

WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #30

At approximately 12:30 p.m. CST on November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated while traveling in a motorcade in an open-top limousine as it passed the Texas School Book Depository Building in downtown Dallas, Texas. First lady, Jacqueline Kennedy, Texas Governor John Connally, and his wife, Nellie, were riding with the president. The governor also was shot and seriously wounded. Kennedy was pronounced dead 30 minutes later at Parkland Hospital in Dallas.

Vice President Lyndon Johnson, who was three cars behind Kennedy in the motorcade, was sworn in as the 36th President of the United States at 1:38 p.m. CST. He took the oath of office aboard Air Force One as it sat on the runway at Dallas Love Field airport.

Less than an hour after Kennedy was shot, Lee Harvey Oswald killed J. D. Tippit, a Dallas policeman who questioned him on the street near his Dallas rooming house. Thirty minutes after that, Oswald was arrested in a movie theatre by police responding to reports of a suspect. Oswald, a 24-year old loner, was a former marine who had recently started working at the Texas School Depository Building. He was formally arraigned on November 23rd for both murders.

On November 24th Dallas police were transferring Oswald from one jail to another. He was brought to the basement garage of the Dallas police headquarters ostensibly on his way to a more secure county jail. A crowd of police and press, with live television cameras rolling, gathered to witness his departure. The time was 12:20 p.m. CST. As Oswald was led out and about to be placed in a police car, Jack Ruby emerged from the crowd and fatally wounded him with a single shot from a concealed .38 revolver. The entire incident was captured on live television, shocking viewers across the country who witnessed the crime.

Ruby was immediately detained in police custody. For years he had operated a series of nightclubs, dance halls, and strip joints in Dallas. Allegations arose that he had minor connections with organized crime figures. After his incarceration Ruby claimed that rage at Kennedy's murder was the sole motive for his action.

Since Oswald was killed so soon after murdering Kennedy, all chances to hear his testimony were destroyed, and his motive for the crime remained unknown. On November 29, 1963, Johnson established the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy in order to investigate the death of his predecessor. The seven-man commission was headed by U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, a Republican from California. He had been appointed to the court by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1953. The commission also included: two U.S. Senators – Richard B. Russell (Democrat from Georgia) and John Sherman Cooper – (Republican from Kentucky); 2 U.S. Congressmen – Hale Boggs – (Democrat from Louisiana and majority whip) and Gerald R. Ford – (Republican from Michigan); Allen W. Dulles – former director of the CIA; and John J. McCloy – former president of the International Bank for Reconstruction and

Development. The general counsel for the Commission was J. Lee Rankin – former U.S. Solicitor General.

During its almost year-long investigation, the Warren Commission reviewed reports by the FBI, Secret Service, Department of State, and the attorney general of Texas. The Commission also examined Oswald’s personal history, political affiliations, and military record. The group listened to the testimony of hundreds of witnesses and traveled to Dallas several times to visit the site where Kennedy was shot.

In its 888-page report presented to President Johnson on September 24, 1964 (and released to the American public three days later), the Commission concluded that the bullets that had killed Kennedy and injured Connally were fired by Oswald in three shots from a rifle pointed out of a sixth-floor window in the Texas School Book Depository. The report described in detail Oswald’s life, including a visit he made to the Soviet Union. But in their report the members of the commission made no attempt to analyze his motives. Additionally, the Commission found that the Secret Service had made poor preparations for Kennedy’s visit to Dallas and had failed to protect him sufficiently. The Commission also concluded that Ruby had acted alone in killing Oswald.

The Warren Commission Report proved to be controversial. Its conclusion that Oswald was a “lone gunman” failed to satisfy some who witnessed the attack and others whose research uncovered conflicting details in the report. A number of conspiracy theories arose, involving such disparate suspects as the Cuban and Soviet governments, organized crime, the FBI and the CIA, and even Johnson himself. Some critics of the Warren Commission Report believed that additional ballistics experts’ conclusions and a home movie shot at the scene provided sufficient evidence to dispute the theory that three bullets fired by Oswald’s gun could have caused the fatal wounds of Kennedy as well as the injuries to the Texas governor.

The Commission’s findings have become the touchstone for most research into the Kennedy assassination. Other interesting facts have emerged as a result:

- 1. Some members of the Commission were reluctant to serve on it. President Johnson initially resisted the idea of forming a federal commission to investigate Kennedy’s assassination, preferring to allow the state of Texas to review what he called a “local killing.” But, after learning that both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives were considering launching their own inquiries, the newly installed President assembled the Warren Commission in the hope of avoiding multiple and possibly conflicting reports on the shooting. Johnson wanted the Commission to include members from each of the different branches of government, but many of his preferred choices were hesitant to participate. Wary of the possible legal entanglements of serving, Chief Justice Warren turned down the opportunity to chair the commission multiple times and only agreed after Johnson argued that an inadequate report could incite a public panic and even spark a nuclear war. Meanwhile, conservative Senator Russell flatly refused to serve because he disliked Warren’s liberal judicial record. Johnson waived off Russell’s protests and**

publicly named him to the Commission anyway, saying that his participation was necessary “for the good of America.”

