CHAPTER 1

Breakfast Before Dallas

My unplanned interlude as a presidential advance man began early in September 1963 in Washington when I met with Jerry Bruno, President John Kennedy’s chief advance man, to discuss whether I should sign on as a part-time advancer for presidential trips. We talked about my experience as a journalist and—later—as an aide to a Democratic governor of Maine. The question was whether my experience would qualify me as one of the advance men for JFK’s upcoming trip to Texas.

We agreed that my credentials to handle arrangements for one of the five stops on the trip did not guarantee a perfect fit, but, on the other hand, they were not disqualifying. The next question was to which of the cities—San Antonio, Houston, Fort Worth, Dallas, or Austin—should I be sent. When Dallas was mentioned as a possibility, I recalled the difficulties that Adlai Stevenson and Texas’s own Lyndon Johnson had experienced there from unruly right-wingers. I suggested that Dallas might not be the place for a novice at the advance man’s game. By the end of the conversation, we agreed that I would go to Fort Worth, the old cow town turned aircraft builder on the Trinity River, thirty miles west of Dallas.

Bruno’s instructions were cryptic. He gave me some names: Bill Duncan, the Secret Service agent who would be in charge of security at Fort Worth; Raymond Buck, president of the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce, which was sponsoring the local event, a breakfast, for the president; O. C. Yancey Jr., president of the Tarrant County AFL-CIO. He said that as soon as I arrived in Fort Worth I should find out how the tickets for the breakfast were to be distributed, how many the White House could have, and how many would be reserved for labor. I was to be sure that the breakfast was integrated. He handed me an onionskin copy of the Texas schedule, which began:
Nov. 21—Thurs. Leave D.C. for San Antonio
3 hours 20 minutes flying time

The president’s movements in San Antonio, Houston, Fort Worth, Dallas, and Austin were timed off in detail. I skipped to the Fort Worth entries, which began on Thursday night:

10 pm Leave Houston
45 minutes flying time to Fort Worth

10:45 pm Arrive Ft. Worth Carswell A.F.B.
20 minutes by car to Hotel Texas
in downtown Ft. Worth

11:05 pm Arrive Hotel Texas for night

I paused. Novice though I was, I would have the overnight stop. The schedule picked up on Friday, November 22:

8:45 am Leave for Grand Ballroom in Hotel Texas
Breakfast one hour

9:45 am Leave breakfast for room

10:45 am Depart hotel
20 minutes ride to Carswell A.F.B.

11:05 am Arrive Carswell A.F.B.

11:15 am Depart airport for Dallas

“What you do,” said Bruno, “is get down there and keep in touch with us. We got to know everything that happens, everything you’re doing. No plans should be made for the president. Check out things. I’ll call you when there’s a flight going down. Probably be about a week.”

I went back to my office.

Bruno telephoned a few days later and told me when and where to catch the plane for Texas. He gave me another name, that of Fort Worth lawyer David O. Belew Jr., who was a contact with Governor John Connally.

“Be sure you talk with him,” said Bruno.
Andrews Air Force Base lies to the south of Washington in its Maryland outskirts. It was there that I caught the plane. The date was November 12, 1963, the day after Veterans Day, or, as I continued to think of it in honor of what my family called Uncle Artie’s war, Armistice Day. The plane had propellers and two engines. We would be a long time getting to Texas by jet-age standards. This was to be no luxury flight. After a lengthy wait at base operations, we boarded the aircraft, the “we” being, I gathered, advance men for the cities on the president’s itinerary, Secret Service agents, and specialists from the White House Communications Agency. I knew no one on the plane, which took off and began to make slow progress toward the Southwest. I had brought nothing to read, so I dozed and mused and looked out the window at the American quilt. I thought of another November, not long before, when I had met Jack Kennedy.

It had been late in the afternoon of November 15, 1959, at the hilltop airport in Augusta, Maine. His hair blowing in the wind, Senator Kennedy came down the ramp from the family plane. Newspapermen were waiting to question him. But it was cold as well as windy, and the official greeting party had taken cover. So I told the senator that I was press secretary to his host, Maine Governor Clinton A. Clauson, and I suggested that he meet with the press at the Blaine House, the governor’s mansion, where he was to go anyhow.

“Fine,” he said, waving to the reporters. “I’ll see you there.”

He turned to me and pointed toward a heavyset figure coming off the plane. “Why don’t you get together with Pierre?”

