THE TRUTH ABOUT THE ASSASSINATION

By CHARLES ROBERTS

Second Gunman Theory Exploded

Are the Warren Report critics scholars or scavengers? Did the Warren Commission suppress evidence of a conspiracy? Was LBJ inconsiderate in his takeover of the Presidency? In answer to innuendoes, suspicions and doubts, Charles Roberts, White House correspondent for Newsweek Magazine, has written "The Truth About the Assassination," an eyewitness reporter's documented study of the controversial questions surrounding the murder of President Kennedy. Roberts was in the first press bus of the Kennedy motorcade in Dallas; he was on the scene at Parkland Hospital, and he witnessed the swearing-in of Lyndon B. Johnson aboard Air Force One. From "The Truth About the Assassination" the Record American and Sunday Advertiser presents the first in a series of six excerpted articles.

BY NOON of November 22, 1963, most correspondents aboard White House Press Bus No. 1 in Dallas had reached a rolling consensus that President John F. Kennedy was unstoppable in 1964.

As the bus prodded its way along Main Street through a crowd of 150,000 cheering, shirt-sleeved Texans, the President seemed to have everything working for him, including his wife, Jackie, who had not made a political trip with him since 1960.

CHARLES ROBERTS

Kennedy, who scoffed at the notion that the President of the United States couldn't ride safely into any American city in an open car, had ordered the plastic "bubble-top" removed from his Lincoln Continental that morning. He had also ordered Secret Service bodyguards off the retractable footholds on the side of the car, where they normally rode when moving through crowds. "He wanted to be seen," one of them told me later.

Kennedy's judgment seemed vindicated as the 21-foot-long, midnight-blue limousine inched its way through the noonday outpouring of admirers. Both the sun and the crowd were warm.

From the first press bus, six or seven car-lengths behind President Kennedy in the motorcade, it looked as though the Dallas police were being overly cautious. When they manhandled one well-wisher who had dashed to the side of Kennedy's car to shake his hand, a local reporter recalled that Adlai Stevenson had been battered by pickets just a month earlier.

FAULTY RECALL

"The Dallas cops learned their lesson on that one," he remarked casually, referring to the assault on Stevenson. "They won't let any nuts get within ten feet of the President today."

Minutes later, the President lay dying on the back seat of his car, his head nearly blasted off by an assassin who never got closer than 60 feet. . . .

If I learned anything in Dallas that day, besides what it's like to be numbed by shock and grief, it was that eyewitness testimony is the worst kind.

As an old police and court reporter, I had long been wary of witnesses who recall in precise detail what they saw and heard while their adrenalin was flowing in moments of great crisis or tragedy.

MALCOLM KILDUFF

Dallas confirmed my suspicion that victims of horror — no matter how eminent they are—suffer also from faulty recall. And now, the more that is written about Dallas on the absis of eyewitness recollections, the more my suspicion is confirmed.

I was in the front seat of that press bus, normally a good vantage point, when the first shot was fired, or when I think it was fired. I had just looked up and noted one of the strangest building names I had ever seen carved in stone (or was it painted?)—"Texas School Book Depository"—when the confusion began.

"That sounded like gunfire," the reporter next

Turn to Page 26, Col. 1

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Second Gun Theory Exploded

Continued from Page 5

to me observed, almost casually. It was Bob Pierpoint, of CBS news, who, like me, had ridden in perhaps 200 Presidential motorcades and heard perhaps 1000 police motorcycles backfire along the way.

The thought was forming in my mind, almost subliminally, that the "pop" I had heard did sound different—when I saw a man on the sidewalk to my left suddenly dive to the ground, sprawling over what appeared to be a five- or six-year-old child. I believe the man was a Negro and the child he knocked to the concrete was a girl, but I wouldn't say so now on a witness stand.

At that instant I heard another "pop." It sounded as though it came from almost directly overhead.

"My God! It was gunfire!" I said, or think I said.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

As I grabbed the handrail in front of me and half rose from my seat, I saw a uniformed policeman running across Dealey Plaza, to the left of the President's car, with pistol drawn. I remember making a quick calculation that something bad had happened, because it is an old rule of thumb that no one draws a pistol in the presence of the President unless he intends to kill him — or prevent him from being killed.

At about that time, give or take two seconds, the motorcade, which most newsmen estimated had been moving at about 20 miles an hour, ground to an uncertain halt.

"What's going on?" someone screamed from the back of the bus.

At that moment I saw a man I believed to be a photographer — but don't ask me what kind of camera he carried — struggling up a grassy embankment ahead and to the right of the President's car, ducking his head as if under fire. He was pursued — or, at any rate, followed — by a motorcycle policeman who rammed his machine over the curb and, as it righted itself, pulled a pistol from his holster.

SERGEANT HELPS

That was the first moment at which I consciously began making notes on what I observed. At that moment, the grassy embankment was where the action was. My attention was riveted there, and so was that of half a dozen other correspondents who had spilled out of the bus onto the pavement in a near futile affort to find out what was happening.

I remember trying to focus on the President's car, downhill from our bus near that now-famous triple underpass. I am not sure I saw Kennedy's big Lincoln until it emerged on the other side of the underpass, streaking down Stemmons Freeway toward Parkland Memorial Hospital.

