

The Truth About the Assassination

Plane Ride Back From Dallas

Eyewitness Report Disputes Several Points in Manchester Book

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• "The book the President took his oath of

office on was not Kennedy's 'personal Bible,' as Manchester reports . . . but a missal—a small text of prayers and Catholic Masses, printed in both Latin and English."
• "He (Manchester) gives the impression that Jackie Kennedy, eager to return to

Washington, has to wait endlessly for a Texas judge to come and swear in Johnson. The fact is that Mrs. Kennedy had to wait just 20 minutes. She boarded the plane at 2:18, Judge Hughes boarded at 2:30 and the oath was administered at 2:38."

By CHARLES ROBERTS

(Last in a series of six articles—which started in Tuesday's Record American—excerpted from "The Truth About the Assassination," newly-published study by an eyewitness reporter of the controversial questions surrounding the murder of President Kennedy. Author Charles Roberts, White House correspondent for Newsweek Magazine, was one of the two newsmen to fly back to Washington on the plane carrying the dead President and Lyndon B. Johnson.) Here is his story of the "Ride back from Dallas."

BACK AT Parkland Hospital, Wayne Hawke, White House Chief of Records, had hurriedly assembled a press "pool" of three White House newsmen—a wire service man, a radio-TV man, and a magazine man—to speed to the airport and cover the story aboard Air Force One for all our colleagues. I was with Martin Smith, of UPI, Sid Davis, of Westinghouse, and I had raced to the airport in another unmarked police car at speeds up to 70 miles an hour.



CHARLES ROBERTS

As we boarded the plane, which had been sitting in the sun for three hours without air conditioning, I noticed first that it was dark and second that it was suffocatingly hot. I did not detect an atmosphere of crackling tension. In fact, it was like bursting breathlessly into a wake. Johnson and Kennedy secretaries, their faces grotesquely streaked with mascara, were weeping openly and audibly. Strong Secret Service men, slumped into seats in the forward cabin, were shielding their eyes from view.

Propelled by Mac Kilduff, who had been awaiting us almost as eagerly as Johnson awaited Judge Sarah T. Hughes, we pushed back into the gold-upholstered conference room, about midships in the 143-foot-long 56 million plane. There a grave Lyndon Johnson was surrounded by a group of familiar Texans—Representatives Homer Thornberry, Jack Brooks and Albert Thomas—and two younger men, strangers to me who had just become, unwittingly, top members of the White House staff, Bill D. Moyers and Jack Valenti.

Moyers, then deputy director of the Peace Corps, had been in Austin "advancing" Kennedy's scheduled speech there that night; he chartered a plane and flew to Love Field, Valenti a Houston ad man who came aboard and flew to Washington without even a toothbrush ("I figured if he wanted me to leave he'd tell me") had just made his first phone call as a Presidential aide. He had called Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach in Washington to make sure that the oath of office Katzenbach had dictated to a secretary a few minutes earlier was the Presidential oath. It was—straight out of the U. S. Constitution, which is printed in most drug store almanacs but was not in any book aboard the plane.

Johnson greeted the tiny, 67-year-old Judge Hughes. Then, seeing us, without smiling, he called out, "If there's anybody else aboard who wants to see this tell them to come in." For a few minutes we waited, talking in whispers barely audible over the mournful wailing of an idling jet engine. Then O'Brien came from the bedroom compartment, aft of the conference room, carrying what we took to be a small leather-bound Bible.

It wasn't. The book the President took his oath of office on, I learned later, was not Kennedy's "personal Bible," as Manchester reports, or a Douai (Roman Catholic) version of the Bible, as Judges Hughes surmised, but a missal—a small text of prayers and Catholic Masses, printed in both Latin and English.

The failure to use a Holy Bible in no way undercut the validity of Johnson's 36-word oath to "faithfully execute the office of the President . . . (and) protect and defend the Constitution of the



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United States," to which he added the traditional phrase, "So help me God." However, he may be the first U. S. President since Theodore Roosevelt to take the oath without his hand on a Bible. He is certainly the first Protestant President to be sworn in on a missal. It took just 28 seconds.

Someone else handed Judge Hughes a copy of the Presidential oath, typewritten, not on an index card, as Manchester reports, but on a memo-sized piece of paper, gold-embossed with the Presidential Seal and the words "Aboard Air Force One."

Moments later Jackie Kennedy walked slowly into the room, smiling faintly but in what appeared to be a state of shock. Even the background whispering stopped as she stepped forward hesitantly in her blood-spattered pink suit and stood at Johnson's left side. Lady Bird stood at his right. The three of them faced Judge Hughes as Johnson raised his right hand, placed his left on the missal, and solemnly repeated the oath after the judge.

