

Thomas Grey “Tom” Wicker Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 03/22/1966
Administrative Information

Creator: Thomas Grey “Tom” Wicker

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Biographical Note

Wicker was a journalist, a White House correspondent, and the Washington Bureau Chief for the *New York Times* from 1960 through 1971; he was also the lead journalist for the *New York Times*' coverage of John F. Kennedy's [JFK] assassination in Dallas, Texas, in 1963. In this interview Wicker discusses JFK's unique way of giving speeches; Lyndon B. Johnson's unhappiness with his position as Vice President; Anthony J. Celebrezze's appointment to the Cabinet, 1962; Wicker's sources for *Kennedy Without Tears*; traveling with JFK to Texas in November, 1963; the motorcade through Dallas on November 22, 1963; the confusion after the shooting and learning what happened; gathering information from witnesses and hospital staff at Parkland Hospital; the announcement of JFK's death and the general atmosphere after; Johnson's swearing in as President; reporting on the day's events from the airport; and the rapid transition to the Johnson White House, among other issues.

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Thomas Grey “Tom” Wicker – JFK #2
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Second Oral History Interview

with

THOMAS GREY "TOM" WICKER

March 22, 1966
New York Times Offices
1701 North K Street
Washington, D.C.

By Ronald J. Grele

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GRELE: In February of 1962, in your article, "Kennedy as a Public Speakah," you've already commented on the President's initial reaction to that, but I have one question that I'd like to ask about the article. In that article you discussed the President's inability or unwillingness to use the draft of a speech. Is that any comment on the role of Mr. Sorensen?

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WICKER: You mean to read from a finished draft?

GRELE: Yes. You said in the article he was always unhappy with it or seemed to be unhappy with the final draft of the speech.

WICKER: Well, I don't remember precisely what I said in the article, but it was true that President Kennedy, in most speeches where he used the text -- he made a great many without a text -- failed to follow it literally. I never had the impression that that was because he was unhappy with the text, as I recall it now. It was because, as he told me, he didn't think he read well. I think he was always trying to bring something to it

that he didn't feel he could when he was literally reading. He would take a sentence, oh, sometimes he would invert a sentence or he would add an adjective or use a different verb to the same effect so that an advanced text of a Kennedy speech was rarely the same

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as the delivery text. These changes basically would not be substantial; it would just be differences in wording. He would do this. If you were trying to follow a speech and keep accurate notes, you would have to scribble all over it because he would, in some cases, change every sentence just enough so that it wouldn't be verbatim delivery, you know. Oftentimes, particularly on less important speeches, he would begin in an entirely different way. He would open with something he had seen or noticed that day that he could connect with the occasion. Then maybe he would pick up the text in the fourth paragraph, leaving aside the prepared opening entirely. Even then he would go on, and it wouldn't be word for word. In other words, he used the text almost as you might use notes, it seemed to me. I did notice that when there would be a particularly

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rhetorical sentence or when there would be a very good phrase or something, he'd usually manage to get that in. Now my recollection is, on really important speeches like once I remember when he made a speech in August of 1961 over television in his office about the Berlin Crisis -- I was one of the poolers of the press that was in there -- my recollection is that he read that word for word. I don't think he ad libbed much on TV. Also my recollection is that the American University speech here at American University in Washington, which was a very important speech, I think he read that pretty much word for word because each word had diplomatic meaning. I don't think he departed very much from that. But he did seem to want to bring a little more spontaneity and the ad lib approach even to a prepared text.

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GRELE: You also discussed a messianic ring to his speeches. Exactly what did you mean by messianic ring?

WICKER: Well, I'm not sure the word was precise. But I think that, particularly when he was really wound up to a subject, when he was really preaching a thesis or trying to make a point, a persuasive point, trying to justify something, or perhaps you might say, when he was on an educational passage of some kind, he could lend a great deal of fervor to this. One of the most effective single points in a speech that I remember him making was in his first appearance at the UN which, I suppose, was in '61, was it not? There's a passage towards the end of that speech, practically the last paragraph: "Never have the nationals of the world had so much to lose or so much to gain. Together we shall save our planet or together we shall

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perish in its flames.” That sentence right there I’ve got underlined in my book. I remember very clearly the ring in his voice. There was real passion and conviction in it. This is what I mean. He could say things like that when he was in command of his eloquence and was matching it with a real, personal fire about something or personal sentiment and emotion about it. He could impart really a sense of conviction, a ringing sense of conviction. That was what I was talking about basically.

I remember also, and this is apropos to your first question too, when he made a most effective speech sometime, again I believe in the fall of 1961, in New York City to the N.A.M. convention in New York. He was talking in advance of the presentation of the major trade bill that was coming up in ‘62. He was talking about the need

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for a more liberal approach to this thing, a need for greater exports in the economy. He was talking about the balance of payments. Beyond that, he was talking about the economy itself and how there should be a partnership between the government and business; they both should be dependent on each other -- this kind of speech. One of his greatest speeches, I thought. I knew that he departed from the text entirely, dropped the text. I mean there was no relation to it, and he began reading off -- and he must have gone on for ten minutes or so -- a wealth of statistics and figures. He delivered this very effectively. The reason I bring this up is because it was a departure from his text. I found out later he had these figures just as statistics and nothing else on a little card that he had in the palm of his hand. He didn’t

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have any text just the figures. Not only was he departing from his text in that way, but at that time he was getting this quality into the speech that I characterized as messianic. By that I mean the quality of the convinced and passionate leader.

GRELE: In March 1961, you wrote an article on Lyndon Johnson called “LBJ in Search of His New Frontier,” wherein you described the vice presidential relationship with the White House or, as a matter of fact, the lack of power in the vice presidency. To your mind was Lyndon Johnson unhappy as Vice President?

WICKER: Yes. Unhappy in the sense.... I think that ought to be clarified. I have talked with Mr. Johnson a good deal since then. I’ve talked with others who have. And I think that Mr. Johnson, as President, has been rather generous. My impression is

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that it is sincere. He’s been rather generous in saying of President Kennedy that during their relationship, the vice presidential relationship, President Kennedy had gone out of his way to

keep him informed, to keep him busy, to make him feel like a useful and valuable member of the Administration. I don't think there's any reason to doubt that. So that, I do not think Vice President Johnson was unhappy with President Kennedy. I think that could be established from many sources.

However, I talked with Johnson quite often when he was Vice President. Other people did. There's no doubt in my mind that he was an unhappy man at that time simply because of the situation he was in. We see from Johnson's presidency what a man of tremendous vigor and vanity and ability and knowledge of things and interest

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in things he is. There's no question of this. For a man of that kind to be in a sense shunted aside to the vice presidency -- and there is no other way to put it because a vice president in our system simply cannot be a first class figure in an administration -- to be in that kind of a role, I think, was bound in the nature of the case to make him feel very unhappy. There are reports, which I can't verify, that he felt that his real role in politics had been completed. As realistic a politician as Mr. Johnson is, looking ahead at the prospect of President Kennedy serving out two full terms at the end of which he, Johnson, would have been 60 or thereabouts, I don't think that he could have had, even with his vanity, any realistic expectation that he would ever be elected President. I think he felt that he had come to the

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end of the road, and even at the end of the road he was not really doing all that he, Johnson, was capable of doing.

