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'The Truth About the Assassination'—VI

Two JFK Staff Men Called

By Charles Roberts

Last of six articles from "The Truth About the Assassination" by the White House correspondent of Newsweek.

Back at Parkland Hospital, Wayne Hawks, White House Chief of Records, had hurriedly assembled a press "pool" of three White House newsmen—a wire service man, a radio-TV man and a magazine man—to speed to the airport and cover the story aboard Air Force One for all our colleagues. Merriman Smith of UPI, Sid Davis of Westinghouse and I had raced to the airport in another unmarked police car at speeds up to 70 miles an hour.

As we boarded the plane, which had been sitting in the sun for three hours without air conditioning, I noticed first that it was dark and second that it was suffocatingly hot. I did not detect an atmosphere of crackling tension. In fact, it was like bursting breathlessly into a wake.

Johnson and Kennedy secretaries, their faces grotesquely streaked with mascara, were weeping openly and audibly. Strong Secret Service men, slumped into seats in the forward cabin, were shielding their eyes from view.

Two New Top Aides

Propelled by Mac Kilduff, who had been awaiting us almost as eagerly as Mr. Johnson awaited Judge Sarah T. Hughes, we pushed back into the gold-upholstered conference room, about midships in the 145-foot-long, \$6 million plane. There a grave Lyndon Johnson was surrounded by a group of familiar Texans—Reps. Homer Thornberry, Jack Brooks and Albert Thomas—and two younger men, strangers to me, who had just become, unwittingly, top members of the White House staff, Bill D. Moyers and Jack Valenti.

Moyers, then deputy director of the Peace Corps, had been in Austin "advancing" Mr. Kennedy's scheduled

Traitor for Aid to LBJ

speech there that night; he chartered a plane and flew to Love Field. Valenti, a Houston ad man who came aboard and flew to Washington without even a toothbrush ("I figured if he wanted me to leave, he'd tell me") had just made his first phone call as a presidential aide.

He had called Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach in Washington to make sure that the oath of office Katzenbach had dictated to a secretary a few minutes earlier was the presidential oath. It was—straight out of the U.S. Constitution, which is printed in most drug store almanacs but was not in any book aboard the plane.

Book Was a Missal

Mr. Johnson greeted the tiny, 67-year-old Judge Hughes. Then, seeing us, without smiling, he called out, "If there's anybody else aboard who wants to see this, tell them to come in."

For a few minutes we wait-

ed, talking in whispers barely audible over the mournful whine of an idling jet engine. Then O'Brien came from the bedroom compartment, aft of the conference room, carrying what we took to be a small leather-bound Bible.

It wasn't. The book the President took his oath of office on, I learned later, was not Mr. Kennedy's "personal Bible," as Manchester reports, or a Douai (Roman Catholic) version of the Bible, as Judge Hughes surmised, but a missal—a small text of prayers and Catholic Masses printed in both Latin and English.

The failure to use a Holy Bible in no way undercut the validity of Mr. Johnson's 36-word oath to "faithfully execute the office of the President . . . (and) protect and defend the Constitution of the United States," to which he added the traditional phrase, "So help me God." However, he may be the first U.S. President since Theodore Roosevelt

to take the oath without his hand on a Bible. He is certainly the first Protestant President to be sworn in on a missal. It took just 28 seconds.

Some else handed Judge Hughes a copy of the presidential oath, typewritten not on an index card, as Manchester reports, but on a memo-sized piece of paper gold-embossed with the Presidential Seal and the words, "Aboard Air Force One."

Mrs. Kennedy Consoled

Moments later, Mrs. Kennedy walked slowly into the room, smiling faintly but in what appeared to be a state of shock. Even the background whispering stopped as she stepped forward hesitantly in her blood-spattered pink suit and stood at Mr. Johnson's left side. Mrs. Johnson stood at his right. The three of them faced Judge Hughes as Mr. Johnson raised his right hand, placed his left on the missal and solemnly repeated the oath after the Judge.

After he said, "So help me God," he turned and kissed his wife on the forehead, then turned to his other side and gripped Mrs. Kennedy's elbows in a fatherly embrace. After the second of silence that ensued, Mrs. Johnson clasped Mrs. Kennedy's hand and said, "The whole Nation mourns your husband." The President also took her hand.

Then as Mr. Johnson turned to grasp other hands, Police Chief Curry, who had stood behind him, said to Mrs. Kennedy: "God bless you little lady, but you ought to go back and lie down." "No thanks, I'm fine," she replied, mustering another smile.

