

**NARRATIVE  
NONFICTION**  
Reads like fiction—  
but it's all true

# THE DAY THE PRES WAS SHOT

BY JUSTIN O'NEILL

How the assassination of President John F.



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Nonfiction

# PRESIDENT SHOT DEAD



# IDENT



Kennedy

changed America forever





## AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:

Why did many Americans see John F. Kennedy as a symbol of hope?

The Secret Service agents were nervous. It was late morning on November 22, 1963, and the President of the United States had just stepped off the plane in Dallas, Texas. The agents were in charge of protecting the President, and they weren't happy about the open-air limousine that was waiting. In a car without a roof, the President would be completely exposed. Vulnerable.

But the **charismatic** President John F. Kennedy loved open-top limos. He was in Dallas to campaign for re-election, and he wanted to be as visible to the public as possible. And so the President—along with the First Lady, the Vice President, the Vice President's wife, the Governor of Texas, the Governor's wife, and other officials—piled into the waiting cars and headed out.

The motorcade slowly made its way through downtown Dallas. Thousands of eager spectators lined the streets, packed rows deep on the sidewalk. Others leaned out of windows of the buildings along the route. Fans shouted and cheered and snapped photographs. Children held up welcome signs. With their smiling faces in the crisp autumn air, the President and his wife, First Lady Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy (known as Jackie), were the picture of glamour.

Everything seemed to be going

well. But at 12:30 p.m., as the motorcade proceeded down Elm Street and passed through a large grassy area called Dealey Plaza, the agents' worst fears came true.

There was a loud *crack!*

Then another.

And another.

Panic erupted in the crowd. Someone had shot the President.

### The Era

At 43 years old, John F. Kennedy was the youngest man ever elected President. He was handsome and brilliant, with bright eyes and an irresistible smile. When Kennedy took office in 1961, many Americans believed it was the dawn of a golden age—a time when anything would be possible.

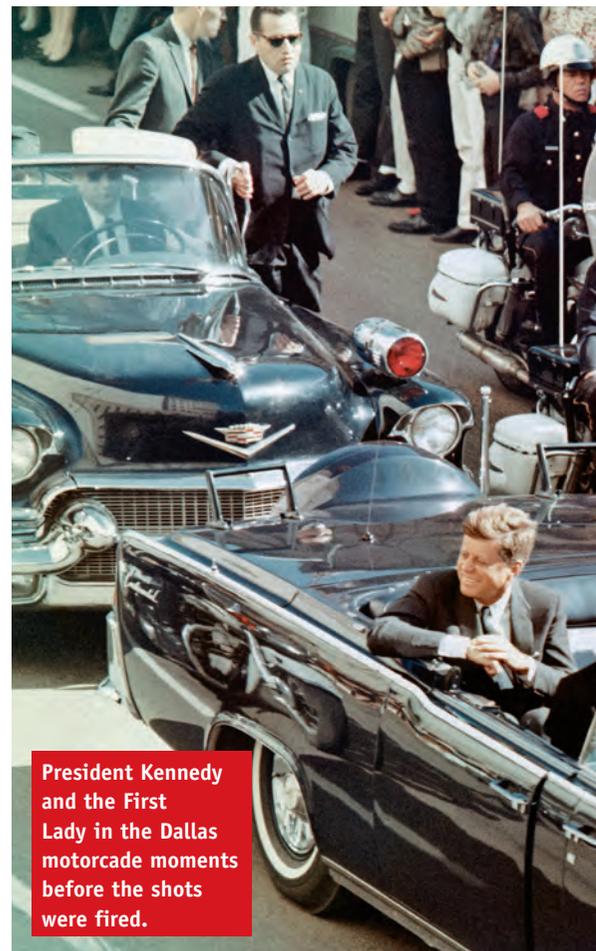
And why not? For the past decade, America had

enjoyed unprecedented growth. After World War II ended, the U.S. had become a world superpower. The economy was booming. More Americans could afford to buy homes, cars, and other goods than ever before.

Not everything was rosy though. America was also fighting the Cold War, a struggle to stop the Soviet Union (now Russia and other, smaller countries) from spreading communism around the world. It was called a “cold” war because, while there was no direct open combat between the two nations, the threat of war was constant.

Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union

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President Kennedy and the First Lady in the Dallas motorcade moments before the shots were fired.

Under communism, the government controls and distributes resources such as food and supplies. History has shown that communist governments tend to be very oppressive.

symbol of hope—and of everything the U.S. could accomplish.

