



**CONVERSATIONS
WITH KENNEDY
PART 7.**

Killing of a President,

By Benjamin C. Bradlee

Last of a series.

Oct. 22, 1963—I was almost an hour late to dinner with the Kennedys last night. We didn't get asked until almost 7 o'clock, and I had a television panel thing to do that I couldn't—and didn't want to—get out of.

Chief topics for discussion tonight were Jackie's recent trip to Greece and a stay on Aristotle Onassis' yacht, and Bobby Baker, the secretary to the Senate majority and a protege of Lyndon B. Johnson.

Kennedy was unwilling to knock Bobby Baker, saying, "I thought of him primarily as a rogue, not a crook.

He was always telling me he knew where he could get me the cutest little girls, but he never did. And I found that when I would call him up to get an accurate count on a vote, I'd get a straight answer.

"I'm not after Bobby Baker," he repeated, and then talked again about how he felt Baker was more rogue than crook. As for dumping Lyndon Johnson from the ticket in 1964, the President said, "That's preposterous on the face of it. We've got to carry Texas in '64, and maybe Georgia."

On the subject of Onassis, much of the conversation was across the table between Jackie and my wife Tony. There had been substantial press criticism of Jackie's trip. The

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President had promised it to her as a way of recuperating from the hammer blow of the death of her last child, but the papers had been full of stories about the "brilliantly lighted luxury yacht," "gay with guests, good food and drink," "lavish shipboard dinners," "dancing music," "a crew of 60, two coiffeurs, and a dance band." And Republican Rep. Oliver Bolton of Ohio had made a speech on the floor of the House criticizing the presence aboard Onassis' yacht of Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr., who was the Under Secretary of Commerce and as such was in a position to influence the relations between the Greek shipping tycoon and the U.S. Maritime Administration.

Jackie told us that Onassis "was an alive and vital person" who had started from nothing, who had not wanted to make the trip with Jackie and her sister, Lee Radziwill (and the Roosevelts and Princess Irene Galitzine, the fashion designer, among others). She told us how she had insisted that she would not accept this man's hospitality and then not let him come along. It was an act of kindness, she said.

"Poor Franklin didn't want to go along at all," she continued. "He said he was working on a new image and a trip like this wouldn't do him any good, but I persuaded Jack to call Franklin and ask him to go with me. I really wanted him as a chaperone."

The President did reveal that he had insisted that Onassis now not come to the United States until after 1964, the best evidence that he thought the trip to be potentially damaging to him politically. But he noted that what he called "Jackie's guilt feelings" may work to his advantage.

"Maybe now you'll come with us to Texas next month," he said with a smile.

And Jackie answered: "Sure I will, Jack."

November 23, 1963—The sledgehammer news that President Kennedy had been shot came to me while I
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CONVERSATIONS, From B1

The
Killing
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was browsing through Brentano's book store on my lunch hour. (It is noteworthy, I think, that virtually everyone I know under 60 can remember exactly where he or she was when the news of the assassination struck them.) First it was the barely distinguishable whispers of incredulous pedestrians, then all too finally it was the AP ticker in the Newsweek bureau on the 12th floor of the National Press Building around the corner.

It's not enough to say that you can't believe these terrible things as they happen. I remember savaging a well-meaning Newsweek reporter, Dave Burnham, when he pointed to the first bulletins of the assassination and told me, "He's going to die, Ben. He's going to die." Irrationally, I turned on him and said, "I know goddamn well he's going to die. Just don't gloat about it."

Of course he wasn't gloating; he was just retreating into a semblance of professionalism to hide his own shock. And our profession does have that virtue—such as it may be. Disaster, even personal disaster, generally means work to be done, mountains to be moved.

Late in the afternoon Nancy Tuckerman, who was Jackie's social secretary, called to ask Tony and me to come to the White House. She said she didn't know where Jackie would go when she returned to Washington, and she didn't know whether Jackie would want to see anyone, but she wanted us standing by. We got there about 6:30, overcome this time by a cheerless dread instead of the exciting gaiety that was the hallmark of other visits.

