JFK: The Man And the Maybes

25 Years of an American Obsession

By Henry Allen
Washington Post Staff Writer

If Jack Kennedy had lived . . .

It's horrible to imagine the change. He'd be 71 now. His neck would be swollen like Frank Sinatra's, his gorgeously hooded eyes would be so fleshy they'd look tired and sly. His hair would seem old-fashioned, an anachronism from the '60s the way Ronald Reagan's hair is an anachronism from the '40s. He'd have the quality of a relic, like Richard Helms or Robert McNamara when you see them around town.

Who knows? Maybe he'd have made a great elder statesman, like Averell Harriman or Clark Clifford. Maybe he'd be one of those institutions people stand up to applaud without quite remembering why, like Helen Hayes. But he wouldn't be Jack Kennedy, our Jack Kennedy.

In 1982, John Gregory Dunne wrote that "there are no new facts about the Kennedys, only new attitudes." Instead of growing old and fat, Kennedy has come to hover in our collective psyche like a hologram, three-dimensional and eerily transparent, the generic man of destiny, the template of the bright-young-man-as-public-figure. He is an idea.

By 1984, Ronald Reagan could get away with invoking Kennedy like motherhood or the flag. Ronald Reagan! The essence of the rumpus room Republican, the small-town power-of-positive-thinker, everything that Kennedy had promised to liberate us from! By 1988, Bush had claimed Kennedy's foreign policy, Dukakis had his haircut, Quayle had his youth and Bentsen had his friendship. Everybody was grabbing for a piece of him in a feeding frenzy that finally left Bentsen snapping at Quayle in the most memorable line of the campaign: "You're no Jack Kennedy."

Who was?

The Kennedy we knew has become the Kennedyesque we know. As in: Gary Hart and Jack Kemp in politics, Ted Koppel on television, Martin Sheen in the movies and Bob Forehead in the comic strip "Washingtoon." As in the movie "The Candidate." Or Hart adopting that hand-in-jacket-pocket gesture Kennedy used to make. As in a million massive-forelock haircuts, such as Richard Gephardt's, all those baby-grand smiles like John Tun-

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ney's and the calculated breeziness of John Kerry. As in whatever it was that George Bush saw in Dan Quayle.

If Kennedy had lived, all the Esques wouldn't be around, or if they were, Kennedy would be laughing at them the way he laughed toward the end of his life, showing some lower teeth, the sides of his mouth stretching out far enough that the corners turned down a little, not just sardonic but self-consciously sardonic. That was part of his charm—the tease, the magician saying "it's only smoke and mirrors" and then making you believe it anyway. Kennedy once said: "Bobby and I smile sardonically. Teddy will learn how to smile sardonically in two or three years, but he doesn't know how yet."

The odd thing about the Kennedyesquery has been that we want the style but not the substance. Lyndon Johnson never understood this. When some of the Kennedy faithful attacked Johnson like children attacking their widowed mother's new boyfriend—as if no one else had a right to carve the roast or put up the Christmas tree—

he got so frustrated. Wasn't he not only telling them bedtime stories of the New Frontier, but actually taking them out there and putting them on horseback? *That wasn't the point.* What about the civil rights legislation? The space program? What about all the other presidents who pitted themselves against the bureaucracy with the aid of a band of brothers, in the mode of the Kennedy White House: Ehrlichman and Haldeman, Carter's Georgians, the conservative true believers, whatever it took to get things done. *Not the point.*

We seem to resent not only success where Kennedy failed, but the idea of anybody else having those ideas at all. Jack Newfield of The Village Voice attacked Johnson as the "Antichrist." And ever since, as the smiles and haircuts have proliferated, we have resisted comparisons of substance. Ronald Reagan may go to his grave wondering how Kennedy people could hate him for cutting taxes and raising military spending at the same time. And Washington is still full of Kennedy people waiting for the restoration or the resurrection with the ennobling fury of exiles who never feel the need to explain

