



That Flight From Dallas

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Washington.
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. Jacqueline Kennedy and President Johnson.

Unquestionably there was friction. Bitterness developed during the tense moments after the assassination. But the Manchester book 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 Kennedy, and Brig. Gen. Godfrey McHugh, his Air Force aide, had been entrusted with the job of getting the 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 to get a hearse. It took about an hour to overcome red tape.

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Air Force One, the Presidential plane, had been waiting for Kennedy's body. This delay was on the order of the new President, and contrary to the wishes of the Secret Service, which thought there might be a widespread plot against both the President and the Vice President and felt the new President would be safer in the air.

Johnson meanwhile 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. Bobby Kennedy did not reply immediately. But Deputy Attorney General Katzenbach called back to advise that 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 U. S., the President was the only person who could give the order to launch American missiles.

Johnson sent for U. S. District Judge Sarah Hughes to administer the oath. While he was waiting for her to arrive, Kennedy's body was

put aboard the plane, and Gen. McHugh told Malcolm Kilduff, a press secretary, that Ken O'Donnell wanted the plane to take off immediately. McHugh was quite excited. He had rushed through the plane looking for Johnson and Mrs. Kennedy, later said that he had found Mrs. Kennedy kneeling beside her dead husband, while Johnson was in the washroom.

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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. Johnson is now President."

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

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

Various stories have been circulated regarding the tragic flight back to Washington. Mrs. Kennedy is reported saying she objected to being called "Honey" and did not want Johnson near her; that she didn't want "that man to touch me." It was also reported that Johnson had come back to the rear of the plane and smiled on the casket.

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."

"Did he smile on the plane?" Kilduff was asked.

Kilduff replied: "Paternaly and in sympathy. 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."