Dry-eyed but dazed, she remained in the crowded confer-



Judge Hughes



Evelyn Lincoln



Jess Curry



Jack Valenti

AP and UPI Photos

... whispers barely audible over the mournful whine of a jet engine

ence room only a few minutes; few of the witnesses to the oath-taking could think of anything to say to her. Then she retired to the aft compartment containing her husband's coffin, where she spent most of the two hours and 12 minutes of the flight back to Washington.

Mr. Johnson shook a few more hands, still without smiling, and turned to kiss the cheek of Evelyn Lincoln, President Kennedy's secretary, who was standing almost directly behind him. I was standing behind Mrs. Lincoln. Although I am not deeply religious, the words that came to my mouth when I clasped his hand were, "God be with you, Mr. President."

First Presidential Order

At 2:41 p.m., three minutes after that brief ceremony, Mr. Johnson gave his first order as President—"Now let's get airborne." A few Texans scrambled off the plane. With

all other aircraft diverted from the area, the big presidential fan jet was airborne at 2:47—just 107 minutes after Mr. Kennedy died. It was then—after those amenities—that Mr. Johnson began his sure-handed takeover of the Government.

During the flight home, the President came twice to the table where Smith and I were trying to record instant history, Smitty on a borrowed, unfamiliar electric typewriter. The first time, still subdued and speaking just above a whisper, he told us he wanted all of Mr. Kennedy's staff and Cabinet officers to stay on—a hint of the "let us continue" theme that he was to sound before Congress five days later. The second time he came to inform us that he would make a few remarks on his arrival—the brief "I ask for your help — and God's" statement that he read before

TV cameras after landing at Andrews AFB.

For the rest of the trip, while the Kennedy party remained isolated in the rear compartment, LBJ tended to urgent business. He kept in touch with the White House Situation Room, manned by McGeorge Bundy, for any sign that the Communist world might try to exploit the tragedy at Dallas. He called Rose Kennedy at Hyannis Port to offer condolences on the loss of her son, and Nellie Connally in Dallas to wish her husband a full and speedy recovery. He conferred for about ten minutes with O'Brien on the congressional situation confronting him.

Two Who "Continued"

As a generalization, it is fair to say that of those who stayed on the payroll for many months, Mac Bundy, a Boston Brahmin, and Larry O'Brien, a Massachusetts pol, were the

only Kennedy staffers who really functioned for Mr. Johnson during the takeover crisis. Both men were branded "traitors" and "turncoats" by the diehard Kennedy partisans as a result.

Bundy's answer to this was that the Presidency, to which he was loyal, is bigger than any one man. O'Brien's was more succinct: "You do what needs to be done." The others never seemed to forget that Mr. Johnson had been their enemy at the Los Angeles Democratic Convention in 1960.

As another generalization, I think one could say that Manchester, in "The Death of a President," overplays these events—dramatic as they were—for the purpose of heightened drama. For example, he has the Secret Service in "hopeless disorder" as a result of divided loyalties, with agent Emory Roberts, No. 2 man on the trip, defecting to the new President. The fact here is that at the hospital, Kellerman, the No. 1 man, ordered Roberts and his 8 a.m.-to-4 p.m. shift to join the vice presidential detail in guarding Mr. Johnson.

Another example: he gives the impression that Mrs. Kennedy, eager to return to Washington, had to wait endlessly for a Texas judge to come and swear in Mr. Johnson. ("Then

the full force struck her. An hour, she thought. My God, do I have to wait an hour?"

The fact is that Mrs. Kennedy had to wait just 20 minutes. She boarded the plane at 2:18, Judge Hughes boarded at 2:30 and the oath was administered at 2:38.

Only Tenable Conclusions

The truth about the assassination of John F. Kennedy is that the Warren Commission reached the only conclusions that are tenable to reasonable men. The truth, extracted and distilled from the 10.4 million words in its Hearings, is borne out by the hard physical evidence as well as the most credible eyewitness testimony. It is the truth, in Earl Warren's phrase, "as far as it can be discovered."

An additional truth is that the critics of the Commission Report have neither raised questions nor produced new evidence that could alter the Commission's findings if a new inquiry were undertaken. Finally, it is true, as Britain's Lord Devlin has observed, that "the best tribute to the solidity of the Report comes from its critics." They have labored mightily and deviously to demolish it but have succeeded only in scratching the surface.

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