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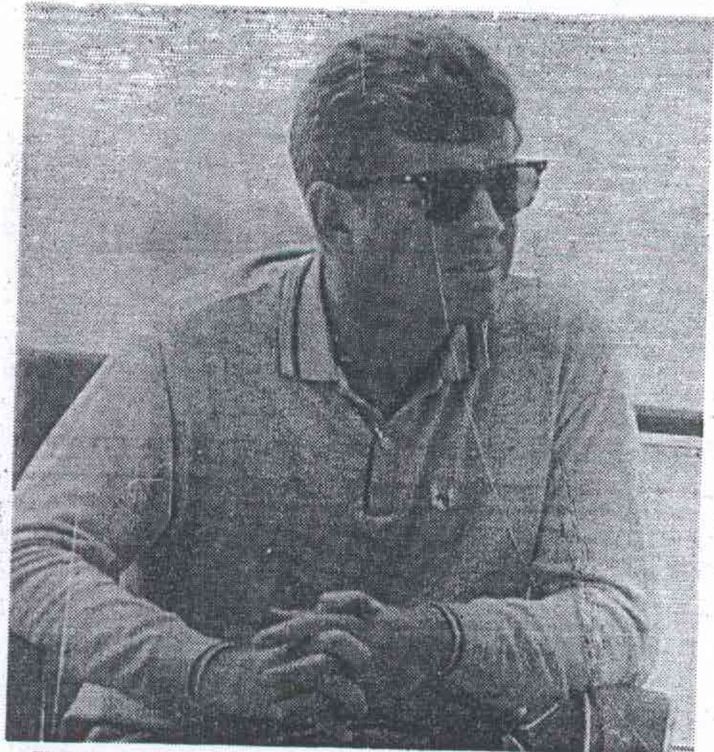


. . . The only president who ever looked right in sunglasses.

anything to anybody—aging Hamlets in pin-striped suits, best and bright at law firms and dinner parties and endless book signings, people who had once hoped to constitute what James Reston hailed as "a new class of public servants who move about in the triangle of daily or periodic journalism, the university or foundation, and government service."

The Kennedy White House spawned a giddy elitism based on a blend of potential, a look and a certain crispness of attitude, as if the principles of undergraduate popularity had been inflated into a political philosophy. The Kennedy people were too fast for the State Department, too smart for Congress. There was a premise that one or two acutely excellent people in the right place at the right time could change the world, either Peace Corps style or James Bond style. It was a government of "informal consultation, anti-bureaucratic, round-the-clock vigils, the crash program, the hasty decision, the quick phone call," as Victor Navasky has written. Much slamming of phones and smoking of little cigars. Much conspicuous intelligence, which is the ultimate value of the rational, objective man of the future. "There's nothing like brains," Kennedy said once. "You can't beat brains."

It was as if he were an ironic messiah scaring us out of our middle-class Eisenhower complacency, as if a prophet had been written into the score of "West Side Story"—"I got a feeling there's a miracle due, gonna come true, coming to me. Around the corner, or whistling down the river, come on, deliver . . ." If existentialists had saints, he might be one, finding truth, as he did, in action, not contemplation—finding it in action for the sake of action, too. In a campaign speech, he said: "I don't run for president in the 1960s because I think it will be an easy time. I don't. I think it will be a very dangerous time for us all."

Much has been made of authenticity, Camelot, Weberian concepts of charisma and so on: the wit, the cool, the Irishness, the aristocracy, the family man, the Regency rake, the war hero, the media manipulator, and our nostalgia for an era when everything was possible and nothing was quite real. But what lingers like an instinct in the backbrain of American culture is more basic.

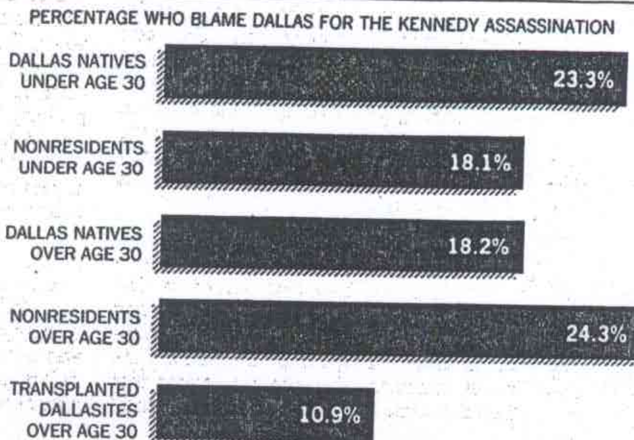
To begin with, he was madly good looking.