While Kennedy and others in his party rode in the governor’s car to the former home of James G. Blaine, Maine’s Republican “plumed knight,” whose chances of winning the presidency had been diminished by a supporter’s remark that the opposing party stood for “rum, Romanism, and rebellion,” Pierre Salinger, Kennedy’s press secretary, and I became acquainted as we rode down the airport hill in my station wagon. We talked about Maine politics and Jack Kennedy’s possibilities of receiving timely Maine support for the Democratic presidential nomination. When we arrived at the Blaine House, Pierre asked me to look at the speech the senator was to deliver that evening at the Maine Democratic Party’s Issues Conference being held at the Calumet Club, a Franco-American clubhouse, in Augusta. He wanted to know if I thought that Kennedy’s prepared remarks in favor of the Passamaquoddy tidal power project were appropriate.
“Well, yeah,” I said without enthusiasm. Most politicians working Maine got around to “Quoddy” sooner or later, the long-talked-of and never-built project to harness the huge tides of Passamaquoddy and Cobscook Bays between Maine and New Brunswick.

John Kennedy met the press sitting on a sofa in the glassed-in sunporch of the Blaine House. The questioning was brisk, and several of the reporters expressed admiration later for his knowledge and answers. One of them in his piece on the news conference made something of Kennedy’s vest, considering it an attempt by the presidential aspirant to add maturity to his forty-two years. Kennedy and Salinger both appeared to appreciate the spirited questioning. Kennedy told us that it was a relief to face ranging, substantive questioning after coming from places where reporters never left the subject of his religion.

The hard politicking took place that night in a back room on the second floor of the Blaine House, where Kennedy, Connecticut Governor Abe Ribicoff, Connecticut State Democratic Chairman John Bailey, and others of the entourage met with Governor Clauson and the Democratic members of the Maine congressional delegation, Senator Edmund S. Muskie and Congressmen Frank M. Coffin and James C. Oliver. I was in and out of the room because the governor had a houseful of guests to meet John Kennedy, and I had many duties. The heart of the conversation was whether and when Maine’s Democratic leadership would endorse Senator Kennedy’s impending candidacy for the Democratic nomination for president. Governor Clauson had told me earlier in the day that, as far as he was concerned, “Sure we’ll go for Kennedy, a New England man. We’ll just have to decide when to do it.” The governor that night appeared ready to issue an endorsement, but the congressional delegation seemed reluctant to take quick action. Senator Muskie, for one, had to consider that three of his Senate colleagues in addition to Kennedy would be in the race: Senators Symington, Humphrey, and Johnson.

The back room conversation over, not to the full satisfaction of the visitors, Senator Kennedy and his party flew back to Massachusetts. By the middle of December, the Maine Democratic leaders had agreed on an endorsement of Kennedy to be made public a few days after the formal announcement of his candidacy. Governor Clauson was to issue the joint statement on January 5, 1960, in the Maine State House. I issued it in his name with the approval of the Maine Democrats in Washington. The governor was dead. He had died in his sleep on December 30, 1959. Issuing the statement of support
for Kennedy was my last act in the governor’s office, where I had stayed on to pack up Governor Clauson’s files. With no lieutenant governor, the Republican president of the state senate, John H. Reed, became governor. I moved over to the State Department of Economic Development and stayed on in Maine for another year, joining the Kennedy administration in Washington in the spring of 1961. More than two and a half years of minor federal functioning slipped by. Now, with President Kennedy preparing to seek reelection, I was on a plane to Texas. Looking out the plane window I recalled Thoreau’s observation more than a century earlier when he questioned the haste with which the magnetic telegraph was being extended from Maine to Texas. “Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.” I wondered if times had changed.

As the plane droned on, I met some of my fellow travelers. Max Edwards, an experienced advance man, introduced himself and bought a drink. Later, a lithe and dark young man worked his way down the aisle, checking names left and right. Bill Duncan, the Secret Service agent assigned to Fort Worth, was looking for me. With him was another agent to be at Fort Worth, Ned Hall, a thin man with close-cropped hair. Duncan rounded up Major Jack Rubley, the communications officer for Fort Worth, and his assistant, Bill Harnett, a young lieutenant. We talked and sized up each other.

Fort Worth was the next-to-last stop. It was after 6 p.m., Texas time, when the plane landed at Carswell Air Force Base to discharge the Fort Worth contingent. An Air Force car met us and took us to the Hotel Texas, where we checked into our rooms and cleaned up after agreeing to meet for dinner. Joining us was Mike Howard, an agent from the Dallas Secret Service office, who was to work with Duncan and Hall. The six of us ate steaks in the Cattlemen’s Restaurant and exchanged notes on our plans for the next day. Rubley and Harnett already had been in contact with the Southwestern Bell representative who would help them make the communications arrangements. They would be joining him in the morning. My plans were to see Raymond Buck. I had telephoned him from the hotel and arranged to be at his office early the next day, Wednesday, November 13. I suggested to Duncan and Hall that they accompany me so that all of us would know what planning had been done before our arrival. After dinner we drove around town to become familiar with the street patterns.

The next morning, I wondered for a moment if Buck manufactured shovels as a sideline. There was a row of them along a wall
of his spacious, ground-floor offices. They were not, however, fated to gouge dirt and toss rock. Each of them, painted and bearing a plaque, had been used once in a groundbreaking ceremony for a new building.