There's another aspect to this, too. Despite the fact that their personal relationships were good, and that Vice President Johnson felt that President Kennedy was generous with him and tried to make as much of the vice presidency as he could, from the number of developments in the Johnson Administration -- changes, contrasts -- we know that he was often unhappy about the conduct of things in the Kennedy Administration. I know from things that have been said to me personally by President Johnson and by associates of his, others that have had the same experience. He did not feel that President Kennedy handled Congress correctly. As an illustration, Johnson told me that prior to the introduction of the very important

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civil rights bill introduced in '63 under Kennedy which became the Civil Rights Act of '64 under Johnson, prior to the introduction of that bill which, if you will recall, followed the Birmingham racial crisis, he had urged President Kennedy to make a joint speaking tour with Vice President Johnson, through the South -- a rather educational project to bring not only the rationale for the bill and the necessity for it, but to bring the authority and prestige of the President, the charm and force of President Kennedy's own personality and popularity and standing to this effort. In that way, Johnson apparently felt that a great deal could be done in paving the way for the successful passage of the bill. President Kennedy did not do that.

What his reasons were, I don't know and, perhaps, they were just as good. But that's one incident that I know of.

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I know from several things that Johnson has said to me that there were times that he was unhappy with the conduct of affairs in the Administration. He felt that they were not being carried out properly. I think this is particularly true with the relationship between the President and Congress. I would suppose considering the type of man Mr. Johnson is, that he felt they were not being carried out as well as he, Johnson, could have carried them out. There is a story, and I am unable to authenticate it, but I believe it's in... I'm not sure whether it's in Elie Abel's book [*The Missile Crisis*] or not.... Let me say this part off the record because it ought not [Tape Recorder Off]... I'm told that President Johnson was not entirely in accord with all the decisions that were made during the Cuban

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missile crisis but I don't know the details of it.

GRELE: My question was, was this the nature of the office or the nature of the men involved? I think that you have fairly adequately answered that question.

WICKER: Yes, I don't think there was ever much personal friction between the two. Although another thing that I just might add peripherally, I was told early on.... No, I guess I was told this not long after Johnson became President. I was working on some article, and I can't quite remember which. But I was told that after the Kennedy Administration got fairly going, Johnson and Kennedy discovered that they could deal much better with each other by dealing directly, face to face, because there did remain some friction between their staffs. So that they sort of had a tacit understanding they would

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Sort of deal together rather than have it pass any emissaries, you know.

GRELE: On April 15, 1962, you wrote an article for the *New York Times Magazine* entitled, "The Total Political Animal," in which you began by quoting a Kennedy aide on the political makeup of the President. Do you recall who the aide was that you quoted?

WICKER: Of "The Total Political Animal" quote? Yes, it was Larry O'Brien.

GRELE: Was this Larry O'Brien's concept of the President?

WICKER: Yes. Well, I mean that quote was. I wouldn't want to attribute everything in my article to O'Brien. As I recall that piece, there were two quotes in

juxtaposition: somebody said, “A total political animal,” Larry O’Brien; then there’s a sort of less slangy quote there about it which I can’t recall. But that was Sorensen. They

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were both to the same effect, but one was stated rather formally – Sorensen’s remark.

GRELE: You went on to discuss the President’s relations with Congress. Other than the comments of now President Johnson, what were the relations of the President with Congress as told to you or conveyed to you from members of Congress?

WICKER: Well, of course, your ideas about things change. I think probably now it’s more possible to see what Kennedy’s relationship with Congress was than, perhaps, it was at that time. Looking at it now with hindsight – with all the additional remarks that I’ve heard, comments and so forth, and perhaps with a greater insight myself in the way things work and having observed Johnson, for instance, working with Congress – my impression is that Kennedy, on the one hand, feared the

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power of Congress too much, and at the same time underrated the ways and means Congress had to thwart him. So that, in my opinion, he never really was able firmly to take the leadership of Congress and really give Congress the kind of strong, driving direction under which I think Congress works best – certainly cooperates with the President best. Nor did he ever quite avoid the pitfalls that await the unwary there. For instance, he confessed to me.... This is in one of these articles. No, it’s in my book about Kennedy. Confessed is the wrong word, but he said to me that sending up the reorganization bill in 1963, I guess, for the Urban Affairs Department and saying in advance that Robert [C.] Weaver, who is a Negro, was going to be the Secretary was a great mistake. That raised Congress’ hackles. They were being put on the spot

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leave it. They decided to leave it. Whether because he would have known better to begin with or because he profited from that experience, Johnson sent virtually the same proposal up as legislation rather than a reorganization plan which meant that Congress had to defeat it rather than just leave it alone, which is what they did in the first thing, or pass it. They finally did pass it. He never gave any hint whatever of whether or not he would appoint Weaver. Now it’s hard to tell whether or not Johnson just profited from Kennedy’s mistake or whether he would have known better to begin with. I suspect he would have known better to begin with.

GRELE: When you say he overestimated the power of Congress, do you mean Congress as an institution or the power of individual chairman, or...

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WICKER: That's right. Congress as an institution and all the ingrained ability that Congress has to thwart a president in many ways; the fact that one major committee chairman or one exceptionally powerful and particularly interested member of a committee may be able to block legislation; failure to touch the right base so that somebody is offended; or just failure to count heads very accurately; or putting too much pressure on somebody who, a more thoroughly acquainted man would know, does not react well to pressure; or trying to persuade someone who doesn't want to be persuaded but can be pressured – you know, just the kind of thing.

I don't think any newspaperman, looking at it from the outside, ever knows, except in isolated instances, why things don't work or why things do work. We operate pretty much on what people tell us. We

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have to. But when you can bring your own insight to bear on things – and after so many years in Washington, you can try to do that, and you look back at the historical record – you can make judgments whether they're right or wrong. My judgment is President Kennedy, despite the fact he spent fourteen years there, did not really know enough about Congress. While he had developed a rather healthy respect for Congress in the broad sense – too much so perhaps; he was too fearful of it – he did not quite understand the power that is in the presidency to exert leadership on Congress specifically. While he had that faculty, at the same time he did not quite have enough of the detailed knowledge of all the many ways that Congress can foul up a President, too.

I don't think, however, this was fundamentally

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the reason why the Kennedy legislative program was not a roaring success. I think the fundamental reason was that he didn't have the votes. While there is a great deal to be said for and against the Johnson consensus approach, I have sometimes thought – and I don't know how you make these judgments – but I am inclined to believe Kennedy's approach was too partisan. He laid too much stress on the Democratic party. While he often made deals across party lines – for instance, I think Dirksen [Everett McK. Dirksen], the Senate Minority Leader, worked rather well with the Kennedy Administration on the whole – still, I think Kennedy's 1960 campaign and his campaign in 1962 and a great many of his speeches were really rather hard line Democratic speeches. I am inclined to think that the time for that sort of thing

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is past. In fact he told me in the preparation of... What article was it in? I guess the "Total Political Animal" piece. He told me that he did not think it was possible to have a strictly party government in the United States. I think I enumerate in there what he said about what a

president could do to organize and use his party: you could raise money; you could get out the vote; and you could help them choose good candidates. I'm not sure what else he said. Those were the main things. But it seems to me he constantly broke these taboos himself because he went out and made a great many partisan speeches where he hammered the Republicans over the head right and left. He used to refer to them as "the people who always say no" and so forth. It's a difficult judgment to make. In my opinion he did go overboard

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on the partisan line. I don't think this helped him with people whose votes he really needed in Congress.

GRELE: In October of 1962, during the campaign, you wrote an article for the *New York Times*...

WICKER: At the same time... Can I go back just a little bit and append to that answer?

GRELE: Certainly.