When you watch him now on television, 25 years after his assassination, it feels like your head moves when you follow him across the screen. Lovely: He runs on a lawn during a touch football game, enthralled with the chaos downfield; or campaigning on a Boston street, he turns away from an old couple and flicks his hand back toward the man as if to say everything from "Thanks" to "You and me, pal" to "We'll be looking for you at the polling place." Perfect. It was the kind of move Richard Nixon never, ever made. Not once.

Six feet one-half inch tall, 170 pounds when he died. Brown hair, blue eyes. That slight hunch to his shoulders, increasing with age and the pain of his back problems, a posture that gives him a preoccupied air, which in turn makes whatever he's doing look as if his attention just has been caught, a gift.

A fabulous head. Like California hot rods of the early '60s, the scalp raked forward, a muscular momentum with no particular destination. Going my way? His eyes squinted a little, as if in surprise or second thought, and a slice of white showed under the irises. The eyelids sloped into crinkles suggesting anything from exhaustion to delight, whatever you wanted to read into them. He was one of those rare men on whom eye bags look good—a piquant contrast to his teen-ager's hair line—and he was the only president who ever looked right in sunglasses, which he wore a lot, tapping into the iconography of the Age of Cool, when sunglasses suggested a fashionable alienation. The lips were just full enough to hint at insolence, and his smile was thrillingly ambiguous, 4,000 teeth placed in just such a way that his S's would whistle a little, yet another of his arresting little acutenesses, along with that strange accent that for all the fat flatness of the vowels seemed to be in a hurry anyway. The chin was terrific, curving out and a little up, as if the whole face might just lift off and go soaring away all by itself, any second.

A dangerous face. It had moments of stillness that were a little menacing, or a little sly, as if he had a piece of gum in his mouth and didn't want to be seen chewing it. A face that looked to see if you knew what the joke was, and if you didn't, the joke was on you. The happily self-conscious face of a man posing for a portrait between phone calls. The kind of face that makes you want to attract its attention, like a glamorous zoo animal. A smile that could turn in an instant—Carl Kaysen, one of Kennedy's national security advisers, remembers how Kennedy would reach up with his finger and tap one of those teeth with impatience.



NOTE: Charts are based on data compiled by James Pennebaker from telephone interviews with 400 people: 200 from Dallas, 100 from other parts of Texas and 100 from out of state.

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Ultimately a totally public face. Sometimes there's an accidental quality to the sighting of someone famous, like Jack Nicholson in a restaurant, for instance. It's like seeing a deer run across the road. Wow! you say. Not so with Kennedy. I saw him only once, at the Hyannis airport after he'd won the Democratic nomination. There was nothing accidental about him—it was like seeing a billboard, not a deer.

But as soon as he started working an audience there was a pure animal speed to him, pure instinct. This is part of the image, too. At a White House press conference shown on television recently, he is asked why he has a band-aid on his finger. The smile. He hesi-

tates, but not because it's none of the reporters' business. Instead, it seems he hesitates to show them he knows it's none of their business but he'll tell them anyway. He calculates for a microsecond. He knows that even if he tells the truth they'll suspect he lied. He savors this idea—what can they do about it, after all, and besides, maybe an obvious fib would be more charming than the truth.

He says, "I cut it while I was slicing bread . . . unbelievable as it may sound."

He lifts the hand to show it to them as an afterthought, a *conspicuous* afterthought, a gift, not an obligation. He knew where the press ranked. He once said: "The press is a very valuable arm of the presidency."

As a member of the upper class, he had grown up amid the received wisdom of long-settled questions. It was an atmosphere in which instinct counted for a lot in weaving through the subtleties: how the in-crowds and the out-crowds are shaping up, where the party is, where the money is, who's got what and who doesn't, how and when to get a little slack. Gesture was everything. A certain smile, a certain face could get you through.

If you liked Kennedy, back then (or watching him now), you could come away from the television feeling as you might have after a Cary Grant movie—as if his grace, his quickness, his easy startlement and intelligence had transformed your walk and smile, conferring an intoxicating self-consciousness, like the first whiskey of the day. Then you'd trip over the dog or say something stupid and feel it fall away from you.

As Kennedy once said: "We couldn't survive without television."