Lawyer, president of insurance companies, and a past Democratic state chairman, Buck was a big man with white hair curling around the back of his neck.

“I’m the last of the long-haired Texas politicians since Tom Connally died,” he told us as we sat around a conference table. This was a reference to a former senator from Texas, Thomas Connally (no relation to Governor Connally), who had died recently and whose Senate seat, which he had vacated in 1953, was held by Ralph Yarborough. Buck said that he had long been a friend of Lyndon Johnson’s. Buck and I did the talking about the basic arrangements for the visit; the Secret Service agents listened. Some presidential advance men, I was to discover, maintained hostile relationships with the Secret Service, excluding agents from planning sessions in which security was not an obvious factor. From the start, however, I found the agents nonpolitical professionals. I made an effort to make sure that they knew what I knew. I hoped that they knew much more.

Buck said that he had been waiting for guidance from Washington, that little had been done yet on the presidential breakfast. The grand ballroom of the Hotel Texas had been reserved, but no invitations or tickets had been issued. The ballroom would hold 2,000 persons, including the working press, who would not be eating. The chamber of commerce planned to send out a letter to its members inviting them to apply for tickets. Buck said that there were about 3,000 members of the chamber, and he expected that at least 1,000 tickets would be requested, half for members and half for wives. Buck gave me a rundown on other requests for tickets: Governor Connally sought 200 to 300; Congressman Jim Wright of Fort Worth wanted 300 to 400; Senator Ralph Yarborough was expected to ask for a sizable number; labor, the Democratic county organization, and a state senator were seeking blocs of tickets; and there were tentative arrangements to set aside 50 for local federal officials, 50 for county officials, and 25 for city officials.

Visualizing the quick disappearance of all the tickets, I made haste to enter a White House claim for at least 200. Buck nodded. He said that the letter to chamber members would say that tickets would be limited, and that they would have to be picked up on a first-come,
first-served basis. Members of the chamber were to pay $3 a ticket. Buck said that he and “several others” would pay for the rest.

When I raised the question of integration, Buck said he understood that about thirty of those attending on labor tickets would be blacks. Although he had indicated that little had been done about arrangements, a basic program had been laid out and a head table proposed, neither requiring many changes. The regular breakfast guests were to be served starting at 8 a.m. and would be through with their meals by the time the Kennedys arrived in the ballroom. A small orchestra and the Texas Boys’ Choir were to perform. There would be a long head table to accommodate heads of local governments, vice presidents of the chamber of commerce, and a labor union representative, as well as the important personages from Washington and Austin. Wives, too. Buck, tactfully, had not scheduled himself to introduce the president, but I did so after talking with Bruno. The president was to speak starting at 9:10 a.m.

After leaving Buck’s office, the Secret Service agents dropped me off at the hotel while they began to make their police contacts. I talked to Bruno, to my own office, to the GSA regional office in Dallas, and to David Belew, the Fort Worth attorney who was Governor Connally’s contact. In the afternoon I went to Belew’s office, where he explained that his wife Marjorie was a Democratic state committeewoman, and that because of her position both she and he were being badgered by people seeking information about the president’s activities in Fort Worth. It was from Belew that I learned first that Democratic Party regulars were expressing indignation over the format of the president’s visit, which seemed to them to be designed to keep the president away from rank-and-file Democrats. I agreed to go to the Belew home that night to talk with the Fort Worth couple, and others whom they would invite, about the difficulties posed by the visit as planned thus far.

The “others” at the Belew home, in addition to the pajama-clad Belew children, who ducked in and out of the living room, were Garrett Morris, Democratic state committeeman, who was introduced as campaign manager for Connally in the last campaign, Tarrant County Democratic Chairman William Potts, representatives of two unions—Garland Ham of the United Auto Workers and John Heath of the International Association of Machinists—and a public relations man who preferred to remain anonymous.

The group was unanimous in pressing for public exposure of the president while he was in Fort Worth. Proposals were made that
President Kennedy, in addition to his address at the breakfast, speak to a public gathering either in the parking lot across the street from the Hotel Texas, or four blocks from the hotel at Burnett Park, where he had spoken as a candidate in 1960, or at Carswell Air Force Base following the breakfast. I was a good listener.

In the following days it became obvious that those participating in the meeting at the Belews had assessed accurately the widespread dissatisfaction among Democrats. As my name and mission became known, my telephone in the Hotel Texas rang with more and more complaints. Labor leaders particularly were incensed by chamber of commerce sponsorship of the breakfast. I discussed with Buck the recommendations I had received for a public appearance of the president. Buck, who I am sure knew more than I did about the Washington-Austin agreement concerning the Fort Worth program, had no objection to any of the proposals as long as they did not affect the nonpartisanship of the breakfast to which he had been committed before I came to town. I passed along to Bruno the suggestions that I had received, a report on the extent of complaints, and my own recommendation that President Kennedy’s schedule be revised to include a public appearance outside the hotel at which he would speak at least briefly.