WICKER: There was a little bit beyond the party business, too. I have always thought that Kennedy's whole rhetoric and attitude and image I suppose you would say, although I don't like to use that phrase, but he set himself up too much, it seems to me, identified himself too much as being a Democratic liberal. In fact, I think Kennedy probably was a bit more conservative person in many of his outlooks than Johnson is. But President Johnson has been very careful while advancing a liberal economic program to heap encomia

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all over the heads of business. He's been very careful while advancing a liberal civil rights program to throw all the olive branches that he can. He's made speeches in the South, talked as a southerner to them, given preferment to Southern senators and that sort of thing. President Johnson, it seems to me, has more nearly been able to walk the middle of the road in terms of the public impression of him. He has, or he certainly had for a long time and still has to a somewhat lesser extent, great support in the business community which is something Kennedy never had.

The contrast, I think, between Kennedy's handling of the steel price crisis of '62 and Johnson's various steel price crisis is instructive. President Johnson – personally, as a personal figure on the television – has never gotten into the business of denouncing business corporations even when he might have felt he

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had justification. What I'm trying to say is while President Johnson's program and approach basically is as liberal or more liberal than President Kennedy's was, still I think to the broad

range of the American people, Johnson does not appear to be so totally identified as a Democratic liberal as President Kennedy perhaps was unavoidable, but he, after all, ran on the most liberal Democratic platform in history in 1960. He adopted the rhetoric of the liberals. He is the man who put the new economic policy into effect. There are many ways in which, no doubt, he couldn't help this. He had to do it that way, but it seems to me, in retrospect, that he did not properly evaluate the necessity as a personal man, as a symbol, to remain more nearly to the middle of the road than he was. That is a judgment that no doubt many historians

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would dispute, but I feel that way.

GRELE: In your article of October 1962, entitled "JFK Hits the Campaign Trail," you talked about the appointment of Secretary Celebreeze [Anthony J. Celebreeze] as a way of balancing the Cabinet ethnically. Was this just your impression or did you have other information to suggest that this was why Celebreeze was appointed?

WICKER: Well, you're never going to get administration officials to admit blatantly that they've appointed somebody in order to win the Italian vote. But it was a subject of quite a bit of talk in Washington for the first years of the Kennedy Administration that there was some discontent among Italian voters because they didn't seem properly represented in a Cabinet, for instance, that had its Jewish member – did they have an Irishman? But anyway you had an

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Irish President – and so forth. There was a man in the State Department early on, and I can't remember his name – Salvatore Bonafiglio or something. You could look that up – who left the State Department for some reason. I don't remember the controversy, but at the time the Italians were reliably reported by political reporters, and I found some myself, to be upset. You will recall there's always been a great Irish-Italian rivalry in Boston and in New York City too, as far as that's concerned. There's not any doubt in my mind that there was concern in the Administration about the Italian vote. There's not any doubt in my mind that, as one looks around the country in 1962, there were any number of people who might have been appointed Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare

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who were not Italian and who would have been, on balance and all things considered and without any denigration of him, better qualified than Tony Celebreeze. I would not think that President Kennedy was – and a few politicians are – not so crass as to appoint Tony Celebreeze in the Cabinet in order to get Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] elected in Boston. In the first place, he didn't need that because Ted would have won anyway. But I do

think the appointment of Celebreeze to the Cabinet was, in part – and it was politically justifiable – to mollify the Italian vote.

There was another thing that came along. I don't know what the time relationship was. But you will recall that when the Justice Department allowed that man from the Mafia to testify before Congress, Valachi [Joseph Valachi], well, this upset the

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Italian community quite a bit because Valachi pictured the Mafia as being entirely Italian almost. They were quite upset about this. In a sense it reflected against the Administration – this Italian feeling. I do have information to that effect because I know quite a few politicians who at that time were disturbed about it. I think that was a minor matter, but nonetheless it all added in.

GRELE: In that article you also talked about the claim that discrimination in housing could be eliminated with a stroke of a pen as part of a welding of the Negro vote to the Democratic party. Did the President ever comment to you on that statement?

WICKER: Not to me personally. I recall in those Christmas backgrounders at Palm Beach – and I cannot say whether it was '61 or

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'62 – he was questioned rather sharply by the group of us as to why he had not done this. I remember asking a couple of questions along that line myself. His response was that... I'm trying to remember it to be accurate; I would have to look it up; I'm sure I wrote about this in the story that we did at the time... But, as I recall his response was that in dealing with a complex matter like civil rights where there were so many facets, so many things that had to be done, you tried to do things in some reasonable order of priority, you tried not to do things that might cause more dislocation than gain at the moment; and you worked along in sort of a smooth progression of things rather than doing everything at once. That is the way I recall his answer. In my accounts in the *Times* file of those two Christmas backgrounders, whichever one it was – it must have been '62 – anyone

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Interested would find a better account of what he said then. But I do recall that at the end of that session – we had virtually reached the end of it – I piped up, having asked a couple of questions in this sitting, and I said, "Mr. President, may I ask one more question?" With a laugh – he had been a little discomfited about this – he said, "As long as it's not about that housing order." I asked something else.

GRELE: Did he ever give any indication to you that he thought perhaps the statement that he had made originally was a mistake?

WICKER: No, I don't think he ever said that. He certainly didn't say it to me. I do think that that statement was made undoubtedly for political effect. I know it was made before he became President, and it no doubt was made without a full realization

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of the difficulties. After all, you have got a great deal of difficulty on this thing. When he finally did it, he said it wasn't an easy matter.

You get all sorts of people up in arms against you if you're going to do this. There are legal problems involved with it. So that, once in office and sitting there looking at it, ready to make that stroke of the pen, then I think the difficulties of doing so, the political problems involved simply were strong enough so that the President didn't feel that he could or should do it immediately. He waited till whatever he felt was the right time. It would be hard to know, as long as you can't put yourself in his mind, whether it was really the right time in some cosmic sense, or whether it was the time when the pressures to do it began to outweigh the pressures not to do it.

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I think the general approach of the Kennedy Administration to the civil rights problem, when it came into office and up until the time in 1963 when the Birmingham crisis forced it to present a sweeping civil rights bill, was that they could make more ground by executive action of one kind or another than by snarling themselves with the southern Democrats. Therefore, there was a succession of things that they did mostly through the Justice Department. I think they were, in a sense, working up steam in this. In other words, they began slowly and moved on as far as they could. In my opinion, and I frankly confess I was wrong at the time, I thought that was good politics. It didn't seem to me sensible that the Kennedy Administration should come right into office and immediately precipitate a filibuster

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in the Senate and get all tied up on that score. I thought the executive approach was good politics. I still think so generally, but I think that President Kennedy, in extending that policy – and I in just looking at it as a commentator – underestimated the virility and volatility of the Negro movement at that time – did not realize how much steam was building up under them – and in effect moved too slowly in this so that by 1963 the thing very nearly got out of hand. But I think if I had been elected President and taken office on January 20, 1961, I would have felt precisely as he did about it. I think most politicians would have. I still think it was a good political policy. It was just that it was based on the wrong assumption, or it was based on an inadequate understanding of how much real

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the key states because Goldwater theoretically had great strength there. And in fact, I believe he would have carried Texas against Kennedy – might have. He would have run close. So I very much wanted to go down there. I begged and pleaded and argued and finally they let me loose. I left New York on a shuttle plane at 10 o'clock Wednesday night, came to Washington, slept a few hours, got up, and went up and caught the press plane. I, of course, will always be rather glad it worked out that way as long as what happened had to happen.