On the other hand, if you disliked him, was it out of objective analysis or your envy of his charm? Being annoyed by people who were infatuated with Kennedy was easy, but you worried that in arguing with them you turned yourself into the sort of monstrous fogy who counsels young girls for their own good, advising them to break off love affairs that are, in fact, going to hurt them.

For a lot of us, Jack Kennedy managed to exist at precisely the point where love and hate converge. Almost everything written about him is touched with infatuation, resentment or both, from the praise of Schlesinger and Sorensen to the nastiness, soap opera and psychoanalysis of books like Nancy Gager Clinch's "The Kennedy Neurosis" or "The Kennedys: An American Drama" by Peter Collier and David Horowitz, not to mention the canon of conspiracy theorists who have created an image of American Evil just as the American public has created the image of Kennedy. (If Kennedy was a demigod, wouldn't it take a demi-demon to kill him?)

There were successes: pushing back the U.S. Steel price hike, the Peace Corps, the Cuban missile crisis, the test-ban treaty, the enfranchisement of the intellectuals—he wasn't afraid of bumpkin opprobrium for being seen with André Malraux or Robert Frost. Also, Kennedy looked comfortable in white tie and tails, and he could shake hands with Charles de Gaulle without making us worry that he'd embarrass us.

But the failures were big: the Bay of Pigs, the Berlin Wall, the lies about Vietnam. Later would come the scandals: his chronically adolescent sex life, the Castro assassination plan and his tendency to go slumming, politically speaking, with Mafia types. Only the young die good, as it happens in the real world, and he was young, but not that young.

We don't forgive his failures as much as we ignore them. They are as irrelevant by now as his successes. Like gods or royalty, the fallen Kennedy wasn't accountable, he just *was*. As early as 1961, Kenneth Crawford wrote in Newsweek, under the title "Royalty USA," that "We don't like to have our symbols making mistakes, so we don't acknowledge that they make them." As time went along, and we kept working on the image in our minds, we dumped his faults on other members of his family—Teddy became the irresponsible, shallow one, Bobby was ruthless, and Jackie had all of the moral debits of the upper class.

Good arguments can still be had on what Kennedy might have done if he'd lived: made peace with the Russians, pulled out of Vietnam, passed the social legislation that Lyndon Johnson twisted arms to get. No matter. As far as the facts go, the revisionists have been revised and revised again. No likely end will bring him loss or leave us happier than before. We've even forgiven Jackie for marrying Aristotle Onassis, that shuffling human twilight of a man, Jabba the Hutt with a private yacht, the image of a devourer of virgins and beautiful widows. At the time, there was a popular rumor that explained it away: Jackie married him, it was said, because Kennedy was still alive, though a vegetable, and Onassis could hide him on his island where Jackie could be with him. Such are the many little corners of Valhalla.

There is a sacred glow to Kennediana. A recent "Nova" program titled "Who Shot President Kennedy?" quotes a doctor on why no autopsy was done at Parkland Hospital in Dallas: "That would have been a little sacrilegious, I think, under the circumstances." As Walter Cronkite describes reports of a mysterious change in caskets, along with the fact that Kennedy's brain is still missing, it's hard not to hear echoes: *The stone was rolled away . . . we know not where they have laid Him.* Then Phil Ochs sings a song called "Crucifixion."

What else but archetypal emotion can explain 34 percent of Americans saying in a September poll that Kennedy had been the "most effective" president since World War II, compared with 17 percent for Truman, 14 for Reagan and 3 for Lyndon Johnson, and 21 percent saying Kennedy was the best president *ever*, with Franklin Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln running second at 17 percent each?

The facts don't support this degree of unambiguous enthusiasm. Neither did the image he had during his lifetime.

There were so many contradictions. Kennedy was an aristocrat, an ethnic, a liberal civil-rightser, a conservative tax cutter. He was a young man with more diseases, pain and disability than any of the old men who have served as president since Roosevelt. He was known for both sleeping through concerts and being an intellectual. He derided Nixon for having "no class," but on the night of the 1960 presidential primary in West Virginia, he relaxed by watching a soft-core dirty movie in downtown Washington. He was a war hero whose brother Bobby would find it profoundly courageous of him to cancel a subscription to the New York Herald Tribune: "He did it deliberately and was glad. He was happy that he did it afterward. And he didn't cut off and sneak off, sneak away somewhere and read it."

