

JOHN OF A  
THOUSAND DAYS



# And what if he'd lived?

25 years later, 'Promises'  
explores the question

*"We may laugh again, but we'll  
never be young again."*

— Theodore Sorenson

**By Ellis E. Conklin**  
Herald Examiner staff writer

Twenty-five years ago today, America fell to its knees and wept with inconsolable sadness, with a grief so wincing that it still grinds the heart on this grim anniversary.

Maybe it always will.

On this day, on that sun-dazzled Dallas afternoon, the life was blasted out of John F. Kennedy. The handsome president, the charming young father — the man who took Jackie to Paris was dead.

It is difficult to find any American over the age of 35 who cannot remember with shuddering vividness where they were and what they were doing on that dark Friday when Camelot crashed and our own special brand of brash, witty royalty faded.

It's as if Nov. 22, 1963, will forever serve as a benchmark, a dividing line — separating a time between cocky innocence and heroes, and cynicism, caution and conspiracy, between "American Graffiti" and Watergate.

A blizzard of books and television documentaries and scholarly interpretations has swept the country in recent weeks as the shifting theories of assassination are unearthed and explored anew. Can we, will we, ever be satisfied?

Or, like the flame flickering at Arlington National Cemetery, will the obsession with Kennedy — and his death — burn eternal?

But perhaps the question that most intrigues and fires the engine of speculation is what if John Kennedy had lived? What if

he had survived those bullets that ripped down from the Texas School Book Depository?

A first-time author from Solana Beach named George Bernau spent more than five years trying to answer that quintessential "What if?" and his ravelings are part of a 643-page blockbuster called "Promises to Keep."

"I don't think there's any doubt but that we would be a little better off as individuals," said Bernau during a recent interview.

"We lost an inspiring leader, and each of us was touched in our individual consciences," Bernau added. "When someone like that stands up and makes an enormous difference, and then is killed, there's something in our minds that says, 'Is it all worth it?'"

The story in "Promises to Keep" is a pulsating concoction of politics, romance and conspiracy that sends history through a blender. Anything seems possible.

John Trelawney Cassidy (John Kennedy) survives three bullets, one of them to the brain, and chooses not to run for re-election.

But so saintly is his stature that he is able to engineer his brother Tim Cassidy (Robert Kennedy) onto the ticket with Ransome Gardner (Lyndon Johnson) in 1964.

But Vice President Cassidy slowly separates himself from Gardner's hawkish Vietnam policies, and then dies in a helicopter ambush during a tour of Southeast Asia.

Then, with monumental revisionism, John Cassidy, who has been re-elected to the Senate from Massachusetts, picks up his younger brother's torch and challenges Gardner in the 1968 pri-

maries. Gardner drops from the race after losing to John Cassidy in New Hampshire — and the nomination becomes a seesaw battle between Cassidy and replacement-Vice President Putnam (Hubert Humphrey).

Underlining the political passions is the specter of conspiracy. There were two gunmen in Dallas is Bernau's hypothesis. One is Arthur Strobe (Oswald) and the other is Antonio Lopata, a twisted Cuban. Both have been hired by a Mafia-Cuban-exile group to avenge Cassidy for failing to provide air cover at the Bay of Pigs.

So fascinated was Warner Books by the chilling premise of Kennedy surviving — and later unraveling the conspiracy to assassinate him — that they paid Bernau a \$750,000 advance, the most money ever given to someone's inaugural entry into the publishing world.

The 43-year-old Bernau is a tall, husky man with a somber countenance. With his wife and daughter, he lives in a sprawling redwood home perched on a hill. From stained glass windows, one can look out above the eucalyptus trees and to the sea beyond.

Bernau was 18 when Kennedy was killed, an undergraduate at USC, sitting in an accounting class when the news struck.

"I remember the professor telling us that the president had been shot," Bernau recalled. "I don't think anyone thought it was serious, but then I walked out and saw the flag at half-mast."