I'm trying to recall in detail. It seems to me we flew first to San Antonio, Texas. Kennedy was speaking there at some, I believe, Air Force research facility outside. I'm not clear on this. The great topic of conversation among reporters was the so-called feeling between Ralph

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Yarborough, Senator from Texas, and Lyndon Johnson. I remember the Texas reporters greeted us down there, and all any of them wanted to know was if it were true that Kennedy was going to dump Johnson from the ticket in '64. The Bobby Baker [Robert G. Baker] scandal was very big at the time – or just breaking. The unanimous opinion among the Washington reporters which we related to them was that that was nonsense. By then Kennedy had said he wasn't going to do this in a news conference, and it didn't seem to make any political sense to us that he would – the importance of Texas and the political dislocation that would always be caused by dumping a vice presidential candidate, you know. So we talked about that some.

There was a report, which I had given currency in something that I wrote and I

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can't recall what, that on that day – and I think there in San Antonio – Senator Yarborough refused to ride in the car with Vice President Johnson. Now, two years after the fact – that was in November of '63 – in November or December of '65, or maybe even January of '66, I got a very irate letter from Senator Yarborough who had apparently just come across whatever it was that I wrote. I don't know whether it was one of my news stories that day or what. He said that this was not so; that he had not refused to ride in the car with the Vice President; and that the further report, which I also had given currency, that on the second day – the actual day of the assassination – in Forth Worth President Kennedy had decreed that he and the Vice President would ride together was not so either. He insisted

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on this. I wrote him back a conciliatory letter telling him quite frankly what is true: that I did not remember on what authoritative basis this had been written; (And I don't. I do not remember.) but that I did remember that those reporters were common currency, and not only I had written them, but everybody in the press had written them; and that he would find them in the Texas press and in the Washington press. But I'm embarrassed to say that I just don't remember what the actual source of the story was. I do remember very plainly in San

Antonio was our first stop – that they did not ride in the same car, and that the next morning in Fort Worth, and again in Dallas, they did ride in the same car, as everybody of course knows.

Anyway, we went on from San Antonio

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to Houston – a wonderful motorcade in Houston. The President got a great reception there. He made a speech that night at a dinner honoring Albert Thomas who was a Congressman from that area and a chairman of one of the important appropriations' committees and a very powerful man in Congress. Albert Thomas was reputed to be sick and retiring from Congress, but I believe by then he had changed his mind. Kennedy payed great tribute to him, I thought somewhat senselessly because he talked about the great future Albert Thomas had to offer the nation when most people knew Albert Thomas had quite a brief future to offer to the nation and, in fact, Albert Thomas is now dead.

There was an amusing incident that you probably know about – if I can remember the phraseology in the speech. Of course,

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the manned space center was there, and Kennedy talked a good deal about space. He said that, "We are getting ready to send aloft a rocket with the greatest payroll in history!" Of course, he meant to say the greatest pay load, and he caught himself. The crowd laughed. It was a perfect Kennedy moment. He laughed himself and said, "Yes, and we've put a little bit of that payroll right here in Houston, too." Which is, of course, true.

It was a big dinner. Parenthetically, that dinner was arranged by Jack Valenti – I mean he was the arrangements chairman – who now is one of President Johnson's right-hand men. I'm told – although Valenti has never told me this, but I think it's true – that Johnson sort of swept Valenti up that night and took him on to Fort Worth. They spent most of the night talking.

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Of course, Valenti was with Johnson the next day when the assassination occurred.

I remember that night in Fort Worth, where we wound up, going with Douglas Kiker of the [*New York Herald Tribune*] into the coffee shop in the Texas Hotel. I'm not sure of the name of the hotel. I think that's it. That's where we stayed. Who should be sitting there but John Connally, the Governor of Texas, who is a very informal sort of fellow, with two or three of the Texas reporters and a member of his staff. Kiker and I went over and joined up. I knew Connally. I had covered his 1962 campaign. And, of course, he had been in Washington as Secretary of the Navy. Kiker didn't know him, but I introduced him and we sat down there. A rather interesting and funny thing happened. Kiker said, "Governor, I'd like to ask you about something.

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We ran into a reporter down in Houston this afternoon.” I can’t remember who it was now. He said, “He told me about a poll that the *Houston [Chronicle]*” – the afternoon paper, I always get mixed up – “the Houston afternoon paper is going to publish tomorrow. It shows that Goldwater would carry the state over Kennedy, if the vote were taken now, by a big margin.” I’ve forgotten the figure. The Governor kind of laughed; the other fellows kind of laughed. The reporter for this Texas paper who was sitting there spoke up and said, “The Governor has been sitting here for the last hour trying to get the results of that poll out of me. I was refusing to tell him until the paper appeared. And now you tell him.” Anyway, Connally went on to discuss this. My recollection is that he said – and I think he repeated

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all this the next morning at a news conference – that it would be difficult for Kennedy to carry the state against Goldwater; that it might be true that if the vote were taken then, Goldwater would win it, but the vote was not to be taken then; and that he didn’t think that it was out of the question that Kennedy could carry Texas. That’s my recollection of the conversation. That was about all that happened.

We got up early the next morning. Kennedy spoke in the parking lot across the street from the hotel. There was a light rain falling. Again I’m in the situation of not really being able to remember my source on this. There was more than one source. But we knew, or thought we knew – the press there did – and it was generally written that that speech was

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arranged at the last minute because Governor Connally who as you know, is a conservative Democrat in Texas – and that has a real meaning in Texas’ I don’t mean just his ideology, but he is in the conservative Democratic faction – had so arranged the Kennedy trip down there that he was not, other than for motorcades in Houston and Dallas, really getting a lot of exposure to the ordinary folks of Texas. He had been to this big dinner for Albert Thomas the night before. I imagine it was a \$100 a plate dinner. I don’t recall the price, but it was an expensive dinner. He had arranged a big luncheon in Dallas the next day – the one that Kennedy never got to. But he was not really given a lot of public exposure. So this parking lot speech was arranged sort of at the last minute to placate the less conservative

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Texas Democrats. I’ve forgotten some of this. Somewhere the night before the assassination, President Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy appeared before a Spanish speaking group. I don’t remember whether it was Houston or Fort Worth, but they appeared before this group, and Mrs. Kennedy addressed them in Spanish and got a big hand. I remember the President and Mrs. Johnson in the background looking a little lost and out of place. Mrs. Kennedy spoke crisp Spanish -- a very simple little speech, but it got a big hand from them.

The President appeared in the parking lot that morning without Mrs. Kennedy. There was some obvious disappointment in the crowd, and he made a nice remark about, “Mrs.

Kennedy is still getting herself together.” This must have been 7 o’clock in the morning, or maybe 8. He said, “It

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takes her a little longer than most of us, but she looks better than we do when she finishes.” -- which got a big round of applause. He spoke there about the important contribution Fort Worth was making to the space and Air Force effort and so forth -- a rather obvious, little political speech, but well done.

We went back to the hotel, and Governor Connally held a news conference. President Johnson has told me since that that morning in the hotel, Texas Hotel of Fort Worth, he and President Kennedy were talking. President Kennedy was very pleased with the reception he had gotten and the turnout and the crowd across the street and everything. President Johnson told me that the last words President Kennedy ever spoke to him were, “Lyndon, I know there are two states we’re going to carry next year --

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Massachusetts and Texas.” That sounds like a bit of hindsight to me. I wouldn’t question that Kennedy said that necessarily, but famous last words and all that -- it takes an act of will, I think, to really concede the fact that those were literally Kennedy’s last words to Johnson. But that’s what he said. I suspect he said that in the course of the conversation, and a little bit later on he said, “Well, so long, Lyndon, I’ll see you later.” But who knows?

