

## WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #37

By the autumn of 1963 President John F. Kennedy and his political advisors were preparing for the next presidential campaign. Although he had not formally announced his candidacy, it was clear that President Kennedy was going to run, and he seemed confident about his chances for re-election.

At the end of September, the president traveled west, speaking in nine different states in less than a week. The trip was meant to put a spotlight on natural resources and conservation efforts. But JFK also used it to sound out themes – such as education, national security, and world peace – for his run in 1964.

One month later the president addressed gatherings of Democrats in Boston and Philadelphia. Then on November 12<sup>th</sup>, he held the first important political planning session for the upcoming election year. At the meeting JFK stressed the importance of winning Florida and Texas and talked about his plans to visit both states in the next two weeks. Mrs. Kennedy would accompany him on the swing through Texas, which would be her first extended public appearance since the loss of their baby, Patrick, in August.

On November 21<sup>st</sup> the president and the first lady departed on Air Force One for the two-day, five-city tour of Texas. President Kennedy was aware that a feud among party leaders in Texas could jeopardize his chances of carrying the state in 1964. One of his aims for the trip was to bring Democrats together. He also knew that a relatively small, but vocal, group of extremists was contributing to the political tensions in Texas and would likely make its presence felt – particularly in Dallas, where Adlai Stevenson, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, had been physically attacked a month earlier after making a speech there. Nonetheless, Kennedy seemed to relish the prospect of leaving Washington, D.C., and getting out among the people and into the political fray.

The first stop was San Antonio. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, Governor John B. Connally, and Senator Ralph W. Yarborough led the welcoming party. They accompanied the president to Brooks Air Force Base for the dedication of the Aerospace Medical Health Center. Continuing to Houston, Kennedy addressed a Latin American citizens' organization and spoke at a testimonial dinner for Congressman Albert Thomas before ending the day in Fort Worth.

A light rain was falling on Friday morning, November 22<sup>nd</sup>. But a crowd of several thousand stood in the parking lot outside the Texas Hotel where the Kennedys had spent the night. A platform was set up, and the president, wearing no protection against the weather, came out to make some brief remarks. He began, "There are no faint hearts in Fort Worth, and I appreciate your being here this morning. Mrs. Kennedy is organizing herself. It takes longer, but, of course, she looks better than we do when she does it." Kennedy went on to talk about the nation's need for being "second to none" in defense and in space, for continued growth in the economy, and "the willingness of citizens of the United States to assume the burdens of leadership." The warmth of the audience response was palpable as the president reached out to shake hands amidst a sea of smiling faces.

Mrs. Kennedy appeared in a pink Chanel suit and matching pillbox hat. Back inside the hotel the president spoke at a breakfast of the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce, focusing on military preparedness. He said, "We are still the keystone in the arch of freedom. We will continue to do...our duty, and the people of Texas will be in the lead."

The presidential party left the hotel and went by motorcade to Carswell Air Force Base for the thirteen-minute flight to Dallas. Arriving at Love Field, President and Mrs. Kennedy disembarked and immediately walked toward a fence where a crowd of well-wishers had gathered. They spent several minutes shaking hands.

The first lady received a bouquet of roses, which she brought with her to the waiting limousine. Governor Connally and his wife, Nellie, were already seated in the open convertible as the Kennedys entered and sat behind them. Since it was no longer raining, the plastic bubble top had been left off. Vice President Johnson and Mrs. Johnson occupied the third car behind the Kennedys in the motorcade.

The procession left the airport and traveled along a ten-mile route that wound through downtown Dallas on the way to the Trade Mart where the president was scheduled to speak at a luncheon. Crowds estimated at over 150,000 excited people lined the streets and waved to the Kennedys. The car turned the corner off Main Street onto Elm Street at Dealey Plaza around 12:30 p.m. CST. According to one report, Nellie Connally turned to the president and remarked, "Mr. President, you can't say Dallas doesn't love you." However, as their vehicle was passing the Texas School Book Depository gunfire suddenly reverberated in the plaza. At first, Mrs. Kennedy thought it was a motorcycle backfiring. Shots rained down on the president's motorcade. One bullet struck President Kennedy in the back of the neck while he was waving to the crowd. It was followed by a second shot to the back of the head. He slumped over toward Mrs. Kennedy, who leaned toward him. According to the first lady, her husband's "blood and brains were in my lap." She "kept holding the top of his head down, trying to keep the brains in." Another shot severely wounded the governor in the chest, and he screamed in pain. Connally, however, would eventually recover from his serious wounds.

Hearing what he initially thought was a firecracker, Secret Service agent Clinton Hill saw the president recoil from the first shot. Almost immediately after that first shot, Mrs. Kennedy reached out across the trunk for something. Hill later told the Warren Commission that he thought she had been reaching across the trunk for a piece of the president's skull that had been blown off. Hill ran from the follow-up car. But, when he reached the limousine, the second shot hit the president, and the agent leaped aboard the vehicle too late. He directed the first lady back to her seat.

The car sped off to Parkland Memorial Hospital just a few minutes away. Doctors tried to save the president, who arrived "moribund." He was rushed into a trauma room. But little could be done for President Kennedy. One physician said: "We never had any hope of saving his life." A few minutes into her husband's treatment, Mrs. Kennedy left her folding chair in the waiting room and tried to enter the operating room. A nurse stopped her and tried to bar the door to prevent her from going in. The first lady persisted, and the president's personal physician, Dr. Malcolm Perry, suggested that she take a sedative. She refused. She said, "I want to be there when he dies." Eventually, the nurse was persuaded to grant her access into the trauma room. A Roman Catholic priest was summoned to administer the last rites. At 1:00 p.m. CST John F. Kennedy was pronounced dead. When the casket arrived, Mrs. Kennedy, who had been holding her husband's hand, removed her wedding ring and placed it on his finger. She told one of her aides, "Now I have nothing left."

The president's body was brought to Love Field in a hearse with the first lady sitting next to the bronze coffin, which was placed aboard Air Force One. Mrs. Johnson kindly suggested to Mrs. Kennedy that she might change out of her blood-stained pink dress. Jacqueline Kennedy had presided over Camelot in her signature pillbox hat, and, now, her dress belied the tragedy of the day. She was the nation's chief mourner. Mrs. Kennedy's gentle voice was edged with steely reserve when she told Lady Bird that she was not ready to change out of her bloodstained clothes. Mrs. Kennedy replied, "Oh, no, that's all right. I want them to see what they have done to Jack." Before the plane took off for Washington, D.C., a grim-faced Lyndon Johnson stood in a tight, crowded compartment with Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Kennedy standing on either side of him as he took the oath of office, administered by Sarah T. Hughes, U.S. District Judge of the Northern District of Texas. The brief ceremony took place at 2:38 p.m. CST.

At 2:47 p.m. CST Air Force One left Dallas. As the plane approached Washington, D.C., Mrs. Kennedy made funeral plans, and Johnson spoke with advisors.

Air Force One landed at Andrews Air Force base in Maryland at 7:00 p.m. EST. Johnson met the press assembled outside for his first statements as president: "I will do my best. That's all I can do. I ask for your help and God's." Robert Kennedy met the plane. He and Mrs. Kennedy went to Bethesda Naval Hospital, where an autopsy was performed on the late president's body and was prepared for the funeral.

**President Kennedy's casket was placed in the East Room of the White House at 3:56 a.m. EST on Saturday, November 23<sup>rd</sup>. There it remained under honor guard for 24 hours. Over 250,000 people, including dignitaries from over 90 countries, attended the funeral on Monday, November 25<sup>th</sup>.**