"That, I remember, hit me the hardest. You know, we were all brought up in the '50s, and we had lived such safe, secure lives. Something like this was inconceivable — that this kind of

JFK, B-7 ▶





Chris Gulker/Herald Examiner

**First-time author** George Bernau of Solana Beach has written a huge novel based on the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

"He was such a symbolic person. He symbolized some of the best of America. I'm not sure we've had someone of his stature since then."

**Author George Bernau**



In "Promises to Keep," a character thinly disguised as John F. Kennedy survives an assassination attempt and gets back into politics. A Herald Examiner artist shows, above, what JFK might have looked like today had he lived.

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**Los Angeles Herald Examiner****Tuesday, November 22, 1988**

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**JFK****► From B-1**

anarchy and violence could be unleashed."

Bernau, a registered Independent who's never been particularly politically involved, stressed that he has been no more obsessed than anyone of his generation about the assassination. Instead, he was haunted by the notion of getting a second chance at life.

Nearly six years ago, Bernau was nearly killed himself by a drunken driver. He was told by the doctors in his emergency room that he wouldn't survive the head injuries.

When he did recover, Bernau decided to no longer practice law. "And so that notion of the second

chance stayed with me, and that every person, like Kennedy said, can make a difference. That stayed with me," Bernau said.

The lure of "Promises to Keep," Bernau explained, is that everyone does have a point of view about how the flood of history may have been altered had Kennedy served a second term.

"He was such a symbolic person," Bernau said. "He symbolized some of the best of America. I'm not sure we've had someone of his stature since then."

And what if Kennedy had lived?

Bernau shook his head and looked out toward the fog-shrouded ocean. "I don't know. I don't know," he said. "There would have been an enormous change in America had he lived. I don't know exactly."





**This heavily armored, bulletproof — and closed — limousine** used by President Reagan in 1981 is in stark contrast to the open convertible used by President Kennedy in Dallas in 1963.

## Armored limousines

### Open cars are a thing of the past

**By David Barry**  
Herald Examiner staff writer

When John F. Kennedy was assassinated in the back seat of an open convertible, the tragedy ended an era of open cars that had put the president on display.

The four-door Lincoln Continental in which Kennedy met his death was long and low, with an elegant shape that had won a design award in 1961. Informal accessibility was part of the Kennedy image, and it was typical that the car's plexiglass shield — for protection against weather and other disturbances — was not in use on the Lincoln that day in Dallas.

The tradition of visibility in a presidential parade car dates back to Franklin Roosevelt, who

made ceremonial appearances in a specially modified 1939 Lincoln V12 roadster, nicknamed "The Sunshine Special."

President Dwight Eisenhower rode in a 1950 Lincoln convertible, with a clear, plexiglass protective bubble-shield, which brought the car the name "bubble-top."

The bubble-top Lincoln was retired in 1960, and a 1961 Lincoln Continental four-door convertible, a new model that year, was modified for presidential use. In addition to its removable plexiglass weather shield, the rear seat could be hydraulically raised 10 inches — to better display the president and his guests.

The Kennedy car, its length-

**Limos, B-7 ►**

# Limos

► From B-1

ened wheelbase and extensive modifications adding greatly to its weight, was known as X-100 to the Secret Service, which operated it under lease from Ford Motor Co. Its removable plexiglass shield, though — like the shield on the earlier Eisenhower Lincoln — was not bulletproof.

After the assassination, the X-100 was extensively modified for security in a redesign that took almost a year to complete.

The re-engineered car was then put back into presidential service, thoroughly armor-plated and bulletproofed.

Converted to a closed car, the newly rebuilt Lincoln featured bulletproof windows of 1-inch-thick glass. The car was then modified for President Lyndon Johnson so that one of its bulletproof rear windows could be rolled down.

It was modified again so President Richard Nixon and his guests could stand and be visible in parades through a slot that could be opened in the top. The car continued in use through the inauguration of President Jimmy

Carter before being retired for good.

When Carter came into office, a newer Lincoln was also in the White House fleet. This car, similar in appearance to the Kennedy Lincoln but heavily armored like the rebuilt Kennedy car, carried President Ronald Reagan to the scene of the assassination attempt by John W. Hinckley.

