

L.A. LIFE

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DAILY NEWS



PHIL ROSENTHAL

JFK

*Rather remembers
the tragic day
a nation can't forget*

NEW YORK — From the time he reported first word of wounded President John F. Kennedy's death in Dallas on Nov.



Rather

22, 1963, CBS News' Dan Rather has sought the last word on the subject.

"Ever since that moment, I've been intrigued and absorbed by both the story of the Kennedy presidency and the four dark days in Dallas," Rather

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said during a recent interview in his office, which overlooks the "CBS Evening News" set where he has presided since succeeding Walter Cronkite as anchorman 12 years ago.

"Many people tend to underestimate the promise of the Kennedy presidency, and it was a promise unfulfilled. Six seconds in Dallas left us with an eternal question. That question is, and will be, 'What might have been?'"

There were other questions raised as well, of course. They are the fodder for "CBS Reports: Who Killed JFK, the Final Chapter?" a methodical two-hour special set for 9 p.m. Friday that supports the original Warren Commission finding that Lee Harvey Oswald was Kennedy's assassin.

It is the sixth prime-time program on Kennedy's murder that Rather has led for CBS News. The first was in 1964, long before "the grassy knoll," "second gunman," "magic bullet" and "back and to the left" became part of the nation's vernacular. He doesn't believe this will be the last.

"I can get to be boring on the subject for some people," Rather said. "But the Kennedy years — and particularly the six seconds and the four days — this was something on a par with the ancient Greeks and Romans.

"You look at the Kennedy funeral cortege and you find yourself saying: 'This must be the way the Greeks did it. This must be the way the Persians and the Chinese a millennium ago did it.' That's part of what keeps me coming

back to it."

Rather, 62, was CBS News' Dallas-based southwestern bureau chief when Kennedy was shot. His original assignment that day was a scheduled meeting between Kennedy and former Vice President John Nance Garner, who was celebrating his 95th birthday. It never happened.

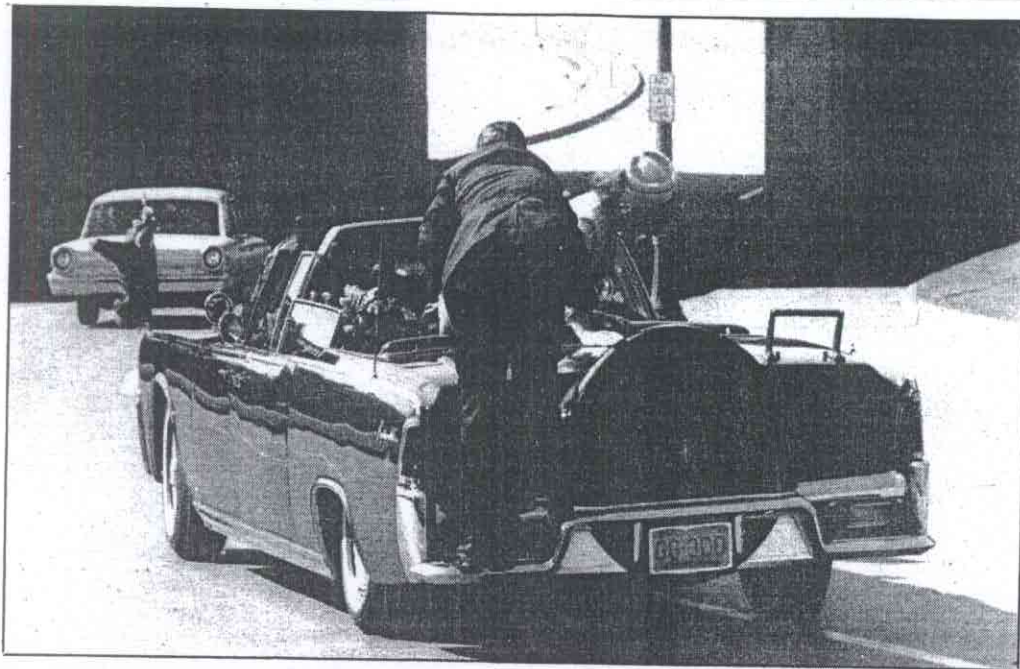
As soon as the shots rang out in Dealey Plaza, Rather became the network's on-site point man, offering cool, level-headed coverage over four sleepless days that would include the capture of Oswald, the murder of Oswald by nightclub owner Jack Ruby and Oswald's burial.