All Kennedy's infatuees ever needed was an excuse to love him. And they remember him still the way a middle-aged wife and mother lies awake at night remembering a boy who rode his motorcycle into a bridge abutment, and how her father couldn't figure out why she cried so hard, she'd only gone out with him a couple of times, and he was never going to amount to that much

anyway.

Ah, youth. You watch that gray footage of the casket being unloaded from Air Force One, of Jackie moving with the bewildered clumsiness of grief, and you feel the random, empty quality of things. It feels like now, you think—that's when *now* began. It is plain that before Kennedy was shot, everything was different: The colors were brighter, the world was smaller and full of purpose. Snug. Wrapped like a trick knee with the Ace bandage of intention.

This is not true—chaos and oblivion are always leering from the shadows. What began with Kennedy's assassination was not the present but the past. Bruce Duffy, who lives in Takoma Park and wrote a novel called "The World as I Found It," said recently: "I was home sick when I heard he was shot. My mother had died the year before, and Kennedy's death was especially painful because it had the effect of moving her farther away from me. It put her into a whole different era."

This is not an age of character, but of personality, and Kennedy gave us that. This is also not an age of darkness but of glare, as a poet has said, and Kennedy gave us that too.

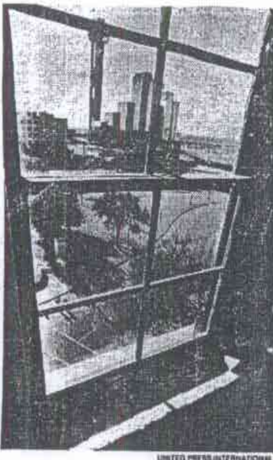
In the long view, he was a warlike young man of great charm, ambition and propensity for getting himself in trouble. We have a niche for men like that—Alexander, Alcibiades, Charles XII of Sweden, Napoleon, to mention the grander figures. Kennedy promised nothing less when he said of the American people in 1960, "They want to know what is needed—they want to be led by the commander in chief."

Who knows if he would have delivered? All we can do is believe.

As Lyndon Johnson said of Bobby Kennedy: "I almost wish he had become president so the country could finally see a flesh-and-blood Kennedy grappling with the daily work of the presidency and all the inevitable disappointments, instead of their storybook image of great heroes who, because they were dead, could make anything anyone wanted happen."

Anything anyone wanted—if Jack Kennedy wasn't that then, he is now.

Dallas and the Lingering Trauma



UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

The view from the sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository.

By David Maraniss
Washington Post Staff Writer

DALLAS

Did Dallas kill Kennedy? Twenty-five years later, that question still rings in this city, and not as just another conspiracy theory. No one blames Washington for the deaths of Lincoln and Garfield, or Buffalo for the assassination of McKinley, yet in Dallas the notion of guilt, deserved or not, lingers in the headlines of local magazines and in the consciences of the citizens.

It has been said that past events become history when the public forgets the details. America has not yet let go of the details of that afternoon a quarter-century ago today.

As part of a recent psychology experiment, James Pennebaker, an associate professor at Southern Methodist University, questioned 200 Dallas natives and an equal number of outsiders about the assassination. About 25 percent of the outsiders over age 30 (old enough to remember Nov. 22, 1963) said they still blame

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Dallas for what happened. Eighteen percent of the Dallas natives agreed with that assessment, but an overwhelming number, 79 percent, believed that the rest of the world still holds them responsible.

Pennebaker said he became interested in the issue of blame as part of a larger study on the effects of socially unacceptable trauma. He contends that cities react to traumatic events much as individuals do, and that, as a rule, it is healthier for them to confront than to repress. His studies noted, for instance, that death rates from suicide, murder and heart disease rose markedly in Dallas in the years after the assassination, during a time when the city seemed determined to repress the tragedy.

"From the moment I moved here [in 1983], it struck me that people don't talk a lot about the assassination," Pennebaker said. "It's almost a forbidden topic. Even on the 'Dallas' TV show, I can't recall them ever mentioning it, and I consider that sort of symbolic of the civic attitude.

"I remember when I first got here, I went downtown to look at the site and there were no markers, and you couldn't get in the building [the Texas School Book Depository, from where Lee Harvey Oswald is said to have fired down on the president]. But then my studies showed that people here think about it all the time. They could not forget it, yet they would not deal with it."