I had been reading in the newspapers about the poor relationships between liberal Senator Ralph Yarborough and Texas’s other leading Democrats, Vice President Johnson and Governor Connally, but I had taken for granted that the differences, which had risen to bitterness between the senator and governor, would be at least papered over while President Kennedy’s pre-campaign Texas tour was in progress. I was startled, therefore, to begin to receive messages from Connally people that were clearly designed to give second-class treatment to Senator Yarborough.

First it was David Belew passing along the word from Scott Sayers, a Connally political operative in Austin, that the governor wanted this order for the motorcade in Fort Worth:

- president’s car
- vice president’s car
- governor’s car
- press cars
- Senator Yarborough’s car
“Tell ’em,” snapped Bruno on the telephone when I brought this up, “that the Secret Service takes care of motorcades.”

Then came requests (or were they instructions?) from several directions, but with a common source in Austin that senators and congressmen should be seated at the breakfast on a dais lower than that for the president, vice president, and governor.

“Tell ’em,” said Bruno, “that we follow protocol.”

Bill Turner, exalted ruler of Fort Worth Lodge 124 of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, appeared on the scene representing Senator Yarborough at this time to inform me that the senator had instructed him to see that protocol was “strictly followed” on the Fort Worth leg of the trip.

“If that means equal treatment,” I told him, “the senator will get it.”

Bill D. Moyers, then deputy director of the Peace Corps and a rising Johnson protégé, telephoned and began asking questions about the Fort Worth arrangements.

“How come?” I asked. Moyers said that he was in Austin and was serving as a coordinator for the trip. I said that I hadn’t heard. Bruno and I were beginning to have excitable conversations. When I told him about Moyers’s call, he flared.

“What’s he doing in this thing? You’re the advance man there. We’re running things here.”

Later Bruno called me back. “About Moyers. It’s okay. If he’s got requests, fill ’em.” Jerry had talked to someone.

Scott Sayers sent word that he was coming to Fort Worth and wanted to meet with me. We met. I was asked about the requests that I had received. I said that we would follow normal political protocol, meaning fair treatment. It was a short meeting.

The tempo of the final days accelerated. Demands for tickets became unceasing. Twelve hundred tickets were set aside for the chamber of commerce. Buck kept control of the rest. With his cooperation, I allocated and distributed 550 of the tickets, making them available principally to Democrats, union members, supporters of Senator Yarborough, blacks, and Chicano. I required each group to compile lists of the names and addresses of intended recipients and to give them to me before I would make the tickets available. The executive vice president of the chamber, Milton Atkinson, who talked and acted like a conservative, became exasperated because so
many of the tickets were straying from the chamber fold. We had words when I answered his complaint with the observation that there were other interests to be considered than those of the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce.

While talking with a labor delegation in my room at the Hotel Texas, I became concerned about the extent of black attendance at the breakfast. One of the union leaders told me that despite what I might have heard about a substantial number of blacks being among the labor representatives at the breakfast, “there will be damn few unless somebody does something.” I asked if anyone knew the number of blacks living in Tarrant County. When the union men told me there were 70,000, I asked for the name of a leader in the black community. Dr. Marion Brooks was suggested. As the labor delegation was going out the door, I was on the telephone with Dr. Brooks and with his assistance placed forty tickets directly with blacks.

With the Chicanos, I nearly struck out. The day before the breakfast the county sheriff telephoned and said that a young man on his staff by the name of Jake Cardenas headed the local Political Organization of Spanish-Speaking People (PASO) and was hurt that no one had made a move to involve the Chicanos in the presidential visit. I talked to Cardenas and apologized.

“I didn’t think of it,” I said.

He was polite, but his voice was numb. “Nobody does.”

I was at the bottom of my ticket barrel but succeeded in retrieving ten tickets, which he picked up.

While I was engaged with my set of problems, Duncan and Hall, with an assist from Howard, went about their business of providing for the safety of the president while he was in Fort Worth. They met with law enforcement agencies that would be involved in the visit, checked the backgrounds of hotel employees and others who would be in contact with the presidential party, “ran out” and timed motorcade routes, including alternates, made arrangements for tight security on the president’s quarters in the hotel, and went through the other rituals peculiar to their calling. We met at night to compare notes.

Mike Howard, the Secret Service agent later assigned by Duncan to be “law enforcement liaison,” told me later that he called on Fort Worth Police Chief Cato Hightower to advise him of “what was about to fall on him.” Howard sought the chief’s help in reviewing records of people in the area who might be threats to the presidential party. Thirty people were detained or placed under surveillance, according
to Howard. The agent asked Tarrant County Sheriff Lon Evans to contact all law enforcement agencies in the county and to tell them that every body was needed on November 21 and 22. The call was answered, and even firemen turned out to guard the hotel exits and stairwells.