Reagan had the aging Lincoln replaced by a 1982 Cadillac limousine, heavily armored by Hess & Eisenhardt, the Cincinnati firm that has been building presidential cars since the Truman administration.

While the specifications of Hess & Eisenhardt security-modified vehicles are a closely guarded secret, it is well-known that the armoring and blast resistance keeps pace with modern weaponry.

Three former presidential Lincolns — Roosevelt's, Eisenhower's and Kennedy's — are on display in the Ford Museum in Dearborn, Mich. Each one makes a statement of style of the era it represents. The current blast-proof, bulletproof presidential Cadillac, like other cars used by modern heads of state around the world, is less an example of automotive style than a statement of the armorer's art.





**Jacqueline Kennedy** and a Secret Service agent attend to President Kennedy moments after he was shot in Dallas 25 years ago today.

## How NBC covered it

### A grieving nation gets the news

**By Mark Schwed**  
Herald Examiner staff writer

At first the news just trickled onto the screen. NBC disrupted its regular programming at 1:56 p.m. EST. President John F. Kennedy had been shot. Less than 30 minutes later, the network was helping a nation weep.

Today at 1:56 p.m. EST (10:56 a.m. local time), the Arts & Entertainment cable network will break into its regularly scheduled shows with that first NBC bulletin, followed by six hours of NBC News coverage exactly as it happened 25 years ago. It is remarkable television, a painful reminder for those who were there then and an eye-opening trip back for those who can't understand how a nation

could be so moved by one man and one bullet.

How things have changed. Gone are the pretty-faced air-head anchors who permeate television today. Missing are the fancy sets and techno-gizmos that overwhelm modern newsrooms. No videotape. No minicams. No live satellite feeds from distant cities.

There was only this: raw news, reported by seasoned journalists, emotions tempered by their sense of duty and by hope that somehow this was all a bad dream.

They used rotary-dial telephones and black-and-white cameras. The backdrop for the news set — plain wood paneling — looked more like the den of a mobile home than the heart of a television network.

Television, after all, was still a baby. It had just helped elect the first TV president and now for the first time it was covering an assassination. Soon TV would bury him.

At the helm were three anchormen in New York: Frank McGee, Chet Huntley and Bill Ryan. Robert MacNeil was in Dallas with the president and David Brinkley was in Washington, D.C.

The first bulletin said only that shots had been fired at the president's motorcade. Immediately there was chaos.

Information was spilling in from a wide array of sources: a congressman, a medical student, a Mrs. Jean Hill who lived at 9402 Bluff Creek in Dallas, a Secret Service man and a Roman Catholic priest.

Slowly, the story unfolded.

Kennedy was in the back seat of the presidential limousine with Jacqueline. A bouquet of yellow roses that had been presented to the first lady at the airport lay on the seat between them. Texas Gov. John Connally was sitting in a jump seat directly in front of Kennedy. The limo's bubble top was down. Then the shots came; three or four — witnesses couldn't agree. The limousine sped straight for Parkland Memorial Hospital, and journalists scrambled for telephones.

As the news spread, people turned not to radio but to television, the new trusted kid on the block. And at times, they got their news in the rawest form, as it was being delivered to the anchors.

Huntley is telling viewers about Kennedy's speech in Fort Worth when a telephone light blinks on the anchor desk. McGee answers.

"Yes, we will," he says. "This is security. NBC News. Put Mr. MacNeil on, please. Hello, Bob."

TV, B-7 ▶



## TV

► From B-1

Are you there? This is Frank McGee. Bob, I'm at (studio) 5 HN. We're on the air. Would you take it from the top, Bob, and tell us everything you know. ..."

But there is a problem with the telephone and McGee must repeat MacNeil's report.

"Bob is at the hospital in Dallas ... where the president has been rushed ... the president is seriously wounded ..."

The president remains in the emergency room while Connally is moved to a general operating room. Huntley speculates, "That would indicate in just a sort of snap-judgment evaluation that Governor Connally was worse injured than the president."

Another interruption. All the news came as interruptions. Each new snippet was more important than the previous one.