Then we had this brief motorcade out to the Fort Worth Airport and about a ten minute flight in the jet to Dallas. It was unusual that Mrs. Kennedy was along at all. This has been a subject of quite a few stories because she didn’t ordinarily make this kind of trip with him. They had lost their baby in August, I guess, or

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before that. She had been off in Europe on a rather criticized trip abroad Onassis’ [Aristotle Onassis] yacht, I think. She had occasioned some press criticism. And there was a good deal of speculation about why she was making this trip, and whether it meant she was going to campaign a lot with him in Texas or whether it was more personal or what. But anyway it was unusual for her to go along on this trip. A lot of note was taken on this. It appeared to increase the size of the crowds and so forth -- a big crowd at the airport.

There was some organized group along the fence with signs welcoming Kennedy. I don’t remember the name of the group, but it would be in my story that I wrote that day. The President and Mrs. Kennedy walked along the fence for quite a while. She was carrying a bunch of red roses and

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shaking hands and greeting everybody. As I always try to do on occasions like that, I got up very close, right in the middle of the secret servicemen and everything, and walked along. It

was a very enthusiastic and happy crowd. I mean there was not an iota of hostility in the crowd at all. After shaking hands, they went back to the limousine they were to ride in with the Governor and Mrs. Connally. I walked all the way back to the limousine with them because, frankly, one of my techniques is to eavesdrop in circumstances like that. I mean, circumstances that are relatively public; where you know they're not going to say anything really private that you don't belong to hear, but which might make a colorful note for a story -- if the President had made some quip to the Governor, for instance. In any

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case, when I can in an occasion like that, I try to eavesdrop and stay as close as I can. In this case I don't particularly remember anything being said. I do remember Governor and Mrs. Connally sort of waiting by the car there for the Kennedys to come back. They didn't participate in the reception that Kennedy was getting. I remember wondering whether this was perhaps a group that was perhaps politically hostile to Connally. It could have been; it might not have been. I don't know. Anyway he stayed by the car.

After they got back to the car, then I broke away and went to the press buses -- there were two press buses. As you probably know, there's controversy in the press to this day about who was on which bus. One of the causes for the controversy arises because the buses were numbered #1

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and #2. But it's now established that bus #2 got ahead of bus #1 in the motorcade. I would swear and still believe -- I'm certain -- that I was on the first press bus. But I know, as a matter of fact that I wasn't because enough evidence has been adduced now. But my recollection is absolutely clear that I was on the first press bus. This is one of the things that people remember. People who were on the first press bus later heard the shots, and I didn't. I don't think anybody on our bus did that I know of. In any case, we went along on this motorcade. It's quite a long route into Dallas. They routed us right through the heart of the town. Dallas has sort of canyon streets. They're quite narrow. The buildings are fairly tall -- I mean ten story buildings. They routed us right through the heart of

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town. The crowds were immense. They were really very big crowds, and they spilled out well over the sidewalks and into the middle so you really only had a lane of traffic down the middle. The limousine was open. They didn't have the bubble top on it.

Everybody was a little keyed up -- anxious to see, you know, if the woman who hit Adlai Stevenson was going to come out there and hit the President or whatever. Or if there would be hostile signs. I don't really remember now, but I think there may have been one or two Goldwater signs or something in the crowd, but that was so common in those days. Anywhere you went there was always some sign. A common one was "Kennedy for King; Barry for President." You would first see in those days -- what was it -- "AUH2O" signs.

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You know, the chemical symbol for Goldwater. You used to see a lot of those. I think there was that kind of sign here and there but not many, and no evidence whatever of hostility -- very enthusiastic crowd, happy crowd, noontime crowd. Warm day, people in their shirt sleeves, pretty girls. A very happy crowd. The Kennedys had plenty of reason to be pleased with it. As Mrs. Connally's remarks have shown, they were pleased.

Incidentally, I never believed, either, that seconds before the shots, Mrs. Connally said to the President -- what was it -- "Dallas certainly loves you today," or something like that. I think that's too pat, too. I think she might well have said that on the trip -- I suppose I'm being cynical or something -- but those famous last words just seldom get said, I think.

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I'm not throwing off on Mrs. Connally's memory or President Johnson's, I just think that it's easy to remember those things as happening that way when they didn't actually.

Anyway, the motorcade came out of downtown Dallas, and it turned into that triple underpass area there that everybody knows about by now; there's no use in my describing it. But the effect is a little bit like coming out of the city and out into a kind of open space. That was the effect a little bit. The crowds just fell away just like that. I mean, the crowd was in the city along the narrow streets, and out in this sort of plaza area where there are two or three highways converging and going down to the underpass and a few buildings around there, there was no tremendous mass crowd, just a few people scattered around.

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I know I had the feeling, at least, that the motorcade was over. We had gone through the crowd, and everybody kind of relaxed. I was sitting by a fellow by the name of Jim Mathis [James Mathis] who was then with the Advance News Syndicate. That's the Newhouse Newspapers. He's a Texan. He now owns, I think, or is editor of some paper in Texas. He's not in Washington anymore. Mathis was sitting by me. We were not up forward in the bus; we were somewhere in the middle of the bus. He was leaning out in the aisle and looking up ahead as we came down out of the downtown area. He got up and went forward all of a sudden to the windshield of the bus up front. He stayed there a little bit; then came back, and he said to me, "Something must have happened. The President's car just sped off." He said, "They really

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gunned it away." I remember that phrase, "gunned it away." Then he sat back down. I did not, at that point, notice any commotion in our bus. I don't think there was much commotion. To my knowledge, nobody in our bus heard shots. As we approached the actual scene where we now know the shooting happened, there was a little commotion in the crowd -- people running hither and thither. I don't recollect at that point, where I now know the shooting happened -- that is, before we got into the underpass -- that this was alarming or upsetting, or

even particularly aroused my interest. I know I did notice it, but it could have been really not a great deal more than the fact that the President's car had passed and the Vice President's car had passed and people were scattering. It was a little more than that, but not so

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much more that it was alarming. Then there was Mathis' remark that the President's car had sped off. So we were alerted to something. For all we knew, you know, somebody had thrown a tomato; or I don't know, maybe they found out they were late for the luncheon; maybe there was no crowd so they decided to hurry. We didn't know. I certainly didn't. I shouldn't speak for anybody else in the press bus. I know Mathis didn't who was sitting by me.

As we emerged from the underpass -- went through the underpass and emerged from it -- I saw the first thing that really excited my curiosity. (Mark Lane goes around making speeches about this, by the way, because it's in my piece that was in *Times Talk* about the day's events.) I noticed a motorcycle policeman, a Dallas motorcycle cop with one of those little side

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cars on it but nobody in the side car, to the right of the motorcade as we came out. It's a grass plot and leads up the back to the railroad tracks up there. He drove his motorcycle over the curb and a good piece up that bank -- about as far as a motorcycle could go up that bank. He dropped it and went charging up that hill. I was convinced by then that something had happened but didn't know what.

Now Mark Lane goes around making speeches saying that that proves that the assassin must have been up on the railroad track, and it proves that the *New York Times* suppressed that fact in my account of that day because I put it in my *Times Talk* article but not in the piece that was published in the *Times*. The explanation really is very simple. That is, that in trying to cover all the catastrophic events of that day,

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I did not think it was necessarily important to the readers of the *Times* that my personal first awareness of something happening should be reported in detail. Now later on when I wrote the *Times Talk* piece, I was writing about myself and what I...

