

25 Years After the Death of Kennedy, Dallas Looks at Its Changed Image

By PETER APPLEBOME

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DALLAS, Nov. 19 — Twenty-five years later there it is, perhaps the most withering question an American city has faced, leaping off the cover of *D*, a Dallas magazine: "Did Dallas Kill Kennedy?"

But as Dallas residents take stock of their most painful moment, they see a city that has been both utterly transformed and yet is somehow much the same, a stubbornly distinctive place that has played a disproportionately large role in the national imagination.

Few people here or elsewhere blame Dallas anymore for the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963. If the anniversary is an unavoidable point for reflection, the mirror it provides reflects not just the changes in this city, but in the nation as well.

"A lot of the criticism of Dallas in the wake of the assassination was a nation looking in the mirror and not liking what it saw," said Rob Tranchin, a Dallas filmmaker, who is doing research for a film on the aftermath of the assassination. "When the 60's developed and the riots and the assassinations hit, a lot of people came to think, 'Hey, it's not Dallas. It's us.'"

Few American cities have come under the kind of national scorn that befell Dallas in the days and weeks after President Kennedy died here. The city found itself widely condemned as a "city of hate." Residents of Dallas recall being refused service at restaurants in other parts of the country or facing gratuitous insults when their home became known.

James Pennebaker, a psychologist at Southern Methodist University, recently completed a study showing that suicide, murder and heart disease death rates in Dallas increased markedly in the year after the assassination and that many city residents still exhibit the symptoms of victims of socially unacceptable acts like rape.

His research found Dallas natives think about the assassination more often than newcomers or outsiders.

The intense blame was not just because of the assassination or the nightmarish aftermath in which Jack Ruby, a Dallas nightclub owner, shot and killed Lee Harvey Oswald, the suspected assassin.

A History of Incidents

In November 1960, four days before the Presidential election, Mr. Kennedy's running mate, Lyndon B. Johnson, was accosted, jeered and spat on

by a crowd of Republican women in downtown Dallas. In October 1963 Adlai E. Stevenson, then the United States Ambassador to the United Nations, was met by angry right wing demonstrators, one of whom hit him on the head with a placard denouncing the United Nations.

It did not matter that Mr. Oswald, a Marxist, was politically the opposite of everything Dallas was supposed to be or that Dallas's leadership desperately wanted a successful Presidential visit to counteract the embarrassment of the Stevenson incident.

Dallas for years was blamed for President Kennedy's death in a way that never linked Los Angeles to Robert F. Kennedy's assassination or Memphis to Martin Luther King.

"It was totally unfair," said Tom James, who was a Dallas lawyer then and now is chairman of the Dallas County Republican Party. Referring to the incidents involving Mr. Johnson and Mr. Stevenson, Mr. James said, "Those other two incidents were so widely publicized that when the ultimate tragedy struck, the three were linked together when there was no linkage at all."

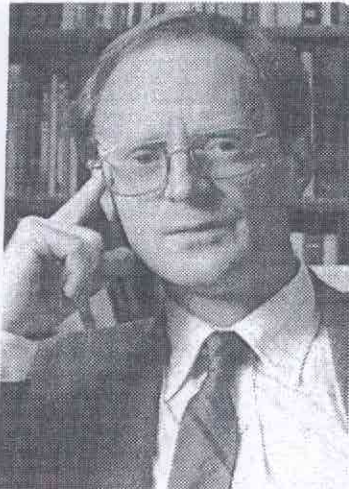
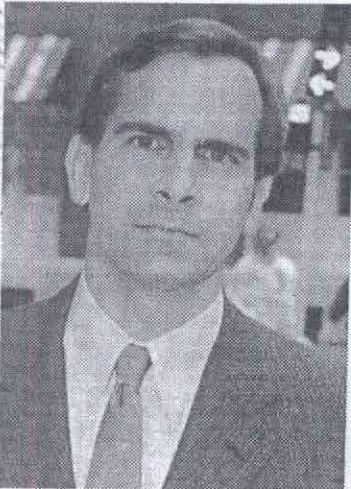
But if few today blame Dallas for President Kennedy's death, there are many who recall that Dallas was an overly insular city, where an ugly extremism was allowed to fester.

