the city directory, and usually answer the phone when you called.

But Walker, perhaps sensing his nearing death, finally relented and agreed to an interview. For two hours he talked, often incoherently, about his place in history, touching on communism, the importance of the Warsaw Pact, John Kennedy's ineffectual presidency, Walker's failed run for Texas governor in the 1960s, and Oswald's attempt on his life. Sometimes the obviously ailing Walker was insightful, especially when it came to the

Kennedy assassination: he would raise questions about the FBI's lack of assistance to the Dallas police, mentioning the long-known fact that Hoover had it in for the bungling local cops and wouldn't grant them jurisdiction on the shooting.

Other times, Walker mumbled gibberish, particularly when he spoke about his historic legacy. Did his actions change the course of this country, or even his city? Walker answered with a rambling discourse on the impact of communism, adding, "You can't understand any of that unless you discuss the three Warsaw Pact objectives put out by Khrushchev, and only by assessing those against the Kennedy administration do you get a clear picture of what the result is." The more he would elaborate, the more murky the answer would become.

Here he was, grudgingly giving what would be his last interview, and most of it was an unintelligible mishmash of right-wing code words, out-of-date rhetoric, rallying cries long ago forgotten, and half-remembered snippets of anticommunist, antidesegregation speeches he gave decades ago in places like Shreveport and Jackson, Mississippi.

The leader who rallied people by the thousands to hear him speak—his "U.S. Day" speech at the Dallas Memorial Auditorium on October 23, 1963 being one of the most memorable, when he assembled every right-wing nut in the region from the Birchers to the Christian Crusaders—now struggled to finish

A SEVENTH
Though he repeatedly insisted he was "doin' all right, feeling fine," Walker would not allow a face-to-face interview. And, the longer the general spoke over the phone, the shakier his voice became.

It was the quivering, brittle, phlegmy voice of a nearly deaf 83-year-old man who had seen his share of bloodshed and fighting, in and out of uniform. In it was only a distant echo of the brash, determined voice of a soldier who thought it was worth sacrificing his military career for his belief that America must be saved from communists without and within.

Where he once toured the country giving speeches about the relentless Red threat to freedom, espousing Christian verse and rightist propaganda, Walker spent his final days phoning state and local politicians to tell them Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison got a raw deal and that the state income tax was a bad idea.

Three decades after rallying thousands against communism, Kennedy, and desegregation, the general's issues were tame by even moderate Republican standards.

One of the things lost to history is that Walker was a fine soldier, a West Pointer who was awarded the Bronze and Silver stars and the Legion of Merit.

Born in Center Point, Texas, on November 10, 1909, Walker graduated from West Point (where he was a first-rate polo player) in 1931 and slowly worked his way through the peace-time Army's ranks until, in 1943, he assumed his first command, leading a special service force of airborne, amphibious, and ski troops. It was his unit, the 3rd Regiment, that led the assault on the Japanese at Amchitka during the Aleutian campaign in May 1943, countering the only foreign invasion of America soil since the War of 1812.

The 3rd also participated in the attack on Naples, the Anzio beachhead, the Battle of Cassino, and several battles in southern France. In 1944, he commanded the 474th Infantry Regiment, which participated in several German and European campaigns as part of General George Patton's Third Army.

After World War II, Walker returned to the U.S. and eventually became Secretary of the General Staff, Fourth U.S. Army, stationed at Fort Sam Houston. He would go on to train airborne Ranger companies for each Army division, but by the early

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1950s Walker was itching for combat.

In 1951 he was sent to Korea, where he eventually became the Deputy Chief of Staff for prisoner-of-war affairs. Then he hopped from Korea to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to Taiwan (where he became advisor to the commander-in-chief of the Chinese Nationalist Army), to Hawaii, to Arkansas, and to Heidelberg, Germany—each time as a commanding

officer and an increasingly revered soldier.

Yet while stationed in Germany in 1961, Walker found himself in trouble with the Army and his commander in chief for distributing right-wing John Birch Society leaflets to his troops; it was part of his "pro-blue" training program, which he claimed was "based on years of personal study, expert counsel, and official Cold War directives." As the general explained it, to be pro-blue was to be anti-red; it was patriotism (if not McCarthyism) taken to the extreme: Walker's strong belief that Commies had infiltrated the U.S. government. Kennedy himself became involved in the Army's investigation of Walker and reprimanded him publicly.

Fed up with the military, Walker sent the Chief of Staff his letter of resignation on October 1, 1961, claiming that "connection or affiliation with the United States Army may continue the jeopardies to which I have recently been subjected."

In one of the many ironies of Walker's life, he found himself defying a liberal president who wanted him to fight communists. But Walker refused to fight in what he believed was a dirty, ill-advised war: Vietnam.