Howard said that each floor and window in the tall building facing the parking lot where the president would speak on Friday was thoroughly checked, and the occupants were told to keep their windows shut on November 21 and 22. However, said Howard, on Thursday afternoon a policeman spotted an open window on an upper floor. It turned out, the agent said, that two teenage boys were looking at the activity in the parking lot through a scope attached to a hunting rifle belonging to their father, an attorney in the office. The gun, taken from an office gun case, was not loaded. It was determined that it was just innocent curiosity on the part of the boys, and the weapon and scope were locked away.

Howard also enforced a violation of the time in his agency’s jurisdiction. An entrepreneur in the hotel lobby was selling $1 bills with the image of the presidential couple over George Washington’s. He was shut down.
Ross Wilder, a big, hearty man who had been one of the pilots on Jimmy Doolittle’s raid on Tokyo in World War II, came over from Dallas, where he was linked to my office in Washington as regional director of business affairs for the GSA. Ross introduced me to the owner of the Empire Club down the street where, after being signed on as a “member” in accordance with the quaint Texas custom of the time, I could buy hard liquor by the drink.

In addition to being sociable, I kept up an old habit of wandering alone in towns strange to me. On one of my walks I saw an interesting sale and emerged from a store wearing a Texas hat, trying to appear nonchalant under it, although usually I never wore a hat of any kind, much less one of Texas’s hyperbolic headpieces. Twice I visited The Cellar, a below-the-street joint a few blocks from the hotel, where early hippie types congregated and weird concoctions, supposedly without alcohol, were served to the thrum of drums and guitars. In each instance my ears could bear the din for about half an hour.

The Secret Service agents and I went out to Carswell Air Force Base together for a meeting with the commanding officer, Brigadier General Howard W. Moore. He told us that because Carswell was a Strategic Air Command base, the public would not be able to enter for the president’s arrival and departure. I argued that an exception should be made, that it was an unusual occasion, and that the people of the Fort Worth area should be able to see their president come and go. Carswell was opened to the public for the visit, but no doubt weightier voices than mine were responsible for the change in the original position that I had reported to Washington.

Inexperience as an advance man led to my being bullied by the Fort Worth labor leadership on one issue. I had made provision for Yancey and his wife to represent labor on the reception and departure committees. In the meeting with the labor leadership in my hotel room, Yancey and other officials of the Tarrant County AFL-CIO suddenly balked at this plan and threatened a labor boycott of the breakfast unless the other union county officials and their wives got to meet the Kennedys too. So an elongated reception committee greeted the presidential party on the night of November 21, and, as a departure committee, said goodbye on the morning of November 22. There was Raymond Buck and his wife, General Moore and his wife, the three vice presidents of the chamber and their wives, the chairman of the Tarrant County Democrats and his wife, the Democratic
committeeman and committeewoman and their spouses, six officials of the Tarrant County AFL-CIO and their wives, the mayor and his wife, and the county judge and his wife. Later, one of my trademarks as an advance man was the compactness of reception and departure committees. But by then I had recognized that you can be firm when running the only presidential show in town.

The meeting with the union leadership also led to my discovery by the press. Following the session that had ended with me on the telephone to Dr. Brooks, the Fort Worth Star Telegram ran a front-page story headlined NEGROES INVITED TO BREAKFAST FOR JFK and crediting unnamed “organized labor spokesmen” with prodding “one of the White House aides at the Hotel Texas” into issuing invitations to black people. After this story appeared, reporters went hunting for the “aides” who turned out, of course, to be me. From then on I was quoted daily in the newspapers, saying vague things about plans for the presidential visit. As a rule, the prudent advance man tries to avoid getting his name into the newspapers. He lets local sources make the announcements. But sometimes the only choice is between candor and causing a disagreeable “tight-lipped mystery man at the hotel” news story.

Bill Turner, the exalted Elk, came to the hotel with a telegram that he had received from Washington after reporting to Senator Yarborough’s office on our Fort Worth plans. Dated November 19, it read:

Seating, cars, head tables perfectly satisfactory.
Please do not object or complain, it is 100% perfect.
As to stopping at Elks lodge, will see what can be done.
Ralph Yarborough
U.S.S.

In addition to protecting Senator Yarborough’s interests, Turner had been advancing one of his own, a visit to the Elks lodge by President Kennedy at which time the president would present an American flag to the lodge. Requests for presidents to make side excursions when visiting a community usually are legion. The majority are denied, as was this one. But Turner tried to the end. He sent long telegrams to Washington, and he kept after me by telephone and note, dignifying me with the written title “Special Assistant to the President and Member of the White House staff.”
Congressman Jim Wright, young and personable, moved into the hotel a few rooms down the hall from mine and stayed on the telephone for two days. We did find time to discuss the Fort Worth planning and to deplore extraordinary examples of intra-party nastiness. Wright worked hard for White House approval of a public appearance by President Kennedy in addition to the breakfast speech. The day before the event, approval came through from Washington to schedule the extra remarks in the parking lot across the street from the Hotel Texas.