## The President

Kennedy certainly had a lot he wanted to accomplish. Fighting the spread of communism was high on his agenda. He also wanted the

had powerful nuclear weapons that could end life on Earth as we know it.

Still, people remained confident in the future.

Many Americans saw Kennedy as a

U.S. and the Soviet Union to agree to stop making nuclear weapons. He talked about sending astronauts to the moon for the first time. He wanted to get laws passed that would lower taxes, provide health care to the elderly, and ensure that all Americans—regardless of race—were treated equally. The civil rights movement was in full bloom, and leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. were working hard to end discrimination against African-Americans. Kennedy wanted to make supporting this movement a priority of his second term in office.

First he would have to get re-elected, though, and winning

Texas would be key. So on November 21, he and Mrs. Kennedy said goodbye to their two children, Caroline, 5, and John Jr., 2, and left for Texas to drum up support.

It was the last time Kennedy's children would see him alive.

## The Attack

The first shot—that first startlingly loud crack that echoed through Dealey Plaza—was a miss. The shot that came three seconds later passed through the President's neck and hit the Governor of Texas, who was riding in front of the President. (The Governor later made a full recovery.) Before anyone realized what was

happening, a third shot rang out, and Kennedy slumped over onto his stunned wife.

The Secret Service agents sprang to action. One leapt onto the car, shielding Mrs. Kennedy and the President with his body as the driver sped off, racing toward the hospital at 80 miles per hour. Meanwhile, Dealey Plaza became a nightmarish scene of chaos. Terrified bystanders scattered or took cover. No one knew if more shots were coming. Police struggled to take control of the plaza while searching desperately for the shooter—or shooters.

The news quickly reached the media, turning a typical Friday into a **surreal** and terrifying day. Within 30 minutes, more than two thirds of the country had heard—all the more remarkable in a time before Twitter, texting, and e-mail.

At 12:38, the President was rushed into an operating room at Parkland Hospital. But it was too late. The third shot had hit the President directly in the head. He was pronounced dead at 1 p.m.

Businesses closed. Kids were sent home from school. Strangers on the street stopped to talk about what had happened. Americans spent the afternoon glued to their televisions, desperate for answers. What would happen to the government? Was the Vice President injured? Had the Soviets masterminded the whole thing? Was this the start of a war?

And, most of all, who was the shooter?



## The Assassin

In fact, the shooter was a 24-year-old American. Lee Harvey Oswald, perched in a window six stories above Dealey Plaza, had just committed one of the most shocking crimes in U.S. history. Now he needed to escape. But where to go?

Where, indeed. Oswald had spent his life asking that question.

Oswald's childhood had been lonely and unstable. Raised by a troubled mother (his father died before he was born), Oswald had moved 21 times by age 17. In 10th grade, he left school and joined the Marines, where he became a skilled shooter. He considered himself a communist and lived in the Soviet Union for several years. There he met his wife, and they eventually returned to the U.S. But Oswald was short-tempered and aggressive, and the marriage was miserable.

When Oswald fired those shots, he was alone on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, a warehouse where he had worked for the past two months. Historians would later say that he probably hadn't made plans to kill the President until a few days before, when the motorcade route was published in the newspaper. It was then, historians speculate, that Oswald realized the President would pass right outside the Depository windows. He must have thought that this was his chance to



do what he had always longed to do: change history.

Now, if he had any hope of escape, he needed to flee Dallas as soon as possible. He didn't seem to have much of a plan, though. First he went back to his apartment, where he changed his clothes and picked up a revolver. He left a few minutes after 1 p.m.—just after the President was pronounced dead.

Exactly what Oswald planned to do next will always be a mystery, because he was soon stopped by a police officer who happened to be driving by. Officer J.D. Tippit thought Oswald fit descriptions from witnesses who had seen someone in a Depository window.

