

Excerpts From O'Donnell Testimony

Following are excerpts from the testimony of Kenneth P. O'Donnell, special assistant to the President, on May 18, 1964:

ARLEN SPECTER, assistant counsel of the commission — What were your duties on November 22, 1963?

MR. O'DONNELL — I was special assistant to the President. I was in charge of his appointments and any itineraries that he might have.

Q.—When, if you recall, was the Secret Service notified of the forthcoming trip to Texas?

A.—I would think they would be notified around the first week in November. The general desire is that they have the specific information at least on the places that he might go 3 weeks prior to the trip.

Q.—And who among the members of the Presidential staff would be charged with the responsibility for coordinating the trip with the Secret Service?

A.—That would be my responsibility. The manner in which we would set it up would be that I would notify the head here, who is Gerry Behn, and Gerry Behn would ask me when we were sending people down, so that his people and our people could go down at the same time. And I recollect that Jerry Bruno was one of them.

The first step would be to confer with the Governor, go over the general proposals that the Governor would make, and then bring it back to me. And I would go over it with the Governor and the Vice President and the President.

Q.—What planning was undertaken with respect to the determination of the motorcade route through Dallas?

A.—Well, I think once we arrived — we chose the four cities we were going into. And then the advance men and the Secret Service went out. The we would work backwards from where we had to be at what time, and what things we had agreed we would do there.

Q.—When was a decision made, if you recall, as to the precise route that the motorcade would follow through Dallas?

A.—I don't recall. I would think it would be perhaps a week before the final decision was made. The President would not involve himself in anything like this. Once we agreed on where he would go, that was my responsibility to work it out. The normal course of events — they would say to me, "Do you want a motorcade in Dallas?" I would say, "Yes; this is how much time you have got." They would work out a motorcade. The Secret Service would time the route. Once they had worked out this point, they would come back to me and say, "We have accomplished the purpose you want." The Secret Service would say it takes so much time, the Governor would say, "You have to be here at a certain time." Once all those are put together, the route is laid out and accepted.

Q.—Would the route be disclosed to the press as a matter of normal procedure in general as it was ascertained? A.—Yes.

Q.—How many cars were there ahead of yours? A.—Well, I think there was a scout car, which was the lead, the President's vehicle, and I was in the car right behind him, in the Secret Service followup car.

Q.—Who else besides you was in the car? A.—David Powers was with me. All the rest were agents.

Q.—Do you recall the scene when you left the Main Street of downtown Dallas, with respect specifically to the presence of a large building which was immediately ahead of the motorcade?

A.—I did not. I was looking at the crowd. And I frankly didn't look at the building, except when there were people in the windows. And as we made that turn, I had been standing—I remember I sat down. And as far as I was concerned, that was the end—we were then going to the luncheon—and I didn't notice any building at all.

Q.—Tell us what occurred then as you made that turn away from the crowded downtown Dallas area and headed toward the plaza area.

A.—Well, I sat down. I remembered saying to Dave Powers that it was a fantastic crowd. He agreed.

We turned. I remember the overpass. And then the shots occurred—which, at that time, I did not know were shots. My first impression was it was a firecracker. And then either somebody said, "He has been hit," or I noticed the slump—he had been waving out the right side of the car, and I noticed him slump over toward Mrs. Kennedy, and I realized then that they had been shots. But as fast as that realization occurred, I saw the third shot hit. It was such a perfect shot—I remembered I blessed myself. I was rather convinced that was a fatal blow.

Q.—How many shots were there in all? A.—Three.

Q.—What is your best estimate as to the total time which elapsed from the first shot to the last shot? A.—I would say 5 to 6 seconds.

Q.—And was there any distinguishable tempo to the shots? A.—Yes; the first two came almost simultaneously, came one right after the other, there was a slight hesitation, then the third one.

Q.—And what was your reaction as to the source of the shots, if you had one? A.—My reaction in part is reconstruction—is that they came from the right rear. That would be my best judgment.

Q.—Was there any reaction by any of the other people around in any specific direction? A.—The agents all turned to the rear. I would think, watching the reaction of the President when the shot—the first shot hit—that it would be automatic it would have to have come from the rear. I think any experienced agent would make that assumption immediately.