[END TAPE II, SIDE I]

GRELE: Did you follow the President's car to the hospital?

WICKER: No. By the time I noticed this motorcycle policeman, the cars up front had gotten very far on out away from us. We were the second bus apparently. Although as I told you, it seems to me we were the first. But both press busses, and for all I know some of the cars that were in front of them -- I don't remember --

but I know both press buses proceeded and not very fast. We went on to the "Trade Mart" where this luncheon was to be held.

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The people were aware on the first press bus more so than I was -- I won't say more so than on our bus, but more so than I was -- that something bad had happened. Robert MacNeil of NBC actually got off the first press bus at the scene of the shooting. Bob Pierpoint [Robert C. Pierpoint] of CBS, who had been seated in the front seat of the other bus, heard the shots. Again, Bob is one of my close friends and he's one of the best reporters I know. But not many people claim to have heard those shots, and I'm just doubtful myself. Those press buses were closed, and we had air conditioning going. I think if one person on the bus heard the shots, almost everybody would have. I don't want to cast doubt on Bob's version, but I've argued with him personally. I think maybe there's hind-hearing as well as hindsight. But I don't know.

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Bob is an honorable man and a damn good reporter.

Anyway, the press buses went on to "Trade Mart." We got out there. I still was not terribly alarmed about anything. We didn't see the President's car, but then that wouldn't be unusual because he would probably have gone to another and more convenient entrance. We went on in this "Trade Mart." It's this big, kind of open building. The main floor was covered with luncheon tables, and there are balconies up on each side. From this point on everything I remember is in there, but if you want it in the tape I'll go ahead.

GRELE: Go ahead.

WICKER: As I said, there were open balconies up the side and diners' luncheon tables up on those balconies, too -- a rather big crowd. It gave the effect of an opera house. The

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luncheon had already begun. People were sitting there eating. As we walked along one side of this one hall down to the other end where the press room was, someone at one of those table said to me, "Has the President been shot?" I said, "My God, not that I know of." I hadn't heard anything about it. I walked on, hurrying on then. But as I walked through that hall, I could literally see that rumor moving through that room. You know, you could just see heads turning; you could just follow it. I've never seen that before, but you could. BY the time I got to the end of the room -- it was a rather long thing, big as a football field, I guess -- the place was buzzing with this kind of talk.

The press room was upstairs, up two or three flights by escalator. We went

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up the escalators, and by the time I got to the press room most of the press group was there, and everybody was buzzing with this. "Something's happened." -- "Have you heard?" -- "There's a rumor the President..." You know. About that time Marianne Means, who was then the White House correspondent for the Hearst newspapers and is now a columnist for them, came dashing over. Phil Potter [Philip Potter] of the *Baltimore Sun* and I were standing there talking, and I believe Kiker of the *Herald Tribune*. She said, "My God, the President's been shot. He's in Parkland Hospital." She didn't say where she got this information or anything, but it was the kind of thing she said that you knew it was true. At that point, it came across.

Potter and I had put our typewriters down at another level up where we were to

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write -- you know, they had typewriters and all for us. We had put our portables down up there and came down a level where, I think, maybe we were supposed to listen to the speech -- or something like that. We went tearing up to get our typewriters, and we went flying downstairs again. And somehow we got on the wrong bank of escalators. We ran down the up escalators, I remember, which is not very damn easy to do. But once you got going that way, it was easier than trying to go back and get on the down escalators. So we went tearing down there. Kiker was with us, and we were running all out. We went tearing out through that big dining room down the hall there and running like hell to where the press buses were. Some officious-looking character grabbed me by the arm, or tried to. He said, "Here, you can't run in here." I

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just kept right on going through. A waiter came sort of backing out into the aisle carrying a big tray of food, and Kiker just hit him head on. He couldn't stop. He just banged into him just like a football player. Potatoes went this way, the tray went that way and the waiter another way, and Kiker kept right on going. We went tearing out.

The only bus we say -- by then we may have switched buses for all I know -- but we saw a bus that was just slowly beginning to pull away. Kiker was okay; he got aboard the thing. But Potter has a bad back -- much like President Kennedy's own back. He carries one of these big old heavy huge typewriters. He's had it with him for years, and he's attached to it, but it's a monstrous thing. He said, "I don't think I can make it." I grabbed his

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typewriter and carried it for him. We tore out for this bus which was moving very slowly. We got up to it, and I got aboard and pulled Potter aboard. We pulled out.

Pierpont was sitting there. I remember what he said. He said, "I don't know what has happened, but we all better pray." I remember that very clearly. The bus went blazing off. By this time we knew something was wrong, so we made the drive go fast. We went blazing off to Parkland Hospital which, in retrospect, doesn't seem to me to be very far away. I'm not

sure what the actual distance is, but it didn't seem very far. We got there, and there was a big crowd standing right outside the hospital. We could see the President's limousine pulled up there in front of the hospital. A lot of police --

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I guess all the police who had been guarding the motorcade. We went sort of plunging into this crowd with the reporters getting off. Some of the reporters were already there. We got there.

It's all just a blur in my mind. I remember the first really good information we got that we could rely on and trust came from Ralph Yarborough. He had been riding in the car with the Vice President. He gave us the description of having heard the shots, which he recalled as having come over his right shoulder, which proves, at least according to the Lee Harvey Oswald theory -- oh, I'm talking about the case made by the Warren Commission -- would be right. The shots came over his right shoulder.

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He also recalls what can't be right if the Oswald thing is true. He smelled the acrid odor of gunsmoke. I think, again, that may be imagination. I don't know. But he said it. He recalled how Rufe Youngblood [Rufus Youngblood], the secret serviceman, had leaped over the back of their car and had pushed Mr. Johnson down onto the floor, and Mrs. Johnson, and got on top of them, and he, Yarborough, was kind of left to fend for himself there. The car sped off at a high rate of speed. They got to the hospital in time for Yarborough to see President Kennedy carried inside. And at that point, Senator Yarborough would not describe the appearance of the President. He would not talk about it except, as you may know, he's a southerner and a kind of rhetorical sort of thing and he said, "Gentleman, this is a deed of horror."

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He was quite shaken by it all. He was white. He was talking compulsively, obviously near shock, as anyone would have been. He confirmed to us that Governor Connally also had been shot, and he said, as I recall it, that Governor Connally had half walked into the hospital. I don't really know whether that's right or not, but I remember he said he seemed to be clutching his stomach. So that gave us quite a bit of information. Then there were other details that he gave us, too.

There was a television cameraman or a news cameraman -- but my recollection is a television cameraman -- but it's in that article -- who had been riding in about the seventh or eighth car in the motorcade. He was right on the button. He said, "I looked up. I saw the rifle in a corner window of the Texas School Book Depository." It seems to me, and again if I'm right it would be in that article, that he had even named the floor. And he turned out to be right on the button.

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We milled around the front of the hospital there. We got some more information relayed to us from Bob Clark [Robert E. Clark] who is with ABC and who was one of the poolers that day and was up close. I didn't talk to Clark personally, but we got this second hand, you know, from people who had. I don't know what information, but we got some from him. We milled around there. I remember getting up close to the President's limousine and taking down the license plate -- G.G. 300. There was a bucket of bloody water sitting on the ground beside it where, apparently, somebody had tried to mop out the back seat of the car. They wouldn't let us get very close. They wouldn't let us in the hospital.