There had been another difficulty about the use of the parking lot as the site for early-morning remarks by the president before the breakfast address. Congressman Wright notes in his 1996 book *Balance of Power* (Turner Publications, 1996, p. 104) that he and Governor Connally had to work hard to convince oilman William A. Moncrief, who owned the city block that included the parking lot, that the lot could be used for the president’s public appearance. Wright said that Moncrief, no Kennedy supporter, “finally relented.”

Overall schedules of the Texas trip were appearing in the newspapers for the last few days before November 22. On November 19, a diagram was published in the Fort Worth newspapers of the routes that the president’s motorcade would follow between Carswell Air Force Base and the Hotel Texas on November 21 and 22. High school bands agreed to play along the route. The Kennedy suite in the hotel was furnished with modern paintings and sculpture by local art lovers. Buck obtained through me the hat and shoe sizes of President Kennedy so that a Texas hat and a pair of boots could be presented to the president.

Ross Wilder came over from Dallas and moved into the hotel on November 21 to help me. There were three telephones in my room by this time, and the room rang like the inside of a campanile. Wilder and I ate a late dinner and then drove to Carswell, where Air Force One was to land shortly after 11 p.m. Streams of cars were entering the gates. As arrival time approached, I lined up the welcoming committee in a hangar and led the long column outside to the light-splashed apron. The blue-and-white 707 landed and taxied. The waiting crowd cheered as the aircraft marked with the American flag and the presidential seal cut its engines. The presidential party came down the steps and went through the receiving line. Marjorie Belew handed Mrs. Kennedy a dewy armful of three dozen red roses. The president and Mrs. Kennedy moved toward the fences. Cheers rose to a roar. Hands reached for theirs. There were laughter and shouts and
a crescendo of cheers as they walked the fences, and, then, entered the cars. The motorcade began to move. Wilder and I got our car and headed for the Hotel Texas.

Downtown Fort Worth was alive with lights and people. We paused in the hotel lobby and talked to friends and acquaintances. Then I went up to the president’s floor to report to Kenneth P. O’Donnell, the president’s appointments secretary. O’Donnell was standing in the doorway of a suite laughing at the antics of David Powers, White House assistant and frequent companion of the president. Powers, in his shorts, was tumbling on the bed. O’Donnell looked at me.

“Why,” he said, “did the congressmen have to wait at the desk in the lobby instead of being escorted to their rooms when the motorcade got here?”

I told him it was a detail that had not occurred to me. I must have looked abashed, because he followed up his abrupt greeting with, “Well, it’s okay. Everything’s fine.”

We talked briefly about the next day’s program, and I went back downstairs to Wilder’s room where we were to have a drink with the owners of the Empire Club and his wife. Passing a hall mirror I realized that I was still wearing the Texas hat that I had put on to go to the airport. It occurred to me that a five-gallon hat was not the finest apparel for a Kennedy advance man to wear when talking with Kenny O’Donnell.

Looking back on the Fort Worth visit a year later, when I was a veteran at advance work, I recognized that the move of the presidential party into the old Hotel Texas that night was far from smooth, that I was not at the right places to plane the edges. With all the new problems I had been grappling with alone, I had slighted or ignored arrangements that later I would make as a matter of course. But the airport crowd had been good, the streets had been lined despite the late hour, and the presidential party was bedded down without any bad incidents. So on my way downstairs that night I was feeling good. I was tired, though, and anxious about the morning, so I declined an invitation to visit the Fort Worth Press Club, which was staying open late for the visiting newspapermen. Among those who did go were some off-duty Secret Service agents who had just arrived in town. After Dallas they were to be pilloried by Drew Pearson and others for drinking and keeping late hours while on a presidential trip. A few of the new arrivals visited The Cellar, the aforementioned nightspot. But there was no evidence of excessive drinking by Secret
Service personnel. As one agent told me, they were more interested in getting a bite to eat than a drink. Meals for agents on presidential trips could be haphazard. Following the nightcap with Wilder and his friends, I went to bed and left a call for early in the morning.

A drizzle was falling when I went out to the parking lot in the morning. On the roofs of buildings overlooking the lot, policemen in slickers stood against the gray sky. Despite the rain, the crowd swelled. The waiting people, many of them men in work clothes, were quiet. They watched the technicians adjusting the public address system on the flatbed that would serve as the president’s platform.

President Kennedy, with Congressman Jim Wright by his side, strode out, neither of them wearing raincoats. Flanking them were Vice President Johnson and Senator Yarborough, with Governor Connally a few steps behind, all three protected against the drizzle by raincoats. It was 8:45 a.m.

