

Continue

interest to protect. But his book is well-reasoned and amply supported by evidence. Examining the Warren Commission's total evidence, the subsequent CIA and FBI revelations, and the analysis of a controversial audio tape that supposedly proved the existence of a fourth shot and a second gunman, Belin deflates the most serious charges brought by the conspiracists, often by showing they have made highly selective use of evidence and testimony.

Even so, that missing-tooth feeling remains. Can anyone say for sure that Oswald and then Ruby acted alone? It seems that few people are willing to accept that conclusion.

"The President was force down on the back seat..."

PRESIDENT KENNEDY IS ASSASSINATED

November 22, 1963
Dallas, Texas

MERRIMAN SMITH

United Press International reporter Smith was a Pulitzer Prize for this account.

It was a balmy, sunny noon as we motored through downtown Dallas behind President Kennedy. The procession cleared the center of the business district and turned into a handsome highway that wound through what appeared to be a park.

I was riding in the so-called White House press "pool" car, a telephone company vehicle equipped with a mobile radio-telephone. I was in the front seat between a driver from the telephone company and Malcolm Kiddulf, acting White House press secretary for the President's Texas tour. Three other pool reporters were wedged into the back seat.

Suddenly we heard three loud, almost painfully loud, cracks. The first sounded as if it might have been a large firecracker. But the second and third blasts were unmistakable. Gunfire.

The President's car, possibly as much as 150 or 200 yards ahead, seemed to falter briefly. We saw a flurry of activity in the Secret Service followup car behind the chief executive's limousine.

Next in line was the car bearing Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson. Behind that, another followup car bearing agents assigned to the vice president's protection. We were behind that car.

Our car stood still for probably only a few seconds, but it seemed like a lifetime. One sees history explode before one's eyes and for even the most trained observer there is a limit to what one can comprehend.

I looked ahead at the President's car but could not see him or his companion, Gov. John B. Connally of Texas. Both men had been riding on the right side of the limousine from Washington. I thought I saw a flash of pink, which would have been Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy.

Everybody in our car began shouting at the driver to pull up closer to the President's car. But at this moment, we saw the big limousine and a motorcycle escort roar away at high speed.

We screamed at our driver, "Get going, get going!" We careened around the Johnson car and its escort and set out down the highway, barely able to keep in sight of the President's car and the accompanying Secret Service followup car.

They vanished around a curve. When we cleared the same curve we could see where we were heading—Parkland Hospital, a large brick structure to the left of the arterial highway. We skidded around a sharp left turn and spilled out of the pool car as it entered the hospital driveway. I ran to the side of the limousine.

The President was face down on the back seat. Mrs. Kennedy made a cradle of her arms around the President's head and bent over him as if she were whispering to him.

Gov. Connally was on his back on the floor of the car, his head and shoulders resting in the arms of his wife, Nellie, who kept shaking her head and shaking with dry sobs. Blood oozed from the front of the governor's suit. I could not see the President's wound. But I could see blood spattered around the interior of the rear seat and a dark stain spreading down the right side of the President's dark gray suit.

From the telephone car, I had realized the Dallas bureau of UPI that three shots had been fired at the Kennedy motorcade. Seeing the bloody scene in the rear of the car at the hospital entrance, I knew I had to get to a telephone immediately.

Clint Hill, the Secret Service agent in charge of the detail assigned to Mrs. Kennedy, was leaning over into the rear of the car. "How badly was he hit, Clint?" I asked. "He's dead," Hill replied curtly.

I raced down a short stretch of sidewalk, into a hospital corridor. Jiggs Faurey of the White House transportation staff grabbed me and said Kiddulf had the White House press staff wanted a pool of three men immediately to fly back to Washington on Air Force 1, the presidential aircraft.

Altogether Air Force 1, on which I had made no many trips as press association reporter covering President Kennedy, all of the shades of the larger main cabin were drawn and the interior was hot and dimly lighted. Kiddulf propelled us to the President's suite two-thirds of the way back in the plane. The room is used normally as a combination conference and sitting room and could accommodate eight to ten people seated.

I wedged inside the door and began counting. There were 27 people in this compartment. Johnson stood in the center with his wife, Lady Bird. U.S. District Judge Sarah T. Hughes, 67, a kindly faced woman, stood with a small black Bible in her hands, waiting to give the oath.

The compartment became hotter and hotter. Johnson was worried that some of the Kennedy staff might not be able to get inside. He urged people to press forward, but a Signal Corps photographer, Capt. Cecil Stoughton, standing in the corner on a chair, said if Johnson moved any closer, it would be virtually impossible to make a truly historic photograph.

It developed that Johnson was waiting for Mrs. Kennedy, who was composing herself in a small bedroom in the rear of the plane. She appeared alone, dressed in the same pink wool suit she had worn in the morning when she appeared so happy shaking hands with airport crowds at the side of her husband.

She was white-faced but dry-eyed. Friendly hands stretched toward her as she stumbled slightly. Johnson took both of her hands in his and held her to his left side. Lady Bird stood on his right, a fixed half-smiling the tension.

When the President's plane reached operating altitude, Mrs. Kennedy left her back chamber and walked in the rear compartment of the plane. This was the so-called family living room, a private area where she and Kennedy, family and friends had spent many happy airborne hours chatting and dining together. Kennedy's casket had been placed in this compartment, carried aboard by a group of Secret Service agents. Mrs. Kennedy went into the rear lounge and took a chair beside the coffin. There she remained throughout the flight.

The brief ceremony ended when Johnson, in a deep, firm voice, repeated after the judge, "... So help me God."

Johnson turned first to his wife, hugged her about the shoulders and "kissed her on the cheek. Then he turned to Kennedy's widow, put his left arm around her and kissed her cheek.

Others in the group—some Texas Democratic House members, President, he seemed to back away from any expression of felicitation. The two-minute ceremony concluded at 1:18 p.m. CST and seconds later, the President was firmly, "Now, let's get airborne."