That civic repression is about to change, with the transformation of the sixth floor of the old schoolbook building into a $3.5 million exhibit featuring films, 400 photographs, artifacts and interpretive displays on the cultural context of John F. Kennedy's death. The museum, operated by the Dallas County Historical Foundation, will give a preview showing today and officially opens early next year. As it nears completion, some of the responses to it have made Dallasites feel that they cannot win no matter what they do.

First, they were blamed for killing Kennedy. Then they were accused of trying to repress the event, and now some people are saying it is ghoulish to turn the assassin's lair into a shrine. Earlier this year, an official from the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, while not speaking for his institution or for the Kennedy family, expressed revulsion at the idea of the exhibit.

But there is a difference between facing up to history and exploiting tragedy, no matter how unpleasant the history might be. Dallas leaders have known for years that the depository, Dealey Plaza, the grassy knoll and that stretch of Elm Street leading down to the shadows of the underpass were, despite the lack of historical markers, perhaps the most heavily visited tourist spots in town.

Since county officials bought the depository in 1977 and turned it into an administration building, they have kept a guest book in the first-floor lobby. The thousands of names in that book, and the outpouring of emotional comments about Kennedy that accompany the names, provided ample proof, year after year, that the place was turning into a shrine without any government encouragement or recognition.

"What we're dealing with is a demand for information about an important event in American history that is all too confusing," said Conover Hunt, curator of the Sixth Floor Exhibit, as it will be known. "Dallas had to face up to that demand and do it in a positive way. We are doing it by using history as a teaching tool. Ford's Theatre in Washington, the USS Arizona at Pearl Harbor, Gettysburg in Pennsylvania, the Vietnam memorial—there are other tragic sites in the annals of our history. The audiences keep coming, and in part, they come to let go of a memory."

Hunt said the museum on Elm Street in downtown Dallas will be nonviolent. A segment of the famous Abraham Zapruder film of the Kennedy motorcade will be shown, but it will not include the frames in which Kennedy is hit by bullets. The southeast corner window, where the assassin is thought to have crouched, will be recreated to include boxes similar to those he might have leaned on, but his rifle will not be there, nor any of the spent cartridges, and the window will not be accessible to visitors. Although the location of the exhibit in effect endorses the official findings that Oswald killed Kennedy, other theories on the assassination will be included in the displays.

"We lay it all out and let the public draw conclusions," Hunt said. "The challenge here is to be fair, unbiased."

One of her hopes for the museum, Hunt said, was that it would have a cathartic effect on visitors somewhat like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. Pennebaker and Nels Paine, one of his psychology students, registered feelings of that sort recently in an experiment that they conducted with 25 people who were taken up to the sixth floor and asked to look out several windows including, finally, the southeast window. The people were hooked up to a device that measured nervousness—which increased markedly when they looked out from the rifleman's window.

Afterward, they were asked to "briefly describe your thoughts and feelings as you looked out the window from where Oswald shot Kennedy." Their responses, identified here by the hometown of each respondent,

reveal the many powerful meanings of this day, in this city and across the country and around the world:

- Toronto: "He didn't do it."
- Houston: "I thought about how he had a clear view to shoot President Kennedy."
- Belfast: "Nervous, sad and a little dizzy."
- San Francisco: "Sadness. How can this happen? What went through this man's mind? We are a country full of extreme violence—will we ever change?"
- London: "I still feel great anger and suspicion regarding the killings of both J.F. Kennedy and Oswald. There are so many unanswered questions. I feel America has a great burden of shame to carry still."
- Appleton, Wis.: "I was somewhat nervous—the whole incident is like a blurry nightmare after all these years. I am grateful to have had the chance to see this because I probably will never get to see this again. I don't like to travel much. I understand some of the area right around this spot has changed since the assassination."
- Fort Worth: "Every other window had an unearthy, hollow gray starkness—but there was greenery and life outside that window [Oswald's]. Somehow, I always look for a brighter future. I'm a perpetual optimist. Standing there was strange."
- Austin, Tex.: "I thought the assassination was tragic, senseless. I also thought that the shots were not that difficult with a slow-moving vehicle. Some vague uneasiness and sadness that is hard to define."
- East Prairie, Mo.: "Seems impossible that it actually happened. Totally irrational action that changed the future of our country."