“There are no faint hearts in Fort Worth,” President Kennedy began when he had mounted the platform, “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 . . . we appreciate your welcome.”

He went on to speak about the country’s defense and the part that Fort Worth played industrially in maintaining the country’s security. He touched on the nation’s space effort. His words had an impromptu ring, but his delivery was warm and direct. He said that the people must be willing to bear the burdens of world leadership.

“I know one place where they are,” he told his wet listeners. “Here in this rain, in Fort Worth, in Texas, in the United States. We are going forward.”

There was prolonged applause from the 8,000 or so people in the parking lot. The president reentered the hotel. As prearranged, the breakfasters in the grand ballroom were on their coffee when the president, to vigorous applause, walked through the kitchen and down the aisle to the head table. I stayed in the kitchen doorway with a Secret Service agent. Mrs. Kennedy, lovely in a pink suit, came in behind us as Buck was introducing the head-table guests. She waited. He swung the attention of the audience to the kitchen entrance. Mrs. Kennedy stepped into the room to a tumultuous welcome. She went down the aisle to her husband amidst the wild cheering.

Buck presented the Texas hat and boots. President Kennedy thanked him and, to no one’s surprise, did not put on the hat. He
began his address lightly, referring to the frequent risings for applause
during the introductions.

“I know why everyone in Texas, Fort Worth, is so thin, having
gotten up and down about nine times. This is what you do every
morning . . .”

The president’s prepared remarks were directed to the country’s
defense posture. The parking lot talk had been a foretaste of what
was to come. He enlarged upon Fort Worth’s contributions to air
defenses: World War II bombers, combat helicopters, the new TFX
planes. It was a speech for a Texas chamber of commerce, and it
was enthusiastically received. The president came up the aisle toward
the kitchen with his wife. His young and vibrant face flashed smiles.
Hands reached for him, and he grasped them. The Kennedys went
into the kitchen and through a back door to the elevators.

As the crowd moved toward the exits, craggy Congressman
Albert Thomas of Houston, whose big day had been Thursday in
his own city, saw me and came over. Thomas, who was chairman
of the subcommittee of the House of Representatives, which passed
on the GSA’s appropriations, shook my hand.

“Wonderful,” he said. “Congratulations on what you fellows
did here.”

I felt a glow of architectonic accomplishment. Congressman
Thomas had something in his other hand. He handed me a hat check
and a quarter and asked if I would mind going through the crowd to
get his hat on the other side of the ballroom, meeting him in front
of the hotel where the motorcade cars were drawn up. He had missed
his proper transportation once earlier in the trip and was determined
not to do so again. A little deflated, I went after his hat. He need not
have worried. The motorcade would not leave for another hour.

“Welcome Mr. President” read the lettering on the marquee of
the hotel. The motorcade cars for the president and the vice president
were parked at the curb. I stood to one side, arms folded, smoking,
hopeful that the loading of cars would go smoothly but apprehensive
that it would not.

Governor Connally and his wife emerged from the hotel. David
and Marjorie Belew were on the sidewalk, and David introduced me
to the governor. “I’ve heard about your work here in Fort Worth,”
Connally said suavely. “You did a good job I understand.”

I thanked him. There was no mention of the unfulfilled requests
from Austin.
Larry O’Brien was waiting nervously by the vice president’s car. Ralph Yarborough had refused to ride with Lyndon Johnson in the other Texas cities on the previous day, prompting new press reports of their estrangement. O’Brien was charged with getting them both into the same car. Senator Yarborough was with O’Brien. Loosely. He wandered. O’Brien asked me in a low voice to seat the vice president in the rear of the car when he came out of the hotel. O’Brien muttered something like “You can do it easier than I can,” and he said something further about his having to work with the vice president in Washington.

The automobile was a convertible with the top down. Yarborough entered the car but perched on the back of the rear seat on the driver’s side. His occupancy seemed tentative.

A Secret Service agent came back from the president’s car escorting Nellie Connally, the governor’s wife. Without crowding, there was no room for her in the president’s car, which was a five-passenger model, the same as the car assigned to the vice president. The president and Mrs. Kennedy and Governor Connally would ride in the rear seat of the president’s car; the driver and another Secret Service agent would be in front, so there was no place for Mrs. Connally to go but the car behind. She was entering the rear seat of the vice president’s car when O’Brien, his face working, moved in and plunked her into the middle of the front seat where she would ride between the driver and a Secret Service agent. O’Brien managed to keep a tether on Yarborough, who had been showing signs of relinquishing, with pleasure, his seat to this lady. Vice President and Mrs. Johnson came up to the motorcade. O’Brien stepped back, and I stepped forward.