2. Gerald Ford secretly provided information on the Commission to the FBI. While serving as a leading member of the Warren Commission, future U.S. President Ford also acted as an inside informant for J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI. Several months after his death in 2006, a cache of declassified documents revealed that Ford, then a U.S. Congressman, had approached FBI Assistant Director Cartha DeLoach and offered confidentially to keep the Bureau informed on the Commission’s deliberations. Among Ford’s many leaks was the revelation that two unnamed members of the Commission – most likely Russell and Boggs – remained unconvinced by FBI evidence that the kill shot had been fired from the Texas School Book Depository.

3. Earl Warren suppressed key evidence from the Commission. The Chief Justice was a close friend of the Kennedy family. His personal attachment may have interfered with his duties to the Commission. In one of the most infamous episodes of the investigation, Warren denied his fellow Commission members access to Kennedy’s autopsy photos because he deemed them too disturbing. He later refused to allow the Commission to interview certain witnesses whom Oswald may have known in Mexico. Warren even tried to block an interview with first lady Jackie Kennedy because he did not want to invade her privacy.

4. The Commission secretly interviewed Fidel Castro. Many believed that Castro might have conspired in Kennedy’s murder. It turns out that the Cuban dictator personally proclaimed his innocence in an off-the-record interview with the Warren Commission. According to journalist Philip Shanon, at one point in the investigation, Commission lawyer William Coleman met face-to-face with Castro on a fishing boat off the coast of Cuba. During a three-hour exchange, Castro repeatedly denied having any involvement in the assassination. No notes were taken during the secret rendezvous. Only Earl Warren and one other investigator were ever made aware of it.

5. The FBI and the CIA intentionally misled the Commission. The FBI and the CIA had monitored Oswald in the months before the assassination. But both agencies later tried to downplay their knowledge of him to the Warren Commission. Oswald had once even left a threatening note for an FBI agent at the Bureau’s office in Dallas. Fearful of catching blame for not preventing the assassination, the FBI later destroyed the note and even removed the agent’s name from a typewritten transcript of Oswald’s address book provided to the Warren Commission. Congressman Boggs would later say that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover “lied his eyes out” to the Commission’s investigators. Evidence also suggests that the CIA had Oswald under surveillance when he made a trip to Mexico in September, 1963 and visited the Cuban and Soviet embassies. But the agency repeatedly denied any connection to the alleged shooter. The CIA also neglected to inform the Commission about its many covert operations in Cuba – including several schemes to assassinate Castro – even though those revelations might have helped shape the investigation.

6. The Commission offered no clear explanation of Oswald's motives. While the 888-page Warren report went into great detail outlining how Oswald could have killed Kennedy, it gave little explanation of why he did it. In its findings, the Commission stated that Oswald's actions could not be explained if "judged by the standards of a reasonable man." The report stated only that he had been an isolated individual plagued by a life of failure and disappointment. The report would later conclude that "the Commission does not believe that it can ascribe to him any one motive or group of motives."

7. Both President Johnson and members of the Kennedy family privately disagreed with the Commission's report. Although they praised the Warren Commission Report to the media, many government leaders had serious misgivings about its findings. Commission member Senator Russell reluctantly signed the Warren Report even though he could not rule out the possibility of a conspiracy. He later admitted to having "lingering dissatisfaction" with many of its conclusions. Congressman Boggs had similar doubts about the report, in particular the "single bullet theory" – the argument that one shot had struck both Kennedy and Connally. Johnson remained in lock step with the Warren Commission's findings for most of his career. But he privately disagreed with the single bullet theory and reportedly believed that the Cubans had engineered the assassination. Likewise, President Kennedy's brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy publicly commended the Warren Report even though he suspected a conspiracy had taken place.

8. Public trust in the report plummeted after only a few years. When the Warren Report was first released to the public in September 1964, polls showed that only 56% of Americans agreed with its "lone gunman theory." Within months, however, critics began to poke holes in its conclusions and methodology. Conspiracy theories cropped up alleging the involvement of everyone from the Mafia to Lyndon Johnson himself. By 1966, a second poll showed that only a meager 36% of Americans still had confidence in the report. Today, close to 2/3 of Americans believe in some form of conspiracy surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy.

9. Late in the 1970s a second government investigation came to a different conclusion. After the public release of new information, including the Zapruder film – an amateur recording showing the Kennedy assassination in shocking detail – the U.S. House of Representatives formed the U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA), which launched a new investigation on the murder of the president. In its final report, issued in 1979, HSCA agreed with the Warren Commission's findings that two bullets fired by Oswald had killed Kennedy and had wounded Connally. However, the HSCA also stated that acoustic evidence from a Dallas police officer's radio showed that it was highly probable that two shooters had fired on Kennedy's limousine. HSCA concluded that the assassination "probably" involved an unspecified conspiracy. Although subsequent investigations have cast doubt on the radio evidence, the HSCA's report helped fuel public dissatisfaction with the efforts of the Warren Commission.

Despite multiple investigations and years of speculation, some of the evidence surrounding the Kennedy assassination has still not been released to the public. Many files used by the Warren Commission and the HSCA were sealed decades ago for security and privacy reasons. An enormous volume of documentation from the Warren Commission – five million pages of this information – was declassified in the 1990s and placed in the National Archives. Much of it is now available to the public. But a small trove of 1,100 records was kept under wraps. Currently, these documents are scheduled for release by 2017. Access to Kennedy's autopsy records is highly restricted. To view them requires membership in a presidential or congressional commission or the permission of the Kennedy family. The findings of the Warren Commission and those of the House Committee continue to be debated.