Mac Kilduff [Malcolm Kilduff] came out about that time. He was the press secretary on that trip. He confirmed that the President had been shot, that Governor Connally had

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been shot and could not give us any information about the President's condition, but said that the President was alive. In fact, he was not. This was after one o'clock. But Mac didn't know that. I absolve him entirely. He did not mean to mislead anybody or anything. He was saying what he knew at that time. He didn't know that the President was dead. But he was obviously very shaken. He said that a press room was being set up in a nurses' classroom around the side of the hospital. "Around that way. If you go around there, that would be the place where any information available would be put out." The press sort of started drifted that way. There was an iron linked, you know, looped fence around there -- chain fence. We were stepping over that and walking around on the lawn of this rather modern, nice building

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to a side entrance. I lingered behind, and I went over and talked to one of the motorcycle policeman. They had radios. I said, "Is their any information yet about who did it?" He said, "No." He said he hadn't heard anything. I said, "Well, haven't you heard anything about what they're doing, or who did the shooting or anything of the sort?" He said, "No, the radio's full of some guy who shot a policeman. They just caught him over in a theatre over on the west side of Dallas." I said, "I don't give a damn about that. I want to know who shot the President." He said, "Well, we don't know anything about that yet." So I walked on along.

The car that the Vice President and Ralph Yarborough had been riding in was standing over to one side in the route where we had to go. It was standing with

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two front doors wide open. It was a convertible, and the radio was on. There was nobody in it, just the radio on. As I walked past that car, one of the last two or three of the press group heading around the side of the building, the radio announcer's voice said, "Ladies and gentlemen, the President is dead. We repeat. The President of the United States is dead." Then the radio went silent -- for a little while at least. It didn't say who said that or what the authority was or anything. It just said that. But it was conclusive. It was final. You know, life

is this way. You simply believe some things, and you don't believe others. Some things hit you and some things don't. I know it was true when I heard that.

So I jumped across that fence. I took off running, carrying my typewriter.

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I jumped over that fence. It wasn't difficult, but I jumped over it, and I caught up to Hugh Sidey who was very close to the President, very close to me. I said, "Hugh, the President's dead. I just heard it on the radio. I don't know what the authority for it is, but it sounded right." I said, "The President's dead." Hugh just sort of stopped and stood still for a while. I stood there for a minute. There wasn't anything to say. I walked on. As he stood there -- I know this because he later came to the press room and told us all this -- I was walking on away, he saw two Catholic priests come out of the hospital. He went up to them and asked them if they knew what was happening and if the President was dead. They said, "Yes." It turned out to be the priest who had administered the last rites. They told

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him what little they knew and gave him their names and so forth. He came on around to the press room and filled us in. He gave everybody that information.

Not long after that -- I don't know how long we waited around there, but not long is my recollection -- Kilduff came in and made the formal announcement which is on record. You know what he said. Very shaky -- all of us were, I think. Perhaps some of the reporters were in tears. Well, I know they were; I was. After that, people began to break out of the press room after Mac made the announcement. He promised to come back and tell us anything else he could. He didn't know a lot of things. He couldn't know. He didn't know when the Vice President was going to be sworn in or anything of that sort. We went out and found telephones. I found a telephone

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somewhere around there and called my office, and we got straight what we were going to do.

Oh, incidentally, before I forget, I found out later -- I didn't know at the time, but Marianne Means had got that information that the President was shot and was in Parkland Hospital from her editor in New York who had heard it on the radio. Most of the press on that trip got what they considered the official -- not official but conclusive -- announcement that the President had been shot and was in Parkland Hospital from a Hearst editor in New York. I wouldn't say most, but a lot of us did.

After I made the telephone call I came back to.... I guess it was before I made my telephone call. The doctors, whoever he was -- I can't remember his name, but of

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course that's in all the articles, too -- who had been in charge there in the operating room came in, and he gave us a good deal of technical information about the bullet holes, the cause

of death, the time of death and this, that and the other thing -- a lot of which was wrong as it came out in the long run. He told us, for instance, that the bullet wound in Kennedy's throat, right here, had all the marks of an entry of a bullet. As we know, it didn't. At least that's as the case was established by the Warren Commission. He never mentioned the large wound in the President's back. The explanation now given, which I never accepted as being sensible, is that they didn't turn him over. But anyway, we had no way to check that information that day so what the doctor told us, we took at face value. The state that everybody was in no matter what kind of information you got, if it was wrong, it's hard to blame anybody.

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I then made my telephone call. That's right. After making my telephone call, instead of going back to the press room, I decided to see where enterprise would lead me. I went wandering around the hospital corridors, and I ran into Sidey and Chuck Roberts [Charles W. Roberts.] Enterprise led us nowhere except outdoors. We just couldn't get anywhere. We got out in front of the hospital again some way. We didn't want to stay out there. We couldn't get back into the main entrance until we located a secret serviceman. I frankly don't know his name. I knew him, but I didn't know his name. He took us through the police line. We went into the emergency reception room, not the operating room. We went into the reception room. We stood there because there was a hearse. I don't want to say whether it was a hearse. It was a hearse because it had a funeral home thing on it.

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We deduced from that that they were getting ready to bring the body out -- which was right. We stood in the emergency reception room. There's a corridor that comes by you. The emergency reception room empties here onto a kind of open porch in front of the hospital and the corridor emptied there. We stood at the door of the emergency reception room. After a very few minutes, the body was wheeled out in a coffin on a thing with wheels. Mrs. Kennedy was walking beside it spattered with blood. Her stockings were spattered with blood. Her dress was also spattered, but I noticed the stockings in particular. She had either lost or taken off the hat she'd been wearing. Her hair was rather disheveled. As you can imagine, she was crying. She was walking with one hand on the coffin. Behind her came a good many members of the Kennedy

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staff who were along: Larry O'Brien, Kenny O'Donnell. I can't remember who all, but I certainly remember them. They showed obvious evidence of crying and so forth. The coffin was wheeled into this hearse. Mrs. Kennedy got in the back of the hearse with him. The staff people crowded themselves into cars that were there -- police cars or anything they could find. I thought at that time.... We assumed they were taking the body to the airport. So, what happened was the three of us.... Chuck Roberts got his way into one of those cars because he was going to go to the airport and see what would happen. Sidey and I decided to stay at the

hospital because we didn't know where the Vice President was. No one was even sure.... There were all kinds of mad rumors. You know, for all we knew the Vice President

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was shot although Yarborough said not. Or the Vice President had a heart attack. Or the Vice President this or that. We didn't know so we thought we ought to stick around there.

We went back to the press room. At that point a man named Reed [Julian Reed], one of Connally's assistants, came in and gave us some very useful stuff from Mrs. Connally who, of course, was uninjured, and also about the Governor's condition. We found out from Mrs. Connally for instance, or she confirmed, where everybody was sitting in the car. We got that remark about, "Dallas certainly loves you today." We got a lot of color like this -- what she had done at the time, and what Mrs. Kennedy had done. We found out about the secret serviceman jumping on the back of the car, that sort of thing -- very useful.

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Then Wayne Hawks who was a member of the White House staff who traveled with us at that time came in and said that the Vice President had gone to the airport and was going to be sworn in at the airport; the buses were going to the airport immediately; and anyone who wanted to go out there and take a chance on seeing the swearing in or whatever could go. Well, I certainly did so we went tearing out of that hospital.