"With 30 years of military service I made the decision I would not honor the Kennedy order of October 13, 1961," Walker said during his interview with the *Observer*, "that reassigned me from NATO Germany to an undeclared war against a second-rate Soviet satellite in the jungles

of Asia. *The New York Times* said I was forced out of the Army, but the Army was running a hell of an operation if the war was so bad they were forcing me out by assigning me to it.

"John F. Kennedy and Robert McNamara were kind of mixed up in their military affairs. If they could use their own dirty war as a means of getting me out of the Army, I don't think that's much credit, do you? I just had a Kennedy on top of me who said I had to be eliminated from the Army because of my anticommunist stance, and I did what I had to do."

After his resignation he moved to Dallas and became the symbol of the right wing. From Dallas, he was going to launch a conservative revolution with the help of people like evangelist Billy Hargis (who would tour the country fighting Commies with Christ) and local billionaire and well-dressed religious zealot H.L. Hunt—who, Walker claimed, "was just someone I talked to a couple of times," despite history books that have them closely allied.

To Walker, Dallas was a "communist cell" that needed to be purged, and his forces were ever-growing. Yet when he ran for governor in 1961, he finished sixth out of six in the Democratic primary; two years later he considered running again—"because it is the cause for Christ and the world," he explained at the time—but then abruptly dropped the idea.

Walker didn't realize that his moment in history had already passed, in 1957. He was named the commander of the U.S. Military District in Arkansas, and under President Dwight Eisenhower's orders he

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led the troops that forced integration on Little Rock's Central High School. His presence helped keep calm and order at a turning point in American history and make him a hero to the civil rights movement. But the general rejected history—he was commanding in Little Rock, he said, "against my wishes."

"I didn't think American troops on top of American people was the right way to do that," Walker said. "I asked Doug MacArthur what he thought about it, and

he said Eisenhower made him do a lot of things he didn't want to do, too." Walker's Little Rock dilemma may have struck a deeper chord with MacArthur, who, under orders from another president, used cavalry in 1932 to break up the Bonus Army, a group of disgruntled World War I veterans camped in Washington.

In 1962, Walker would make up for his Little Rock "error" when he led a riot on the campus of the University of Mississippi at Oxford to protest the admission of black 29-year-old Air Force veteran James Meredith. On September 30, Walker issued a statement to the national media claiming that Meredith's enrollment at Ole Miss was "the conspiracy of the crucifixion by the Supreme Court in their denial of prayer and their betrayal of a nation."

The riot on Oct. 1, 1962, which involved thousands of antidesegregationists—some armed and wearing Confederate uniforms—left Ole Miss in shambles and landed Walker in the custody of U.S. marshals. To the end, he maintained that he was simply part of the melee, not its leader.

He was charged with acts of "rebellion, insurrection, and seditious conspiracy"—all of which were later dropped after a high-profile legal battle and batteries of psychological tests, including one that led an SMU professor to proclaim Walker had a "superior level of intelligence."

In one way, Walker equated Little Rock and Ole Miss: both events were "too badly messed up, too questionable."

"There's a difference between integration and desegregation, and that's never been taken into account," Walker said in his final interview. "One infers force and the other one doesn't. That's all I have to say on the subject."

In 1982, Walker was reinstated by the Army and given back his title of major general—not to mention his full annual pension of \$45,120 and all benefits. "I got everything back," Walker said, quite proudly.

"I don't have any fights with the Army," he added. "I was never fed up with the Army. I was fed up with the Kennedy administration."

Even with Little Rock and Ole Miss, Edwin Walker would have become little more than a footnote had Lee Harvey Oswald not embarked on his own rendezvous with history.

"When Oswald shot at Walker, says author Gerald Posner (*Case Closed*), "he dragged Walker into the history books in a more prominent way."

It was on April 10, 1963 that Lee Harvey Oswald narrowly missed putting a bullet through Walker's head. Had it not been for a window frame that deflected the 6.5 mm bullet harmlessly onto a stack of

Papers, the general would have died three decades ago, a martyr for his right-wing cause. As it is, his history is forever intertwined with that of the president he

despised.

Walker, in his own mind miraculously spared JFK's fate, was left with an obsession with the assassination, convinced that Oswald was part of a communist plot to kill both himself and the president. Walker believed the Warren Commission Report was "85 percent right" and that Oswald alone killed JFK. But he also maintained that not only did the Kennedys know that Oswald shot at him, but that the Dallas Police Department had arrested Oswald the night of the shooting and that Attorney General Bobby Kennedy had ordered Oswald's release from custody. How Oswald could be part of a communist plot to kill a right-wing radical and JFK—and be protected by the president's brother—Walker couldn't quite explain.