At that point, I jumped back into the press bus. By now those still aboard were pressing bug-eyed toward the front door, some screaming, "Let us out!" and others shouting, "Go, dammit! Go!"

For some reason — there were no precedents for handling the press when a President is shot — our press bus lumbered down the freeway to Dallas Trade Mart where the President was to have spoken.

While other newsmen rode an escalator up to a press-room, I ran into the parking lot and found a motorcycle cop straining to unscramble a babel of voices cracking out of his police radio.

"They shot the President," he told me before I could open my mouth. "They're taking him to Parkland Hospital."

This, I suddenly realized, was the first word I had that the President had not only been shot at, but hit.

As I ran for the street I heard the radio dispatcher say something like, "There is no description of the gunman."

A police sergeant I had never seen before (but will never forget) walked into the street and commandeered a car for me.

"Take this man to Parkland Hospital — and fast," he told the driver, a Mexican-American woman who had been listening to her car radio and thus was able to provide me with my first clear-cut bit of misinformation.

"I hear they got Johnson, too," she said, referring to the then-Vice President.

TWO INCONGRUITIES

Minutes later, at Parkland's emergency admitting platform, I noted two incongruities that, unaccountably, still stick in my memory. The President's blood-spattered car was parked directly under a neon sign that said "Ambulances Only," and two Secret Service agents were starting to put the fabric top on that car as the President lay dying, a few feet away inside the hospital.

Why now? I wondered.

In the driveway alongside the platform I cornered my first, good, close-up eyewitness. Senator Yarborough, who had been riding with Lyndon Johnson just behind the President's security car, was standing there in what seemed to be a trance. Measured against what is now known to have happened, he gave a surprisingly good reconstruction of events, and yet there was an odd reflection on the accuracy of eyewitness testimony in his tearful story.

"I smelled the gunpowder . . . It clung to the car nearly all the way to the hospital," he said again and again.

No gun had been fired within 100 feet of his car. Senator Yarborough is noted for his integrity. Was it possible that he smelled gunpowder as his car raced to the hospital at speeds up to 80 miles an hour?

BUCHANAN THEORY

Seeds of the "conspiracy" or "second gunman" theory of the Kennedy murder were sown in that driveway and inside the hospital during the hectic, confused two hours that followed.

One alert reporter, Dick Dudman of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, observed what appeared to be a small bullet hole in the front windshield of the President's car.

Dr. Malcolm Perry, a competent but harried surgeon who had made a desperate effort to save the President's life by performing a tracheotomy, suggested in a news conference, apparently in answer to a hypothetical question, that there was an entrance wound in Kennedy's throat.

These two quick observations prompted author Thomas Buchanan (Who Killed Kennedy?) and a legion of doubters who followed in his footsteps to pose the theory that a gunman other than Oswald fired from in front of the Kennedy car, putting a bullet through the windshield and into Kennedy's throat.

This lie traveled around the world while the truth was putting its boots on. While the

Warren Commission wrapped a tight and senseless veil of secrecy around the windshield (nicked by a bullet fragment on the inside but not even fractured on the front side) and the Bethesda Naval Hospital autopsy report (establishing that the hole in Mr. Kennedy's throat was an exit wound) readers around the world swallowed the conspiracy theory.

PRIEST SUMMONED

It matters not that the Secret Service has since displayed the windshield, with no hole in it, and that Dr. Perry has long since concurred with the Bethesda autopsy findings.

The exploded Buchanan theory, with variations, is still the favorite of doubters, from Bayonne to Bangkok. Mark Lane's heavily annotated and footnoted defense brief for Oswald is little more than a cleaned-up, updated version of it.

The realization that the President was dying if, in fact, he was not already dead, came to us slowly and terrifyingly as we pieced together what had happened — and what was going on in the hospital — from Secret Service men, the police, doctors, nurses, and finally from a priest who had been summoned to administer last rites.

Charles Roberts, Arrow, Jots Notes During Swearing-In of President Johnson on Air Force One in Dallas Shortly After President Kennedy's Assassination
(Cecil Stoughton-Time Magazine Photo via AP Wirephoto)

"Where was the wound?" I asked Senator Yarborough, whose eyes were brimming with tears. "I can't tell you," he answered, unconsciously holding his hand to the right side of his head, where he had seen blood streaming from the President. "This is a deed that's indescribable."

Shortly after 1 p. m. reporters were herded into a nurses' classroom on the ground floor.

"This is your pressroom," shouted Wayne Hawks, White House chief of records. "We're getting some phones."

Within minutes of that ominous announcement we learned, unofficially, that John F. Kennedy was dead. A crying nurse "knew" it. A resident surgeon called his wife to tell her. 'I think it's true but I can't say anything," sobbed a nursing supervisor.

It was a truth no one who had covered President Kennedy for three years could accept. It couldn't be true. Reporters not facing deadlines sat numbly with heads in their hands.

Then, at 1:33 p. m., Assistant White House Press Secretary Malcolm Kilduff pushed into the room with a piece of note paper in one hand and an unlighted cigaret in the other.

Standing at a gray metal counter in front of the classroom blackboard, red-eyed and tremulous, Kilduff read slowly from the paper: "President John F. Kennedy died at approximately 1 p. m., Central Standard Time, today here in Dallas. He died of a gunshot in the brain."

"Oh, God!" a hardboiled newsman cried.

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TOMORROW: Dallas with Hindsight.