Q.—And was the reaction of the agents which you have re-

ferred to as coming from the rear, or the right rear or to the left rear?

A.—The reaction I note would be right rear. And, again, looking at the manner of the President's movement, I would think you would have to feel the thrust of the shot was from the right rear.

Q.—Now, what was there



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about the President's movement which leads you to that conclusion? A.—He was leaning out waving. He may have just been withdrawing his hand. And the shot hit him, and threw him to the left. He slumped on Mrs. Kennedy.

Q.—Were you able to determine a reaction on that slumping movement, as to whether it was the first, the second, or the third shot? A.—It was not the third shot. Whether it was the first or second, I would not know.

Q.—Do you think it could have been the second shot?

A.—Yes; I do. If I had to pick one of the two, I think it might have been the second shot. It seemed to be—but, again, it is a foggy recollection—it seemed to have been that his movement coincided—with such a slight difference of time, that is just guesswork.

Q.—Did you observe any reaction of Governor Connally in the car?

A.—I saw the Governor turn toward the President. The President, in that period of time, had been—they were one right behind the other. And the only reason I would even notice it was when the President had slumped to the left, the Governor then turned, and he was in my view. Otherwise, he would not have been. But the President slumped over, and, therefore, the Governor just turned and I could see him. I had no knowl-

edge that he had been hit at that time.

Q.—When did you get the first knowledge that he had been hit? A.—When the third shot came. The President was hit. The motorcade accelerated. And one of the agents said, "The Governor has been hit, too."

Q.—What reaction did you observe, if any, as to Mrs. Kennedy during the shots?

A.—Well he slumped on her. She appeared to be immediately aware that something had happened. She turned toward him. And then the third shot hit. Obviously, she then knew what happened. She turned, looking at the backup car. Meanwhile Agent Hill had gotten off the car and started running up. She was clambering toward the back, and reached his hand, and he was on the car.

Q.—Did you observe any reactions in the President's car other than those which you have now testified about? A.—No.

Q.—At what point did the motorcade accelerate? A.—It accelerated, I would think, right about at the time that Agent Hill grabbed onto the back of the car, which would be just a few seconds after the last shot.

Q.—And at what speed did the motorcade proceed en route to the hospital? A.—Very rapidly. I would guess between 60 and 70 miles an hour.

Q.—About how long did it take for the motorcade to get to the hospital. A.—I would guess 5 to 10 minutes.

Q.—How far behind the President's car was the followup car in which you were riding at the time the President's car arrived at the hospital? A.—Right behind it, 5 or 6 feet.

Q.—What occurred at that time? A.—We got out of the car. David Powers got out of the car, went to the President, and was not visible to me, and was crying, he laid on him. And then they came and took the President—that was the first time I really realized that Governor Connally had been badly hurt, as they also carried Governor Connally out.

Q.—What was the President's attitude in a general way, about Presidential protection — that is, President Kennedy's attitude about Presidential protection, Mr. O'Donnell?

A.—Well, his general attitude was that the Secret Service—that there was no protection available to a President of a democracy such as the United States from a demented person who was willing to risk his own life; that if someone wanted to kill a President of the United States, who in a sense wears two hats—he is the leader of a political party as well as our Chief Executive—and by the nature of our system must mingle with crowds, must ride through our cities, and must expose himself to the American people—that the Secret Service would not be, other than the protection that they provide by the screening processes prior to the actual carrying out of a political trip — would not be able to guarantee 100 percent protection, considering one has to mingle with crowds of 50,000 or 100,000 peo-

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ple, and mingle with them at
handshaking distance.

His view was that a demented
person who was willing to
sacrifice his own life could take
the President's life. And that
if it were to happen, I think
his general view was it would

happen in a crowded situation.
I don't think it entered his
mind that it might happen in
the fashion as of a motorcade.

Q.—What was his reaction
to that risk? A.—I think he
felt that was a risk which one
assuming the office of the Presi-
dency of the United States in-
herited. It didn't disturb him at
all.