

THE ADVANCE MAN

Post
Daily
Magazine

ARTICLE III: Dallas.

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I WAS THE advance man for John Kennedy's trip to Dallas.

I don't guess there's a day when I don't think about it, keep seeing the route of the motorcade, the route we planned, the stop at the Trade Mart he never reached, the dinner that night in Austin that was supposed to end the trip.

I know that for more than a year I blamed myself for his murder. I don't think that way anymore, or if I do, I don't know it. And I don't blame any politician or pressure group for setting up the chain that ended on Elm St. outside that School Book Depository.

I don't have any conspiracy theory to offer. But I somehow think it's important to show how all of the tiny, stupid, petty political fights and feuds can shape a complete change in the world, in history. It doesn't prove anything except how dumb it is to think any of us really can control events, how much it's all up for grabs.

**BOOK
DIGEST**

The trip to Texas was political from the word go. There was nobody pretending this was a "non-political" tour of oil wells or cactus or anything else. John Kennedy was going to Texas because he had to have Texas to win reelection in 1964, and because Texas looked like a big trouble spot for his reelection.

Why? First, Kennedy was in danger of losing all of the Southern states in 1964—particularly if Goldwater was the Republican candidate, which everyone took for granted at that time (it was only after Dallas that Goldwater became anything except an odds-on favorite).

Second, the Texas Democrats were completely, hopelessly split. Briefly, Texas liberals and conservatives in the Democratic Party were so angry at each other that they were out for each other's blood, first and last.

I went to see Senator Yarborough toward the end of October. Yarborough, a maverick liberal in Texas politics, was a supporter of Kennedy, and I liked him. But he was angry and bitter. He described how Governor Connally and Vice President Johnson were screwing him; worse, he said, they'd be after John Kennedy in a minute if they thought he could get away with it politically. He was sure that Connally would want to run the whole Texas trip to embarrass him, and as it turned out, he was pretty nearly right.

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This was really going to be a wonderful trip; not only would I have all the usual garbage, but every stop, every appearance would be fought over by contacts from the Connally-Johnson wing, versus the Yarborough wing of the party. Right after I spoke with the Senator I called O'Donnell at the White House.

"Listen, Kenny," I said. "I know you always give me the best jobs, the easiest trips, and this is really going to top it off."

"Look," he said, "it's not the easiest trip in the world, but it's one thing the President wants to do and we're going to have to make the best of it."

With those cheery words I left for Texas. Just to show how smooth it all was, I'd arranged to meet with Connally's people that night and with Yarborough's people the next morning. But, somehow, Yarborough's people heard when I was coming down, and when I got to the airport, both factions were there to meet me. Right away I got into a flight over whom I'd meet with first. By the time I got that straightened out, I was ready to go home and forget the whole thing.

Well, the next morning it got worse. First I saw people from the State Demo-

cratic Committee—solid Connally people—and the proposed schedule they showed me was as if all of Yarborough's supporters had moved to Alaska.

There were meetings with nobody but the Connally wing. And when I said something about that, I got a really heartening answer.

"You're coming into Texas," the spokesman said, "and Connally is the Governor."

"Yes," I said, "but there's somebody above even the Governor, and that's the President of the United States."

Despite all of this fighting, the trip began to click into place. Kennedy would start in San Antonio, then go to Houston, then to Fort Worth, then to Dallas for a luncheon, then to Austin for a big fund-raising dinner, and home to Washington. The one impossible spot on the whole trip was Dallas.

We knew Kennedy would go someplace for a luncheon speech. The question was where. The original plan was to go to the Hilton Hotel, but the group that had booked the hotel ballroom wouldn't give it up. That brought the possible locations down to two: the Trade Mart and the Women's Building auditorium at the state fairgrounds.

The location for a speech shouldn't really stir anyone's emotions, but in fact it was really a matter of deciding what kind of trip

tant to anyone at the time. If Kennedy had been going there instead of to the Trade Mart, he would have been traveling two blocks farther away from the School Book Depository—and at a much faster rate of speed. At that speed and distance, it would have been almost impossible for a sniper to hit him from the Depository.

My idea—and I'd done it before on political advance—was to get the Secret Service to veto the Trade Mart on security grounds. That way there was nothing Connally could do about it, and we would have to go to the Women's Building. I asked Jerry Behn, the head of Secret Service at the White House, to pass the word to the Texas agents to wrap it up. But somehow or other that word never got through. We heard back from Texas that the Secret Service had O.K.'d the Trade Mart as acceptable from a security point of view.