“Here is your seat, Mr. Johnson,” I said cheerfully, swinging open the rear door. He stared at me without comment as he struggled into a coat held for him by agent Rufus Youngblood. Mrs. Johnson slid into the middle of the seat next to Yarborough. The vice president climbed in. I shut the door. The deed was done. I quickly wondered how this motorcade episode would go down with the press. It would probably be somewhere up front in accounts of the morning events. The running story had been the split in the Texas Democratic Party. Typical had been the final paragraph in a piece in the November 18 Dallas Morning News before the trip had begun. Robert E. Baskin of the paper’s Washington bureau had written: “The President’s attitude toward Yarborough and other Texas party leaders will be closely watched during his visit.” The close watchers, of course, would be
reporters. Oh well, I thought, time will tell. But time did not. The incident became inconsequential as the day unfolded.

Up ahead, the Kennedys and Governor Connally settled into their white convertible which, Agent Howard recalls, had been borrowed by the Secret Service from professional golfer Ben Hogan. There were waves and cheers from the onlookers. The motorcade to Carswell began. Riding in a Secret Service car, Howard was pleased to see Tarrant County’s “Mounted Posse” out in force to supplement police on foot. Rain had cancelled the planned presence of these deputies on horseback along the incoming route the night before. There was, Howard notes, an unscheduled stop by the presidential cavalcade along the way in the northwest suburb of River Oaks, the line of cars pausing while the president spoke to some nuns and a group of schoolchildren.

Ross Wilder, my helper from GSA’s Dallas office, and I drove to Carswell by a different route to arrive at the air base before the motorcade did. The departure committee, formerly the welcoming committee, was already in place at my request. It did its duty. Thousands of people behind the barricades raised their voices as the big blue-and-white jet roared and began to roll. The plane took off at about 11:20 a.m., Texas time, for the flight to Love Field in Dallas, a little more than ten minutes away. Members of the serpentine departure committee, their faces warmly smiling, came up to me and shook my hand.

We drove back to the Hotel Texas, and I made a reservation on a commercial flight to Friendship Airport in Baltimore. Bruno telephoned from Washington and Moyers from Austin to ask how the morning had gone. After talking with them, I sat down at my portable typewriter and wrote a one-page final report on the Fort Worth leg of the trip. Then I lay down on the bed for a short nap. There was a furious knocking on the door. “Turn on your radio,” Ross Wilder shouted. “Your boss is dead. Turn on your radio.”

I switched on the hotel radio and let him in. Bulletin followed bulletin. A voice said that two priests emerging from a Dallas hospital room had confirmed that President Kennedy was dead. I turned off the radio. Wilder left. I lay on the bed and wept.

Wilder drove me to Love Field in Dallas to catch my flight, which I had cancelled and then rescheduled. I had a middle seat in the plane. My sobs would not stop, so I said to the men on either side, “You will have to put up with this. I was in Texas for the president.”
From Baltimore I took the airport bus to Washington and a taxicab to my home south of Alexandria, Virginia. My wife, our four boys, and I stayed home in the days that followed.

After the federal city returned to work, I found myself still tied to the Texas tragedy. President Johnson named his commission to investigate the assassination. While the GSA sought suitable office space for the panel headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren, its members met in a conference room of the National Archives, then a part of the GSA. By agreement of the chief justice and the archivist of the United States, Wayne C. Grover, I accredited the reporters who converged on the archives building for the Warren Commission’s first three meetings, and I served as press aide. Following the third meeting, the commission had a staff and offices in another building. My services ended.

Back in my own office, I was talking on the telephone one day to Wilder in Dallas and he said, “Do you remember Jack Ruby?”

“Yeah,” I said, “I remember.”

Henry Levy, a member of our staff, and I had been in Dallas months before the assassination of President Kennedy. When we had completed our business in the GSA regional office, we went to dinner with Wilder, and afterward somebody said, “How about a nightclub?”

Wilder asked the bartender in the restaurant, an old acquaintance, where we should go.

“Hold a minute,” said the bartender, “let me call a guy.”

When he hung up, he said, “Go to the Carousel. The guy says since I’m sending you, forget the door charge.”

It was a walkup. A fat, balding man met us at the entrance and showed us to a table. Most of the tables were empty. It was Jack Ruby, who was to gun down Lee Harvey Oswald in the corridor of the police station. He stayed for a few minutes to tell us how good the show was. The MC came out on the stage, grabbing for a support. He was drunk. The decorations were shoddy, the drinks terrible. There was a laboring stripper. We paid up and got out.

“Goin’ so soon?” said Ruby as we passed him.

In the weeks that followed close on November 22, 1963, it was difficult to realize that the Kennedy years were over. A sense of finality came to Washington on December 22 during the candlelight ceremony at the Lincoln Memorial that ended the thirty days of official mourning. The Howard University choir sang, the army band played,
and clergymen prayed. It was bitter cold. The new president spoke, paraphrasing the words of Lincoln at Gettysburg. We lit candles, sang “America the Beautiful,” and looked across the Potomac to Arlington National Cemetery, where there was another glint in the night, a reminder that in the short years before Dallas, hope had come to some arid places in America.