The FBI claimed it didn't learn of Walker's attempted murder until December 3, 1963, when Marina Oswald, Oswald's widow, told the feds that Oswald had plotted to kill the general. She not only turned over a note from Oswald that instructed her on what to do in case he was captured, but also revealed that when Lee returned home that night, he was "nervous," saying he had just tried to kill Edwin Walker. She also gave the agents copies of surveillance photos Lee had

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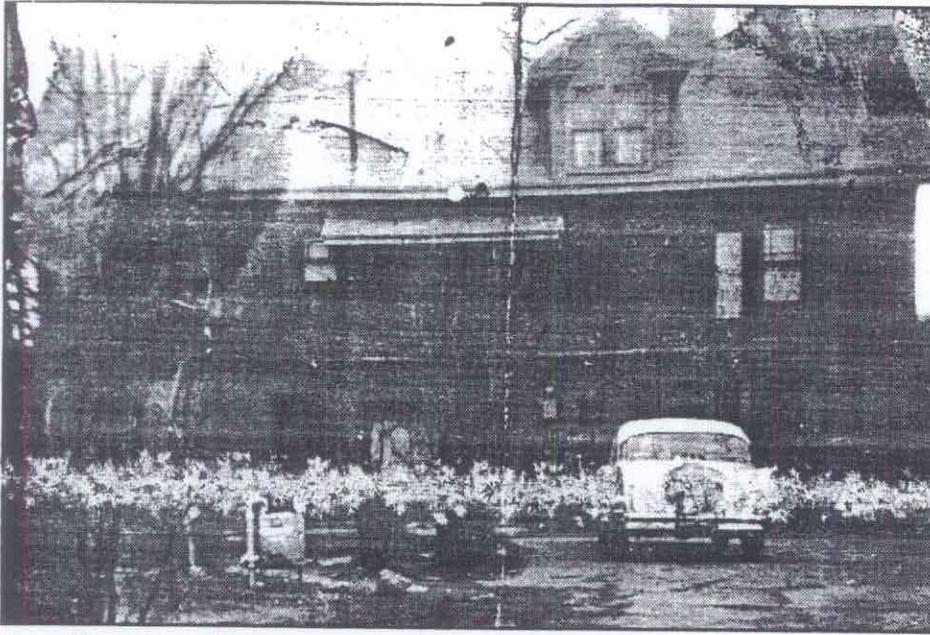
taken of the general's old Turtle Creek mansion.

According to a December 26, 1963, letter sent from the Secret Service to Jesse Curry, then the Dallas police chief, Oswald told his wife, "It was best for everybody that I got rid of Walker."

The general has spent three decades turning over in his mind why Oswald would have targeted him and Kennedy, two men who, to most people, appeared at odds with each other and at political poles. But Walker figured it differently: he and JFK weren't so different. Both were

Commies wanted him dead, and the Kennedys didn't much like the general either, so they sent their boy Lee to kill him. History would tell us Oswald's act that April night (and November afternoon) was out of calculated, illogical violence, but Walker would tell you it was part of some grand international scheme to bury the right, to bury God.

"I completed 30 years of military service and made my home in Dallas when the president gets shot by a Communist," Walker said. "How do you younger people explain it? The policy was wrong. I couldn't prosecute a communist because



National Archives

A surveillance photo of Walker's mansion believed to have been taken by Lee Harvey Oswald

fairly conservative when it came to matters of foreign policy, Walker said, and he never really saw himself as the right-wing extremist portrayed in the media.

"There are similarities in everything," Walker said, laughing. "But I wouldn't make a newspaper article out of it."

And, of course, it could have been that Oswald, obsessed in his own way, thought Gen. Edwin Walker was a more powerful, influential figure than he really was. One of the hundreds of theories swirling around the assassination holds that Oswald believed that by killing Walker, whom he considered to be racist and anti-Semitic, he would wreak havoc on the Dallas political scene—the hoped-for effect of the Kennedy assassination on a smaller scale.

But for Walker it was simple: The

he knew Khrushchev and because he knew Kennedy, and in my opinion Oswald was a ward of both states. You know bloomin' well he was a ward of the Kennedy state and a ward of the Khrushchev state."

Then, and to his dying day, Walker was convinced communism, whether it finally had been beaten by Jesus or the cash register, had left scars that affect us every day. "Everything's a little off-keel," he said. "A little abnormal."

"You know, I can't systematize the whole world, but you can do it one person at a time," he said, perhaps the only time in the conversation when he really reflected on his life's work. "But back then, I had a bit more influence than that. Course, you young people don't remember that." □