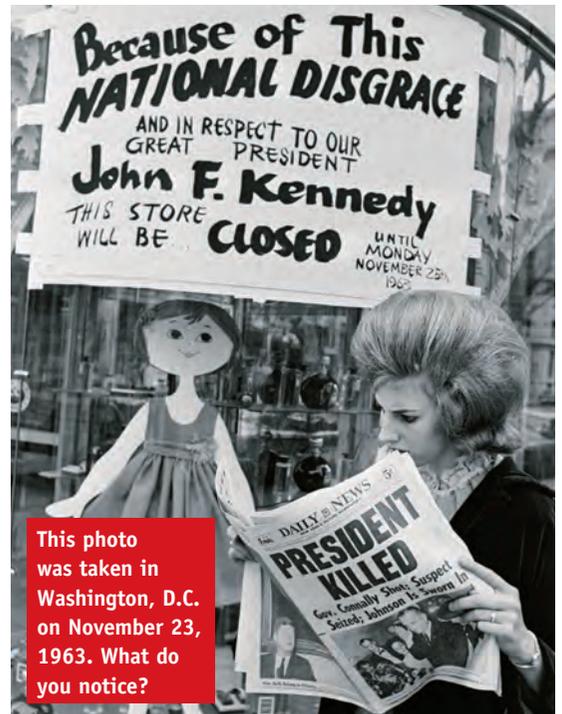
Tippit got out of his car. Panicked, Oswald pulled out his gun. He shot and killed Tippit and fled the scene.

It didn't take police long to find him though. They soon discovered Oswald hiding in a movie theater and took him into custody.

## The Aftermath

Around 2 p.m., the President's body was loaded onto a plane to be taken to Washington, D.C. Before takeoff, Jackie Kennedy, still wearing her bloodstained suit, stood beside Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson as he was sworn in as President. She was still wearing that suit when she stepped off the plane that evening. Reporters were waiting, and her image was broadcast across the country. Mrs. Kennedy did not object. She wanted the public to see her. She wanted the world to remember, forever, what had happened.

Mrs. Kennedy spent the next day mourning privately and planning one of the grandest memorials the country had ever seen. After a service on Sunday, more than 250,000 people came to pay their respects, filing past Kennedy's



This photo was taken in Washington, D.C. on November 23, 1963. What do you notice?

coffin in the vast Capitol **rotunda**.

But the violence wasn't over.

Earlier that day, Dallas police were moving Oswald to the County Jail, escorting him through a sea of reporters in a parking garage. Suddenly a man emerged from the shadows and shot Oswald. The attack was broadcast live on TV.

The shooter, a nightclub owner named Jack Ruby, had taken it upon himself to avenge Kennedy's murder. Ruby was arrested, and Oswald was rushed to the same hospital where Kennedy had been taken days before. Again, it was too late. Oswald was pronounced dead at 1:07 p.m. He never confessed to murdering the President.

The circumstances of Oswald's death have fueled many **conspiracy** theories. Some argue that Oswald did not act alone—that he was part of a larger plot. In 1964, however, an official investigation called the Warren Commission stated **definitively** that he did act alone.

## The Legacy

Kennedy's assassination marked the end of an era—of an innocent and optimistic time—and the beginning of a **turbulent** period in American history. During the next decade, Martin Luther King Jr. and Kennedy's brother Robert would both be assassinated. A bloody war

in Vietnam would take more than 58,000 American lives. And the Cold War would intensify.

Yet the 1960s were also a time of transformation. After Kennedy's death, several laws were passed that Kennedy had been urging, including a civil-rights bill and a tax cut. As President, Lyndon B. Johnson initiated some of the most **progressive** legislation of the 20th century. Medicaid and Medicare were created to help the poor and the elderly with healthcare costs. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 protected African-Americans' right to vote. In 1969, during Richard Nixon's Presidency, astronauts walked on the moon. It's impossible to know if any of

Surrounded by friends and family, the First Lady holds hands with her daughter Caroline at the memorial service for the President.

this would have happened if Kennedy had lived, but historians have speculated that his assassination helped **galvanize** support for these programs and policies.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the assassination, and Kennedy is in the news again. Yet he never really left the American consciousness. An eternal flame burns at the site of his grave, a reminder of a life of hope and promise cut tragically short. But those who were alive in 1963 need no reminder. They will always remember where they were the day the President was shot. ●

### POEM

## John Fitzgerald Kennedy

BY JOHN MASEFIELD

All generous hearts lament the leader killed,  
The young chief with the smile, the radiant face,  
The winning way that turned a wondrous race  
Into sublimer pathways, leading on.  
Grant to us life that though the man be gone  
The promise of his spirit be fulfilled.

—First published in *The Times* of London, November 25, 1963



## WRITING CONTEST

Compare the purposes of the article and the poem. What key ideas in the article are reflected in the poem? Explain your answers in two paragraphs. Use text evidence to support your ideas. Send your response to **JFK CONTEST**. Five winners will each receive a copy of *"The President Has Been Shot!"* by James L. Swanson. See page 2 for details.

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