

The Unforgettable Afternoon

By Jack Valenti

WASHINGTON
On this day 35 years ago, the "ceremony of innocence was drowned," to borrow Yeats's phrase. At midday on that Friday, John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas.

Even now, so many long years later, I remember every minute of the motorcade's journey from Love Field through downtown Dallas, past a drab building of undistinguished architecture called the Texas School Book Depository.

I was six cars back in the motorcade, in a vehicle carrying Evelyn Lincoln, the President's secretary; Pamela Tunure, secretary to the First Lady, and Liz Carpenter, staff director for Lady Bird Johnson.

At the time I was a founding partner in a Houston advertising and political consulting agency. Over the eight years I had known Lyndon Johnson, I had helped him with a number of political chores. Some weeks earlier he had called me to say that the President and John Connally, then the Governor of Texas, had struck a deal for a Presidential visit to Texas.

"I'm against it right now," the Vice President had told me, "but it's a done deal. I want you to help out. Since this trip is going to take place, I want it to go well."

L.B.J. didn't have to tell me why he was opposed to the visit. The Democratic Party in Texas was in disarray, a dysfunctional family whose members were hissing at one another like rattlers in the brush. Senator Ralph Yarborough and Governor Connally were in venomous discord.

Nonetheless, the visit began with unreserved excitement. In San Antonio and Houston the crowds were immense. From Houston, I flew with the Vice President to Fort Worth on the night of Nov. 21. The next morning at a breakfast at the Texas Hotel,

and again atop a raised platform across the street, J.F.K. was at the top of his game, his wit and charm inspiring loud applause.

From Fort Worth it was on to Dallas, where aboard Air Force Two the Vice President relaxed. "It's going great, isn't it?" he said to me. From Love Field, the motorcade began its journey to the Dallas Trade Mart, where the President was to speak to a crowd of some 2,500.

We wound our way into the downtown area and onto Dealey Plaza, past thousands of waving onlookers. Suddenly, the car in front of us leaped forward, racing from 10 miles per hour to 60. As our car tried to keep pace, we passengers, who had heard no gunshots, looked at one another with bewilderment.

"Don't worry," I ventured, "the President is late for his speech, and he's hurrying to get there." It was not wholly mollifying, but the alternatives were too bleak to consider. So we sped to the Dallas Trade Mart.

When we arrived, a large crowd was awaiting the President. But there was no President. Now we knew that something was desperately wrong. A Secret Service agent told us matter-of-factly: "The President has been shot, as has the Governor. They're at Parkland Hospital." A deputy sheriff took me there.

Not long after I arrived, Cliff Carter, chief political aide to the Vice

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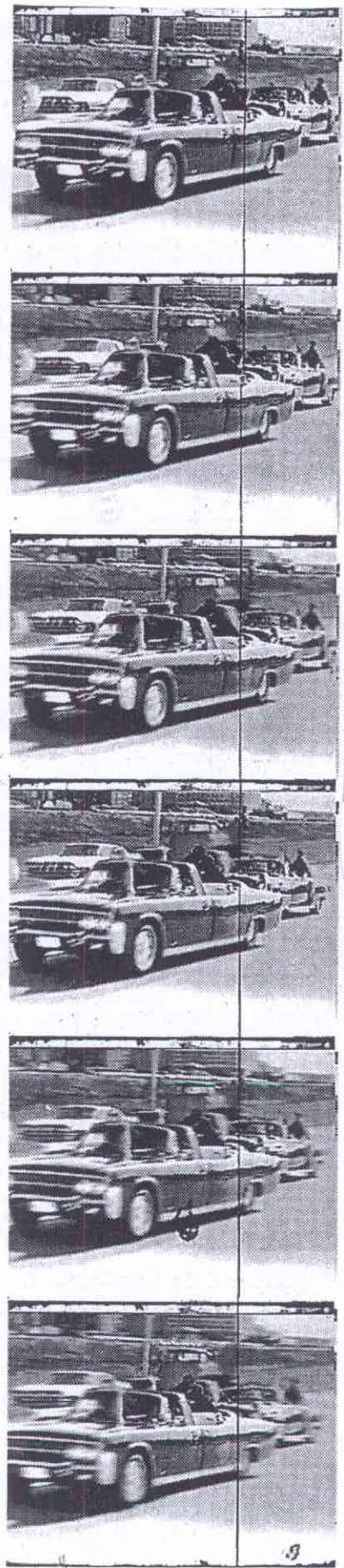
President, found me. "The Vice President wants to see you, now," he said. "The President is dead, you know." His voice was toneless. I began to sob.