So until less than a week before Kennedy's Texas trip, the Dallas luncheon site was the one part of the trip that hadn't been locked up. It's for this reason that I was never able to believe the conspiracy stories afterward. The motorcade routes for every other city were released weeks in advance. Anybody planning to kill the President could have planned it for any city except Dallas—because the motorcade route wasn't known



Rolling toward Dallas and death.

'Then I was angry, furious . . . the President had been shot because we went here instead of there.'

Kennedy would make and whom he would be allowed to speak to.

The Women's Building was a sprawling auditorium which could hold 4000. To fill it, we would probably have opened the place up after lunch was served so the people in Dallas could have come in and heard Kennedy. We would have organized labor committees, chicano committees, women and blacks, to turn people out. It would have been a way for Kennedy to say symbolically, "I want to speak to all the people of Dallas."

The Trade Mart was an enclosed setting. The lunch would be an expensive affair, but more important, it would be closed off. It would have been totally under the control of the Dallas Citizens' Council—no relation to the White Citizens' Council, but the establishment group that ran that town's politics, social life, and everything else. A Trade Mart luncheon would be a rich people's luncheon: a way of identifying Kennedy with the Dallas establishment.

There was one other key factor in the choice. The Women's Building auditorium was a low-roofed affair. That meant the luncheon dais could only be one level high—so that everybody was sitting on the same basis. At the Trade Mart you could build tiers on the dais. And that's what Connally wanted to do, so that his allies could sit with the President, while Yarborough was put as far away from Kennedy as possible, to prove who had clout and who was out of it—the Russian May Day idea again, that the closer you were to Number One, the more important you were.

There was another point about the Women's Building site that didn't seem impor-

until a day or two before the President's visit.

On the night of Nov. 20, Kennedy flew to Texas. At a time like this an advance man really gets tense. Is the weather going to hold? Will the people bring signs? Will the crowd be friendly? What about hecklers? Will the advance man get the key to open the President's suite, or will he have to stand in the hall for 20 minutes? Will the press get their typewriters and baggage? Will we lose the motorcade route? And suddenly he's on the way, and if it breaks right, it's like the curtain going up on a hit. The hands play, the crowd cheers, the speech gets applauded, and the President is in bed, the day's gone well, and we got through it.

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Friday morning the party left Fort Worth for Dallas. Since it was only 20 miles away, we'd debated whether to fly there or motorcade the entire distance. In the end, we decided to fly because the motorcade would take Kennedy right by the General Dynamics plant, where the TFX airplane was being built. There was a lot of flak about that plane—its cost and where the contract had gone—and we thought it better if Kennedy had nothing to do with that place. So instead Air Force One flew the short hop to Dallas. And finally, with Kennedy himself making the pitch, Yarborough had agreed to ride with Johnson.

Sometime after 1 p.m. Washington time I checked in with Dallas. I was trying to reach Jack Puterbaugh, our Dallas advance man, to find out how the crowd looked in this city where Adlai Stevenson had been

almost physically attacked a few weeks earlier. I raised the Secret Service agent through the White House switchboard and asked for Puterbaugh.

"How's it going?" I asked. "We got off good at the airport," he said, "and the motorcade looks good."

"Can I get Puterbaugh?" I said. "I'm not sure where he is right now—I let me raise the motorcade and I'll get back—"

All of a sudden he stopped. "I got to get off, I got to get off," he said and his voice sounded different. "There's trouble with the motorcade, trouble in the motorcade, I got to get off."

And I was out of it. There were a dozen things I was imagining; a blown tire, a friendly crowd stopping the motorcade, a wrong turn, a right-wing nut that had run out to spit on the

President—everything except what happened.

I called back the White House switchboard and asked for Dallas. "There's been some trouble down there," the operator said. "We can't get through."

Just then a secretary came running up. "Jerry, Jerry," she was yelling. "The ticker's got a light flashing. They say the President was shot."

I ran over to the Associated Press wire, with a red light flashing, meaning urgent story coming, and there was the flash: PRESIDENT SHOT.

I tried the White House switchboard. The operator was crying. "We can't get through," she said, sobbing. "The President's been shot."

And it all came back to me. All the police chiefs and Secret Service warnings that always seemed so stupid; all the worry and the jokes about assassinations; all the preparations I'd always laughed at.

Then I was angry, furious, at Connally and his demands to control the trip, where Kennedy should go, and now the President had been shot because we went here instead of there.

And then I thought about me—about how this was the one time I didn't just stick up and fight like a son of a bitch for the place I wanted to go. I never realized how my decisions could be this important. I'm involved with the murder of a President. And then, for the first time in my life, I started to cry.

Continued Tomorrow

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