NBC New York switches to its Dallas/Fort Worth affiliate for a report from Charles Murphy. "Just moments ago, authorities in Dallas took a young man into custody ..." and then the sound went dead.

"This is a time as what would probably be best described as controlled panic," Ryan tells viewers, apologizing for the technical problems.

Then the first real chunk of hard news: an interview with an eyewitness, Mrs. Jean Hill.

"We took one look at him and he was sitting there. He and Jackie were looking at a dog in the middle of the street. At about that time, two shots rang out just as the president looked up. He grabbed his chest. He looked like he was in pain. Jackie fell on him and said, 'My God. He's been shot.' After that more shots rang

## TV lines up Kennedy specials

Other programs airing this week commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination:

► "Kennedys Don't Cry," family portrait of America's aristocratic dynasty on Arts & Entertainment cable network. 6-8 tonight.

► "On Trial: Lee Harvey Oswald," five-hour TV trial hosted by Geraldo Rivera, featuring real attorneys, judge and witnesses on KTLA-Channel 5. 7-10 tonight, 8-10 tomorrow night.

► "JFK — That Day in November," NBC News special

featuring remembrances by the public and reporters. 10-11 tonight.

► ABC's "Nightline," Judd Rose reports on power and potency of the Kennedy mystique, exploitation of the Kennedy name, plus the myth vs. reality. KABC-Channel 7. 11:30-midnight tonight.

► A&E's "JFK Assassination: As It Happened," featuring six hours of NBC News coverage, repeats Saturday, beginning at 7:56 a.m.

► "JFK: The Presidency," airs on A&E on Sunday, 5-6 p.m.

out and the car sped away. The shots came from the hill."

A call goes out from the hospital for surgeons and a Roman Catholic priest. Last rites are administered. Vice President Lyndon Johnson is at the hospital. His wife appears to be in shock. The president's brothers head to Andrews Air Force Base to hop a plane for Texas.

McGee talks. "In just this momentary lull I would assume that the memory of every person has flashed back to that day in April 1945 when Franklin Delano Roosevelt ..."

"Excuse me, Frank," interrupts Ryan. "Here is a flash from the Associated Press, datelined Dallas: Two priests who were with President Kennedy say he is dead of bullet wounds. There is no further confirmation."

Confirmation comes quickly, though there is much left unanswered.

A policeman has been shot two

miles from the assassination scene. A man has been arrested. His name: Lee Harvey Oswald.

Reaction pours in. Pope John Paul VI, Winston Churchill, senators, congressmen all express shock and sympathy.

Ryan gets a copy of the speech Kennedy was to deliver in Dallas and reads the last few paragraphs. "... We in this country in this generation are by destiny rather than choice the watchmen on the walls of world freedom. We ask therefore that we may be worthy of our power and responsibility, that we may achieve in our time and for all time the ancient vision of peace on Earth."

For six straight hours the NBC anchors deliver amid chaos. Few mistakes are made. There are no breathers, no commercials. "We remind you once again that NBC's regular programs have been canceled for the remainder of this broadcast day," McGee says.

Later, McGee says what many

Television, after all, was still a baby. It had just helped elect the first TV president and now for the first time it was covering an assassination.

people now know: "It is safe enough to say ... that this afternoon wherever you were and whatever you might have been doing when you received the word of the death of President Kennedy, that is a moment that will be emblazoned in your memory. And you will never forget it as long as you live."

Finally, there are live pictures. The jet carrying the remains of a man who once was president, as well as his successor, lands at Andrews. The casket is removed. Mrs. Kennedy is helped into the Navy ambulance. And the nation hears the first public words from a new president.

"This is a sad time for all people," Johnson says. "We have suffered a loss that cannot be weighed. For me it is a deep personal tragedy. I know that the world shares the sorrow that Mrs. Kennedy and her family bear. I will do my best. That is all I can do. I ask for your help. And God's."

In that moment it was done. A man who lived for peace died by the weapons of war. There was much to report in the days ahead. But in that whisper of time America would change forever. A dream would be shattered. Peace would have to wait awhile.