

Washington Merry-Go-Round

Aides Fought Red Tape After Kennedy's Death

Bulletin By DREW PEARSON

Washington, Jan. 11—I was in Dallas on the tragic day President Kennedy was assassinated.

Since that time Jack Anderson and I have talked to various members of the Kennedy and Johnson staffs in order to get the facts regarding the friction and bitterness which William Manchester reports developed between Mrs. John F. Kennedy and President Johnson.

Unquestionably there was friction. Bitterness developed during the tense moments after the assassination. However, Manchester's book, "The Death of a President," tells only one side of the story.

Here is part of the other side:

First, friction occurred with the coroner in Dallas. Kenneth O'Donnell, secretary to Mr. Kennedy, and Brig. Gen. Godfrey McHugh, his Air Force aide, had been entrusted with the job of getting the slain President's body back to Washington. But the coroner refused to release it until he held an inquest.

Finally, O'Donnell and McHugh prevailed upon him. Then they had trouble with a Dallas city ordinance against carrying a casket in an ambulance. They had purchased a casket but found it was necessary to get a hearse.

It took about an hour to overcome local red tape and get Mr. Kennedy's body to the waiting plane.

Meanwhile, Air Force One, the presidential plane, had been waiting for the body. This delay was on the personal order of the new President, and contrary to the wishes of the Secret Service.

Emery Roberts, of the Secret Service staff, had ordered the plane to take off immediately. The Secret Service had no idea, in the confusion of Mr. Kennedy's death, whether there was a widespread plot against both the President and the Vice President and felt the new President would be safer in the air en route to Washington.

But Mr. Johnson ordered the plane to wait for Mr. Kennedy's body. Meanwhile, he telephoned Robert F. Kennedy, the attorney general, in Washington to ask for a legal opinion as to whether he should take the oath of office immediately or wait till he got

back to Washington. Kennedy did not reply immediately, but Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach called back to advise that Mr. Johnson should be sworn in immediately. If there was a national emergency while the plane was in the air, such as a missile attack on the United States, the President was the only person, as commander-in-chief, who could give the order to launch American missiles in retaliation.

Incidentally, Mr. Johnson addressed Bobby formally as "General Kennedy" during this and other conversations.

Secret Equipment

Jackie Kennedy expressed indignation in the original version

of the Manchester book that Mr. Johnson used her husband's plane. However, the plane contained secret electronic communications equipment which only the President could use in case of emergency. Mr. Johnson had flown to Dallas in the vice presidential plane, but it did not carry this equipment. The

Secret Service had decided that he must use Air Force One for the return journey in order to be able to use this equipment. Besides, he was now President.

After receiving word from the Justice Department that he should be sworn in in Dallas, Mr. Johnson sent for U. S. District Judge Sarah Hughes to administer the oath. Before she arrived, Mr. Kennedy's body was put aboard the plane, and McHugh told Malcolm Kilduff, press secretary, that O'Donnell wanted the plane to take off immediately.

McHugh was quite excited. He had rushed through the plane looking for Mr. Johnson and Mrs. Kennedy. He later said that he had found Mrs. Kennedy kneeling beside her dead husband, while Mr. Johnson was in the washroom changing his clothes.

But Kilduff told McHugh the plane could not take off.

"He may want to take off," Kilduff said, referring to O'Donnell, "but he isn't in charge any more. Mr. Johnson is now President."

O'Donnell, who two hours before had been the closest staff member to Mr. Kennedy and whose word was law, was bitter.

Later, as Mr. Kennedy's body was about to be removed from the plane in Washington, O'Donnell is reported to have blocked the new President in the plane's aisle so he could not disembark with the body.

Dignity and Sympathy

Various stories have been circulated regarding the tragic flight back to Washington. Mrs. Kennedy is reported as saying she objected to being called "Honey" and did not want Mr. Johnson near her; that she didn't want "that man to touch me."

According to Kilduff, the new President acted with dignity and sympathy.

"My hero was Jack Kennedy," Kilduff told me, "but Johnson acted with nothing except sympathy for a bereaved widow. He took over the situation with precision and dignity. He acted as a strong President must. He ordered certain meetings by telephone. He telephoned the late President's mother to tell her of the tragedy, and the late President's brother. These were not easy things to do. He did his best to help Mrs. Kennedy."

"There was an atmosphere of bleak silence on the plane going back," said one member of the Johnson staff. "You did not want to break the silence by touching a typewriter. You felt you were an intruder. Death of course was the intruder. © 1967.