

Return to Dealey Plaza

CBS News' Dan Rather relives 'the longest 17 minutes' of his career

NEW YORK (AP) — Dan Rather, like everyone else who was alive that day, remembers where he was when President John F. Kennedy was shot in Dallas.

He was there. And Wednesday, Rather returned to Dealey Plaza for an edition of "48 Hours" that examines what is known and not known about the killing of the president on Nov. 22, 1963.

Rather, a 32-year-old bureau chief who'd set up CBS coverage of the presidential fence-mending trip, was at the end of the motorcade route outside the plaza, waiting at the final "film drop" for the motorcade's camera crew.

"The motorcade never passed me," he recalled. "Here comes the limousine, but it seems to be going awful fast and it sort of streaks by in a blur. And I sensed that something was wrong. I had no idea. I had heard no shots."

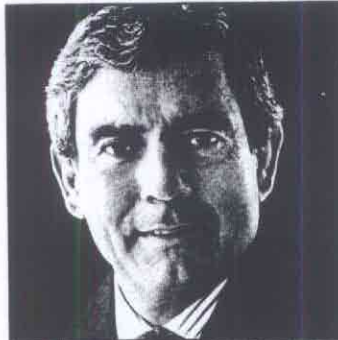
Rather ran back toward the plaza.

"Now I had in front of me the grassy knoll, the School Book Depository.

"God, the chaos and confusion! People were on the ground, screaming. Police were running around. It was clear then... Something was wrong."

He sprinted the few blocks back to the CBS affiliate, and heard the first radio bulletins that shots had been fired in Dealey Plaza.

Rather called the hospital and confirmed the death with emergency room witnesses, breaking the story 17 minutes before the official report that the president was dead. "It was the longest 17



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minutes of my professional career," he said.

Wednesday's "48 Hours" was not made solely because of the furor the conspiracy theory advanced in Oliver Stone's new movie, "JFK." "This program is not a refutation of the film," Rather said.

"Whatever one thinks of the film or doesn't think of the film, it has rekindled interest in the assassination for a whole new generation," Rather said. "Would we have been able to get an hour of primetime to deal with this had there not been a movie? I think probably not."

Rather said he's found no credible conspiracy theories, but does not doubt their appeal. "Conspiracy and conspiracy theories, perhaps all of them unprovable, ex-

plain the inexplicable. Therefore they're always attractive.

"And also, let's face it," he said. "In human nature there's a side of us all that loves to doubt as well as to know."

Rather said "48 Hours" draws on CBS' independent investigations of the shooting, including its four-part 1964 and 1967 "CBS Reports" examining the Warren Commission report, including its test of the lone gunman theory in 1967.

The program also retraces the strange life of Lee Harvey Oswald, and relates the evidence linking him to the shooting. It examines the various conspiracy theories that have emerged since, and Rather interviews director Stone about the factual basis of his movie.

"Artists have something else to do," Rather said. "It's a work of imagination. They deal with suspicions, fears, hypotheses. Journalists have a different role: to bear witness and deal with facts. There's a role for both."

The Kennedy assassination and CBS' 53-hour coverage of it literally made Rather's career. It is a story that he has returned to again and again in his 30-year career. He has read all 26½ volumes of the Warren Commission report.

And he still is not convinced that Oswald acted alone.

"I'm open-minded about it," Rather said.

"The evidence is strong that Oswald was probably a shooter. Note that I didn't say that the evi-

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dence is conclusive," he said. "I believe that one of the key, cutting-edge questions is, if he was a shooter, was he *the* shooter?"

If anyone else was shooting, and if their shot or shots hit the president, Rather said, he believes that they came from above and to the rear of the president.

Any serious student of the assassination should begin by reading the summary of the Warren Commission report, he said.

"Yes, the Warren Commission should have done its work better," Rather said. "But the key question is, whatever bungling they did, whatever mistakes they made, did they reach the proper conclusion?"

"That's what we're struggling with today." □