Jean Kennedy Smith was there, Nancy Tuckerman and later Eunice Kennedy Shriver. There were no tears, only an embarrassed, sad and stilted silence. About 9, Nancy Tuckerman told us that Jackie—and everyone connected with the slain President—was going directly from Andrews Air Force Base, where Air Force One with the new President aboard would land, to Bethesda Naval Hospital.

A final autopsy on the President's body would be performed there, and Jackie was apparently determined to

stay as close as she could for as long as she could.

We went quickly but not silently in a White House limousine to the hospital, accompanied by the senseless screaming sirens of a motorcycle escort splitting the night. Halfway out there we watched in horror as one of the motorcycles spun out of control, and we thought surely we would have to add another fatality to this dreadful day, but a miracle brought the rider through, and we begged our driver to slow down.

The next seven hours have stayed blurred in my mind for all these years, except for the moments right after Jackie entered the hospital suite on the arms of the Irish Mafia in the form of Larry O'Brien and Kenny O'Donnell, men she had never really understood or appreciated, but to whom she turned and clung now, strong men from the Irish political side of the dichotomous Kennedy, whom Jackie had never met on equal terms, but who now seemed to comfort her more than any of the rest of us.

Her entrance, announced to us by the flashes of photographers' bulbs many stories below us, into that dreary hospital green room is scarred on my soul for the rest of my life. Her pink wool suit was copiously spattered with blood of her dead husband, when she had cradled his shattered head in her lap. She looked so lovely, I remember thinking incongruously. But a closer look showed her to be dazed, moving ever so slowly, with her eyes apparently not taking all of us in.

We all rose, stricken and uncomfortable, as she came slowly toward us. When she got to Tony and me her eyes brightened a little, she raised her arms and then lurched into my arms, and sobbed. After a minute or so she pulled back and greeted Tony in the same way. Then she turned to me and said, "Oh, Benny, do you want to hear what happened?" And then quickly added, "But not as a reporter for Newsweek, okay?"

I felt badly that she obviously felt she had to be that careful in that awful moment about the old problem, and was about to proclaim my innocence as usual, when she started telling us of the actual shooting. I can remember now only the strangely graceful arc she described with her

right arm as she told us that part of the President's head had been blown away by one bullet.

She moved in a trance to talk to each of us there and to new friends as they arrived, ignoring the advice of friends and doctors to get some sleep and to change out of her bloody clothes. Those were some kind of dreadful badge of the disaster she had been through, and no one could persuade her to remove them.

It was past 5 in the morning when we left the hospital, after Jackie was finally persuaded to try to get some sleep in one of the bedrooms in the hospital suite.

After dinner Saturday night, Jackie telephoned and asked us to join a bunch of friends at the White House, to take her mind off death and funerals. When we got there Dave Powers, that irrepressible veteran of a hundred wakes, who knew instinctively how to comfort families of the dead than all of us put together, was finally making Jackie laugh, with one story after another about the "three-deckers" in Charleston, which Dave pronounced "Char-less-town," where he had first met John F. Kennedy.

A "three-decker" is a three-story tenement with stairs going up from one outside rear porch to another, and Dave had climbed most of them in his district with JFK. Dave's stories would be interrupted by moments of silence as the television set caught our attention, especially Jackie's attention, with shots of the country grieving, of people, including herself and her children and other Kennedys, filing silently, prayerfully past the presidential casket on view in the halls of Congress.

Jackie was extraordinary. Sometimes she seemed completely detached, as if she were someone else watching the ceremony of that other person's grief. Sometimes she was silent, obviously torn.

Often she would turn to a friend and reminisce, and everyone would join in with their remembrance of things forever past. There is much to be said for the wake. Led by Dave Powers, this one was more often than not surprisingly cheerful, and always warm and tender. *

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