A Secret Service agent, Lem Johns, took me back to Love Field and to Air Force One. The plane had been removed to a remote corner of the field, where two cordons of armed men guarded it. Agent Johns told me that no one knew the extent of the assassination plot, so it was battle stations for all security personnel.

Inside Air Force One, the Presidential office was crowded with Congressmen, police officers and Secret Service agents. Suddenly, in the narrow corridor connecting the office to the Presidential bedroom, the 6-foot-4 figure of Lyndon Johnson appeared. Representative Albert Thomas of Houston said quietly, "We are ready to help you in any way, Mr. President." This was the first time L.B.J. had been so addressed.

Johnson sat in a large chair on the port side and beckoned to me. "I want you on my staff," he said. "You'll fly back to Washington with me." It was not a request. It was a Presidential command.

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In the next five minutes, the new President made two decisions that, in retrospect, were brilliant, especially given the urgent challenges he faced.

He had talked by phone with Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who had urged him to get in the air immediately. Kennedy reminded L.B.J. that he was constitutionally President and needed no formal swearing-in to make him so. Get in the air and out of harm's way, Kennedy said. But Johnson demurred.

His first decision was that he would not leave Dallas without the body of President Kennedy on board. L.B.J. foresaw that he would be maligned for being so eager to be President that he left behind his predecessor's body.

His second decision was to be sworn in on the plane, before departure. He had already given an order that a Federal judge, Sarah T. Hughes, be brought swiftly to the plane.

L.B.J. understood how crucial it was to photograph the swearing-in so that the picture could be flashed around the world quickly. This photo would proclaim that while the light in

In his first hours as President, Lyndon Johnson showed a calm wisdom.

the White House may flicker, it never goes out.

The immediate problem was, Where to find the oath of office? My first official duty was to talk by phone with Nicholas Katzenbach, who I later learned was Deputy Attorney General. Where to find the wording of the oath, he was asked? After a bit of scurrying, the answer came back: in Article II of the Constitution.

L.B.J. asked Mrs. Kennedy if she would stand beside him when the oath was administered. She came forward from the rear of the plane, a few feet from the flag-draped coffin of her husband, walking slowly, eyes opaque. She had refused entreaties from her staff to change her pink jacket, now spotted with her husband's blood.

Thus the camera caught one of the most famous scenes in American

history — the new President with his right hand raised, speaking the same words sworn to by every President since George Washington; Mrs. Kennedy to his left, eyes cast down and fixed with a disbelieving stare of unhinged grief; Mrs. Johnson to his right, solemn, full of wonder. The distraught, dark-haired man at the extreme left is me.

Much has been written of the so-called hostility between the Kennedy aides and the Johnson contingent on the plane. I never saw it or felt it. What I did witness was the grief of Kennedy's top aides, Kenny O'Donnell and Larry O'Brien. They were simply beyond anything as casual as hostility. Unhappily, there was one contradiction. Gen. Godfrey McHugh, military aide to J.F.K., became hysterical, even to the extent of trying to overrule L.B.J. when the new President ordered Air Force One to remain in place until President Kennedy's coffin had been brought aboard. It was a sorry, bizarre tableau.

Then we were airborne, headed for Washington. I sat beside the new President, he in the window seat on the starboard side. Midway through the flight, L.B.J. reached his left hand across my face to take a glass of water from the steward. His large hand, freckled and brown from the sun, was inches from my eyes. The hand was steady. Not a tremble.

Strange how that odd fragment stayed with me. Maybe it was because Johnson's calm was so at odds with the queasy, fearful embrace in which we all found ourselves.

I do not claim to be an accurate explorer of the mysterious and conflicting depths of Lyndon Johnson. But one aspect of his character I came to know intimately: the stern discipline that let him remain cool, appraising, even relaxed in those moments when the dagger was at the nation's belly. Many people would rightly apply that description to John Kennedy. But it fit Lyndon Johnson as well. On a nightmarish day 35 years ago, that was fortuitous for the country. □