His report from Parkland Hospital that Kennedy had died, relayed by Cronkite, came several minutes before formal announcement from White House officials.

Rather would go on from the Kennedy assassination to cover nearly every major story of the next two decades for CBS, including the civil rights movement and assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Vietnam and Watergate. But for the reporter, "the greatest murder mystery of the 20th century" remains an unfinished story.

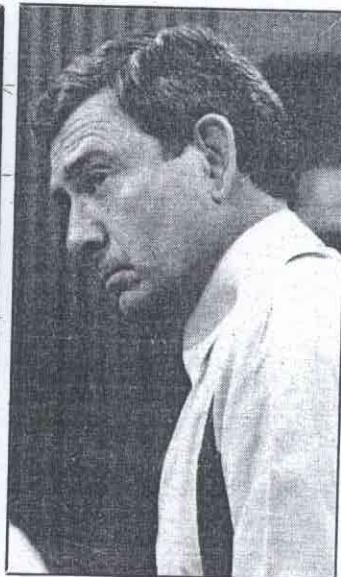
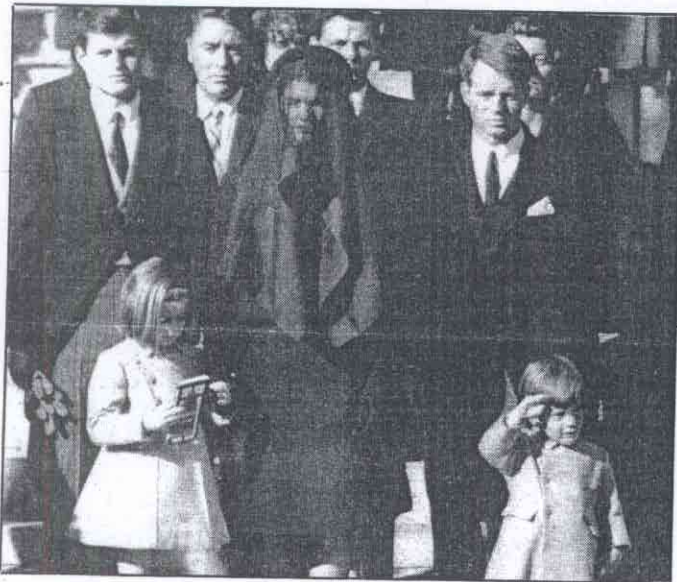
Rather does not claim to be an expert on what happened in Dallas 30 years ago, merely a student who now has spent nearly half his life examining and re-examining it with an open mind.

"The longer I go, the more I



Associated Press

"CBS Reports: Who Killed JFK, the Final Chapter?" is Dan Rather's sixth prime-time program on John F. Kennedy's murder.



"You look at the Kennedy funeral cortege and you find yourself saying: 'This must be the way the Greeks did it.' . . . That's part of what keeps me coming back to it," says Rather.

From Rather came the first word on President Kennedy's death.

think there are no experts on the assassination," Rather said. "Listen, an awful lot of people either don't know or have forgotten or refuse to recognize that there are facts about the Kennedy assassination. There are a lot of facts. Not everything is known. Some things may never be known, but there are some things that are.

"I spent eight years working a police beat at a time when one had to spend that kind of time as apprenticeship for your craft. You learn from detectives that if you've got a murder case, the first thing is you look at the physical evidence. There's quite a bit of physical evidence connected to the killing of President Kennedy."

