

WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #5

While visiting Dallas, Texas, on a political trip, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963. Three days later a devastated American nation watched the funeral cortege of its fallen leader.

For two days the president's body had remained lying in state at the Capitol rotunda in Washington, D.C., while mourners filed by his casket. It was now the morning of November 25, 1963. At 9:45 a.m. EST a United States Army squad brought the casket out of the Capitol. The president's remains were placed on a horse-drawn caisson. That same wheeled vehicle had carried the remains of President Franklin D. Roosevelt as well as those of the Unknown Soldier. At 10:35 a.m. the long line of mourners paused in front of the White House. Jacqueline Kennedy, the former First Lady, joined by other family members and world leaders, abandoned their limousines to take the eight-block walk to St. Matthew's Cathedral. For Mrs. Kennedy it was a familiar trek. She and her husband had taken the same route when they had walked to Sunday Mass. Black Jack, a 16-year old riderless horse, trailed the procession from the White House. He walked with a sword hanging from his empty saddle and stirrups fitted with boots symbolically pointed backward. The family reached the church just before high noon. Cardinal Richard Cushing, an old family friend, greeted the mourners. He had married the Kennedys and had baptized their children. The Mass lasted one hour.

At the conclusion of the funeral service the Kennedy family stood on the steps of the cathedral. Mrs. Kennedy was accompanied by her two children – her daughter Caroline, who was two days away from her sixth birthday, and her three-year old son John F. Kennedy, Jr., known to the nation as John-John – as well as the late president's brothers, Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Senator Edward Kennedy. At his mother's urging, the toddler – in shorts with a matching overcoat – raised his right hand to the forehead and snapped off a final salute to his assassinated father. This brave little boy, who barely had had time to tell his father hello, now said goodbye as the nation buried its beloved leader and the world watched and wept. Sadly, November 25, the day of his father's funeral, was also the little boy's third birthday.

This salute was the most poignant, heartbreaking lasting tableau from an unprecedented four-day stretch in American history.