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Connallys Tell of 'Terrible Ride'

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"There was no screaming in that horrible car," Nellie Connally recalled emphatically of the moments after the shots were fired. "It was just a silent, terrible ride."

Quietly but vividly, as though it had just happened, former Texas governor John Connally and his wife appeared before the House Assassinations Committee yesterday to recount the murder of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

It was the first time that the Connallys, who had been riding with President and Mrs. Kennedy that day in the fatal motorcade, had ever testified publicly under oath. The Warren Commission, whose penchant for secrecy helped give rise to the current inquiry, heard from them only in executive session, spending less than an hour with the governor and only five minutes with his wife.

They relived every moment yesterday for nearly three hours, differing on some points, slightly revising others that assassination investigation critics will undoubtedly seize upon and chew upon for still more years to come.

Connally commended the committee for undertaking the thankless task. But he said he was equally sure it would fail to stop all the speculation and dispel all the rumors swirling about the Warren Commission's conclusion the assassination was the work of Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone.

The Connallys confined themselves to what they heard and saw. She remembered three shots. Wounded by one of them, he heard only two. Both

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By James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post

John, Nellie Connally: she "saw president clutch his hands to his neck."

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agreed they all came from above and behind them, from the direction of the Texas School Book Depository, where Oswald worked.

"We may be wrong" about the precise sequence or timing of the shots, Connally said at one point, but he rejected suggestions that his or Mrs. Connally's memories might have overdimmed with the years.

"The things we do remember today," he said in solemn tones, "are as indelibly etched in our minds as anything ever could be."

The crucial questioning concerned the number of shots that were fired and where they landed. The Warren

Commission concluded that there were three, one of which missed the presidential limousine, one of which (the so-called "magic bullet") wounded both Kennedy and Connally, and one which finally killed the president, literally blowing up his brain.

Despite that, Nellie Connally and until yesterday, her husband, had always insisted without reservation that Connally and Kennedy were wounded by separate bullets, before the fatal shot was fired. Indirectly at least, that conflicts with the Warren Commission's findings because it fails to explain the bullet that missed, the one an entirely separate shot struck me . . . it's a certainty. I'll never change my mind."

Yesterday, however, Connally made that hit a curbstone several hundred feet in front of the presidential car and kicked up a concrete fragment, nicking a bystander in the cheek. The Warren Commission concluded that Oswald could have fired three shots but no more. Another shot would suggest the presence of a second gunman.

Undeterred by such mathematics, Connally told Life magazine in 1966 that he was positive he and the president were hit by separate shots.

"There is my absolute knowledge, and Nellie's, too", he was quoted as saying then, "that one bullet caused

the president's first wound, and that a major concession, declaring now that it "might well be" that the single-bullet theory was correct after all and that he and Kennedy were wounded by the same shot, passing through both the president and Connally before it lodged in the Texas governor's left thigh.

Mrs. Connally had no such reservations. The first shot, she said positively, hit Kennedy; a second bullet hit her husband, and the third killed the president, spewing blood and brain tissue all over the car.

"I heard a noise that I didn't think of as a gunshot," she told the committee under questioning by Deputy Chief Counsel Gary T. Cornwell. Sitting in a jumpseat next to her husband and in front of the Kennedys, Mr. Connally said she "looked in back and saw the president clutch his hands to his neck. He said nothing. He just slumped down in the seat."

"John had turned to his right and shouted, 'No, no, no,'" Nellie Connally recalled. Then, "the second shot was fired and hit him. He [Connally] was in the process of turning [back around again, this time to his left]. His hand was on his knee. The bullet went through him."

Mrs. Connally said she thought her husband was dead but instinctively pulled him down into her lap.

"The only thing I could think of was to pull him down, so maybe they wouldn't hurt him any more," she testified, as her husband listened, brushing tears from his eyes with a handkerchief. "I never looked back [at the Kennedys] after John was hit."

Both, however, heard the final shot, the one that killed the president.

"It had a very pronounced impact," Connally said, slamming his hands together with a loud thwack. "I could

see blood and brain tissue all over the car. We were covered. There were little pieces of brain tissue as big as your little finger."

At that, Nellie Connally remembered, Jacqueline Kennedy cried out, "They've killed my husband. I have his brains in my hand."

The famous Zapruder film, played repeatedly after the Connallys testified yesterday afternoon at various speeds to illustrate various points, showed Mrs. Kennedy crawling onto the rear of the car, but, as photographic consultant Robert Groden tes-

tified, with somewhat more deliberation than previously believed.

To some, Mrs. Kennedy, who could not recall the incident, seemed to be trying to get out of the car until she was pushed back in by a Secret Service agent, but Groden said, a closer look at the film shows the agent "barely touches her forearm. She climbs back in herself."

"It appears she had some specific purpose" in climbing out of the back seat for just a moment, Groden concluded. "It would appear she picked up a piece of skull or brain matter that had blown out."