While acknowledging that Dallas police botched several aspects of the case, the Warren Commission appointed by Lyndon Johnson probably made errors and the FBI and CIA were not as forthcoming with investigators as they should have been, Rather was unable to find solid evidence of the conspiracy that a recent CBS

News poll found most Americans believe occurred.

Ballistics tests conducted by CBS News not only show how it was possible for Oswald alone to have fired the shots that killed President Kennedy and wounded Texas Gov. John Connolly, but that it's likely the shots came from the sixth-floor window of the Texas Book Depository where Oswald reportedly was camped.

The magic of the so-called "magic bullet" theory is dissipated in the special, as is the credibility of those eyewitnesses who claim to have seen a second gunman.

Like those who believe in a conspiracy — whether tied to organized crime, the Soviet Union, Cuba, the U.S. government or some combination thereof — Rather relies heavily on Abraham Zapruder's home movie of the shooting.

It is a film Rather and CBS helped discover and helped to get developed. But they ultimately were outbid for it by Life magazine, which tied up the film exclu-

sively and kept it out of circulation for years.

"It was quite a long time before the film was run," said Rather, who saw the film once in '63 for CBS as part of the original bidding process.

"Individual frames were run in Life magazine. But were frames missing? Were frames out of order? All those questions could have gone by the board (had the film aired soon after the assassination).

"But it didn't work out that way. Life paid a ton of money for it and they protected it as their own exclusive, as they were entitled to do."

As a result, the Zapruder film has developed its own mystique in the intervening years and become the centerpiece of more than one conspiracy theory, including that of filmmaker Oliver Stone, whose assertions in "JFK" are discounted by Rather in the special as "conjectural, circumstantial and cinematic."

"Over and over again, people — whether it's to make a lecture,

THE FACTS

- **The show:** "CBS Reports: Who Killed JFK, the Final Chapter?"
 - **When:** 9 p.m. Friday.
 - **Channel:** KCBS (Channel 2).
 - **Host:** Dan Rather.
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make a film, make money, for glory or genuine intellectual curiosity — use the (Zapruder) film or distort the film for their own purposes," Rather said.

"If you accept, as I do, that the film is one of, if not THE best pieces of physical evidence, then it really behooves people to know what the best scientific methods, the best technology and the best scientific minds conclude that the film tells us."

Rather's methods, technology and minds contend the enhanced Zapruder film shows the shot came, not from the direction of the grassy knoll but from the depository behind the president's car. While upholding the original findings of the Warren Commission, it flies in the face of current

popular belief.

"Any number of people will tell you, 'Any idiot can look at the film and tell you that the shot came from the front,'" Rather said. "Hold it. Not true.

"The very best scientific minds — and the people who really know high-velocity weapons will tell you the film proves conclusively the direct opposite and here's why: Yes, it's true that you see the president's head blown back and to the left, which has become almost the mantra of some people. But look at the film. Just before that, the president's head moves forward.

"Anybody who understands high-velocity weapons understands that because it's a high-velocity bullet, the entry-hole is likely to be much smaller than the exit-hole, and what happens is a slight force forward and then, as it exits, whether it's a deer or a person, there's a tremendous blow-back."

There will always be too many unanswered questions to satisfy some, however. A CBS survey found that the younger a person is, the more likely he or she is to believe in a conspiracy theory. It is those theories that sustain interest in the events of Dallas that long

November weekend in 1963 even among those who do not remember where they were when they found out Kennedy was dead.

"The myth and legend of the Kennedy presidency — the six seconds and the four days — has taken such a life of its own," Rather said.

"A hundred years from now, a thousand years from now, people might be discussing it somewhat in the same way people discuss 'The Iliad.' Different people read Homer's description of the wars and come to different conclusions, and so shall it be with much about Kennedy's life and death."

For Rather, it is the odyssey of a lifetime.

Phil Rosenthal's column appears in the Daily News four days a week. He is too young to remember where he was when Kennedy was shot.