'A Very Mean Streak'

"Dallas did have a very mean streak," said Marshall Terry, an English professor at Southern Methodist University who remembers battles in the early 1960's to bring dissenting voices to the campus.

The excesses of the time have passed, partly as a result of the shock to Dallas's psyche caused by the assassination. But some things have not changed much. Dallas still has a fiercely competitive, deeply conservative, civic and political culture. Even with its current economic downturn, it still has an almost imperial optimism about its own economic prospects. And to some it is still a place with a tough world view that has been slow to address social problems.

But just as the dingy warehouses down the street from the red brick building that used to be called the Texas School Book Depository have been turned into trendy, neon-lit shops, clubs and eateries, the city has been transformed by growth, an influx of newcomers and changing times.



The New York Times

Judge Lee Jackson, left, has been among those heading the effort to install an exhibit in the former depository. James Pennebaker, a Southern Methodist University psychologist, recently completed a study showing that suicide, murder and heart disease death rates in Dallas increased markedly in the year after the assassination.



The New York Times/Jarrod Cabluck

The building that used to be called the Texas School Book Depository, at left, from which Lee Harvey Oswald allegedly fired the shots that killed President Kennedy.

Few American cities have faced the same kind of national blame.

Twenty-five years ago it was a city of 679,000. It was 75 percent white and dominated a metropolitan area of 1.7 million people. Now less than half the million or so residents of Dallas are white, and it dominates a metropolitan area of 3.7 million people.

Most of the powerful banks and Dallas-based businesses that once dominated the city no longer are controlled locally due to mergers or economic distress.

And the business oligarchy that ran Dallas and nurtured its business-knows-best attitude has grudgingly given way to a more open political structure. The city now has a Jewish woman as mayor and black men as city manager and superintendent of schools.

Changing With the Times

"The day that Kennedy was killed, I was a bartender out at Brookhaven Country Club," said Councilman Al Lipscomb, a black. "And today I'm sitting at the same table at times with the man who owns the club. I couldn't in all

truthfulness say it's the same city today as it was then."

Dallas is looking back on the traumas of 1963 at perhaps its most wrenching time since then. Along with the economic downturn as a result of the collapse of oil and real estate prices have come bitter battles over police conduct and civilian oversight of the Police Department and angry racial confrontations on the City Council. At one point last summer there was widespread fear the city was on verge of racial violence.

"Dallas has had a hard time making the transition to a modern city," said Lawrence Wright, whose book, "In The New World," is partly a memoir of growing up in Dallas. "It's the last big city in America to bring minorities and women into power and it did it more clumsily than any other city."

In the Mainstream

At least one other thing has changed as well. In 1963, Dallas's strident conservatism was regarded as far out of the mainstream. The Dallas Morning News was viewed then as almost off the political scale because of its incessant columns assailing liberal judges and the American Civil Liberties Union. The newspaper now has a less overheated, more mainstream conservative approach.

Now, as shown in the Presidential election, the nation's political center, both geographically and ideologically, has shifted closer to where Dallas is. In

1963 the mere mention of Dallas was loaded with negative connotations. In 1988 George Bush repeatedly used the phrase "Governor of Massachusetts" to paint a negative image for the voters of the South and West.

"One reason Dallas is not as angry as it was is that it has real power now," Mr. Wright said. Judge Lee Jackson of Dallas County has been among those heading an effort to raise money to install a historical exhibit about the assassination on the sixth floor of the building where Lee Harvey Oswald allegedly fired the shots that killed President Kennedy.

The slow progress of the fund raising indicates just how sensitive the assassination remains. But many feel the exhibit and the passage of time could exorcise the last remaining demons from 1963. A national poll commissioned by The Dallas Morning News found that only 11 percent of respondents listed the assassination as the first or second association they had with the city, down from 23 percent just five years ago. Only 4 percent said conditions in Dallas contributed to the assassination.

"The next significant anniversary will be the 50th," said A. C. Greene, a Dallas historian. "By then, I suspect we'll talk about Dallas the same way we talk about Sherman's march to the sea. Even the grandchildren or great-grandchildren of those who remember it can't really feel any movement of the spirit about it now."