By this time time was getting a little short, or you always feel that time is short in circumstances of that kind. I knew my deadline had been moved up. I actually had time but.... I wanted to get busy. I had right much stuff by then, as you can imagine. So I ran faster than anybody else -- I guess. I got ahead of everybody anyway. I got aboard the press bus and went straight to a seat in the back -- the wide seat in the back -- because

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I have ridden many press buses many times, and bus seats are so constructed that you can't put a typewriter on your knees in an ordinary seat. But you can go back there in the back and sit in that seat and claim the aisle, you know, and open up your typewriter and work on your knees, which I did. We drove from there to Love Field which, again my recollection is it's a short trip. I don't know the distance, but it didn't seem to take any time. I got off two pages of copy on the way to the airport. I got them typed, you know. I put down the assumption that President Johnson would be sworn in in the terminal, which was not true as we know.

Well, as we drove up, we entered a rear entrance to the airport. We didn't come up to the terminal. We came in somewhere out at the field through a wire fence.

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As we came up to a runway, Air Force One was thundering down the runway taking off at that point. We watched it go and then got out of the bus. Sid Davis who works with the Westinghouse Broadcasting Stations had also got out to the airport someway and had

witnessed the swearing in. He and Roberts had put together a pool report. They didn't have room for everybody on the plane going back so people had to be put off. Davis got off because he wanted to go and broadcast anyway. He stayed there long enough -- he got up on the trunk deck of somebody's car and gave us a pool report in which he gave us all the details about the President being sworn in, the time and all that sort of thing. So that pretty well rounded out the story.

Incidentally, there's a little bit of contretemps about it. He read out -- and I have in my notes and everybody else

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does -- an oath that he said Judge Hughes [Sarah Hughes] had given the Vice President. I copied it down in my notes and reported it in my story, and it went through all the editions of the *New York Times*. It's in some other papers too. A controversy arose about this later because it was not the official Constitutional Oath. It's close to it, but it's not the same thing. There had been a problem. Apparently, a call had been made to the Justice Department from the airplane. The Justice Department had phone back the actual text of the Constitutional Oath. The tape recordings reveal that the President took the oath as prescribed in the Constitution and not the oath as read to us by Davis. Well, we began to get letters about this. There was even a little Goldwater type thing that Johnson wasn't really President because

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he had taken the wrong oath, you know. It was a lot of nonsense.

Anyway, I questioned Davids about this. Davis was perplexed about it, too. He said that he had asked Judges Hughes after the ceremony, if she had a copy of the oath. She handed him a card with the oath on it. That is the oath he read to us. He and I conjectured from that that Judge Hughes, hastily called to the airplane, had not had time to get the oath and had from memory constructed something that was quite close to the oath. It was. It was very close, but some of the words were off. I wrote her a note to try to establish this fact. She wrote back. I don't remember the wording of the letter, but in fact she didn't remember giving Sid Davis any card and she said she had given the legal oath. So how it all happened, I don't know.

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But the oath as reported in the *New York Times* is not the right oath. Where Sid Davis got that card -- he said he got it from Judge Hughes, and Sid is a great man and I'm sure he did. But she says she doesn't remember any of that. Exactly what happened I don't know.

GRELE: After the assassination...

WICKER: I'll give you that letter if you want it if it's worth anything. After that, we heard Davis' pool report, Kiker and I took off right there and went running, literally, across the field and through some warehouses and freight storage and

shipping places and made our way into the terminal. Both of us went to the telephone immediately and called in some stuff. I went up.... If you've ever been to the Dallas terminal, you know there's a kind of balcony along one

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side of it and they've got some writing tables up there for travelers -- postcards and so forth and stationery. I appropriated one of those tables and went to work. I would write about two pages of copy. Then I'd go across the terminal to the phones and call in. Kiker went off to one of those bottle clubs some airlines have and worked in there. Several television sets were around the terminal, and we could follow some of what was going on from them. I had told my office to take all news about the assassin and the efforts to find him and so forth from the wires because I hadn't any time to do a police reporter's job -- I had to write what I had -- which they did. Late in the day, about the time I was getting through, Gladwin Hill, who is our Los Angeles correspondent who had been assigned, had gotten a plane and had

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gotten into Dallas and found me in the airport. He was the first man in, besides me, of the *Times* men. I sent him immediately -- or asked him immediately -- to go to the police station and get on the police story which he did and stayed on it for weeks. But I never did go to the police station or any of that.

Kiker and I got through and went down to the Dallas News office. Later in the night a number of other *Times* men came in, and I wrote another story. I got -- just cribbed it out of the Dallas paper -- a description of the School Book Depository building: what it was, and all that sort of thing; what it looked like. I tried to get the other reporters out on assignment and so forth. Pretty soon, however, Fendall Yerxa, who was then the news editor of the Washington bureau, came in, and I turned all that over to him.

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I went back to the hotel. I hastily got a room. A while bunch of the Washington press, basically Washington press, who were there and stayed the night gathered in somebody's room -- I can't remember whose -- in another hotel room, in the Adolphus Hotel. We watched TV until about midnight, seeing a lot of things. Among other things, we saw Mayor Cabell [Earle Cabell] of Dallas, who is now Congressman from Dallas, make what I thought was a very good speech where he really sort of laid out Dallas for right wingism and the Stevenson incident and this kind of thing. I went to bed, and that about ends that day -- unless you want more of an account of what I did, which I don't suppose would be of interest to anybody.

GRELE: When you came back you were still White House correspondent.

WICKER: Yes.

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GRELE: How rapid was the Johnson take-over of the White House?

WICKER: Well, of course you had the interim of four days there -- the funeral and all. I was not here on the Saturday following the assassination. I got back Saturday night late because of the time differential, and I couldn't get a reservation out of Dallas until about 2 o'clock in the afternoon -- and then into Friendship Airport in Baltimore. Sunday was the day they took the body to the Capitol. You know, it's established that Johnson began conferring with people Friday night when he got in, and Saturday. And Sunday afternoon he met with Henry Cabot Lodge, who was then Ambassador to Vietnam. Monday was the day of the funeral itself, was it not? Yes. On Tuesday he was hard at work because you still had a great many of the foreign

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dignitaries who had come to the funeral here. He shuffled them in by the dozen. I can't remember, but I wrote a story about it that day with all their names listed. He was hard at work all day Tuesday. In fact, he actually went to work with that sort of thing Monday night after the funeral with the State Department reception. He moved in very rapidly. On Wednesday he made his famous speech to Congress which, I think, was the single most important moment of his presidency so far. I think he established himself as President right there. He probably won the 1964 election right there. He said the right things, did the right things -- and scored. He could have gone wrong so easily. I would say he moved in very rapidly, very rapidly even with all the difficulties.

GRELE: Was there tension and conflict between the

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Kennedy staffers and the Johnson staffers?

WICKER: I don't think so -- not much. I think in those weeks right after the assassination all the Kennedy people were pretty much inclined just to pitch in and help and do a patriotic job and try to get the new man going as best they could. Also, I suppose they didn't want to sit around and think about it all very much. I'm sure there must have been some frictions of some kind, but there never were enough to make news or there never were any loud feuds or anything of that sort -- not that I know of.

GRELE: Can you recall any conversations with John Kennedy that we might have overlooked? Did you ever talk about the reporters' craft?

WICKER: No, not much. I think probably most of the conversations of that kind or any kind that I had with you were on the other tape. I

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don't really remember, but I think so.

GRELE: Can you think of anything we might have missed? [Pause] Well, if something comes to you, you can pencil it in on the transcript.

WICKER: No, I don't really think so. I don't think so. Of course, you know, this kind of conversation could go on if we had the time and if my recollections were all that important. We could go on and talk for hours. No doubt I'd dredge up a lot of things that conversation would evoke. But, no, I think that about does it.

GRELE: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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