After he said, "So help me God," he turned and kissed his wife on the forehead, then turned to his other side and gripped Mrs. Kennedy's elbows in a fatherly embrace. After the second of silence that ensued, Mrs. Johnson clasped Jackie's hand and said, "The whole nation mourns your husband." The President also took her hand.

Then, as Johnson turned to grasp other hands, Police Chief Curry, who had stood behind him, said to Mrs. Kennedy: "God bless you little lady, but you ought to go back and lie down." "No thanks, I'm fine," Jackie replied, mustering another smile. Dazed but smiling, she remained in the crowded conference room only a few minutes; few of the witnesses to the oath-taking could think of anything to say to her. Then she retired to the aft compartment containing her husband's coffin, where she spent most of the two hours and 12 minutes of the flight back to Washington.

Johnson shook a few more hands, still without smiling, and turned to kiss the cheek of Evelyn Lincoln, President Kennedy's secretary, who was

standing almost directly behind him. I was standing behind Mrs. Lincoln. Although I am not deeply religious, the words that came to my mouth when I clasped his hand were, "God be with you, Mr. President."

At 2:41 p. m., three minutes after that brief ceremony, Johnson gave his first order as President—"Now let's get airborne." A few Texans scrambled off the plane. With all other aircraft diverted from the area, the big Presidential jet was airborne at 2:47—just 107 minutes after Kennedy died. It was then—after those amenities—that Johnson began his sure-handed takeover of the government.

During the flight home the President came twice to the table where Smith and I were trying to record instant history, Smitty on a borrowed, unfamiliar electric typewriter. The first time, still subdued and speaking just above a whisper, he told us he wanted all of Kennedy's staff and Cabinet officers to stay on—a hint of "let us continue" theme that he was to sound before Congress five days later. The second time he came to inform us that he would make a few remarks on his arrival—the brief "I ask for your help—and God's" statement he read before TV cameras after landing at Andrews AFB.

For the rest of the trip, while the Kennedy party remained isolated in the rear compartment, LBJ tended to urgent business. He kept in touch with the White House Situation Room, manned by McGeorge Bundy, for any sign the Communist world might try to exploit the tragedy at Dallas. He called Rose Kennedy, at Hyannis Port, to offer condolences on the loss of her son, and Nellie Connally, in Dallas, to wish her husband a full and speedy recovery. He conferred for about 10 minutes with O'Brien on the Congressional situation confronting him.

As a generalization it is fair to say that of those who stayed on the payroll for many months, Mac Bundy, a Boston Brahmin, and Larry O'Brien, a Massachusetts pol, were the only Kennedy staffers who really functioned for Johnson during the

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takeover crisis. Both men were branded "traitors" and "turncoats" by the diehard Kennedy partisans as a result.

Bundy's answer to this was that the Presidency, to which he was loyal, is bigger than any one man. O'Brien's was more succinct: "You do what needs to be done." The others never seemed to forget that Johnson had been their enemy at the Los Angeles Democratic Convention in 1960.

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As another generalization, I think one could say that Manchester, in *The Death of a President*, overplays these events—dramatic as they were—for the purpose of heightened drama. For example, he has the Secret Service in "hopeless

disorder" as a result of divided loyalties, with Agent Emory Roberts, No. 2 man on the trip, defecting to the new President. The fact here is that at the hospital Kelleman, No. 1 man, ordered Roberts and his 8 a. m.-to-4 p. m. shift to join the Vice Presidential detail in guarding Johnson.

Another example: he gives the impression that Jackie Kennedy, eager to return to Washington, had to wait endlessly for a Texas judge to come and swear in Johnson. ("Then the full force struck her. An hour, she thought, *My God, do I have to wait an hour?*") The fact is that Mrs. Kennedy had to wait just 20 minutes. She boarded the plane at 2:18, Judge Hughes boarded at 2:30, and the catch was administered at 2:38.

The truth about the assassination of John F. Kennedy is that the Warren Commission reached the only conclusions that are tenable to reasonable

men. That truth, extracted and distilled from the 10,400,000 words in its Hearings, is borne out by the hard, physical evidence as well as the most credible eyewitness testimony. It is the truth, in Early Warren's phrase, "as far as it can be discovered."

An additional truth is that the critics of the Commission Report have neither raised questions nor produced new evidence that could alter the Commission's findings. If a new inquiry were undertaken, finally, it is true, as Britain's Lord Devlin has observed, that "the best tribute to the solidity of the Report comes from its critics." They have labored mightily and deviously to demolish it but have succeeded only in scratching the surface.

END OF SERIES

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