

# JFK: An Accidental Assassination?

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US News

November 5, 2013 [RSS Feed](#) [Print](#)



President Kennedy's limousine speeds along Elm Street toward the Stemmons Freeway overpass moments after he was shot at Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Tex., Nov. 22, 1963.

Always in late November, there is a somber moment when Americans return to the day John F. Kennedy was slain in Dallas in 1963. Except this November 22, the date will hit a knell of 50 years ago.

America wept. Shattered, the nation lost its innocence with two rifle shots ripping through the air at a parade, aimed at the bronzed president with ocean blue eyes. The Thousand Days of the JFK presidency, with compliments to historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (my editor's wise father) vanished yonder in the big Texas sky. Like a legend, the king was dead in broad daylight, for all Americans to witness such an act of violence for the first time ever, in black and white television. We'd never be the same.

The day is a Mississippi River of remembrance running through the consciousness of Americans. It separates those who remember the moment and what they were doing and those who don't remember it in real time. I was too young to remember the day he died. The vast swath of Americans under 50 do not know it from direct personal experience. So we can't look back and say that once we lived in Camelot. But we've seen the pictures that tell the story a thousand times.

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But what if Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassin, was not aiming at the handsome bronzed head of the 46-year-old president? That is the question raised by an intriguing new book by James Reston, Jr. "The Accidental Victim" tells the same tale of the same day in Dallas from an entirely different angle. Told in an elegant novelistic voice, Reston's book alights on Oswald's motive – acting alone, he declares – and finds none for killing the president.

From investigating Oswald's jagged biography, his emigration to the Soviet Union as a communist and other documents anew, Reston shows the ex-Marine felt a hatred for the other man riding in the parade convertible. That was tall John Connally, the governor of Texas, who was shot and severely wounded, but lived. Connally had denied Oswald a chance to erase his dishonorable discharge from the Marines, a source of severe distress to Oswald. His Russian widow testified before the Warren Commission that her husband bore a grudge against the Texas governor, but none against the president. Reston feels that this clue, hiding in plain sight, unlocks a new explanation of the Kennedy assassination.

Reston brings the exhilarating early '60s back to life. Texas was considered a lone outpost by sophisticated Easterners – and some presidential advisors felt Kennedy was courting danger down there. So he was, but JFK himself pressed to make the visit for much of 1963, believing he had to conquer Texas Democratic politics and win the state for re-election in 1964. The last hour the president and Mrs. Kennedy spent together is painted in stark, heartbreaking detail. She came for his sake, though she could not stand the conceited swagger of Connally. Texas was not her cup of tea.

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After 50 years, Reston's new version fits the facts for a convincing match. The author admits it is emotionally hard to accept that Kennedy, larger than life, may have just been in the way of the intended target. That such a voice was stilled, that this grand life was gone in a flash - accidentally? - seems to fall as an unseemly blow.

But clarity matters more than anything. And Kennedy's death has preyed on our psyche so long because of all the uncertainty shrouding it. Whatever way he died, he was just as dead. And Kennedy's magic and legacy remain beyond the reach of a rifle.

In an elegiac end to his account, Reston relates going to the government medical offices where Kennedy's corset, worn that day, is kept in deep secret. The president had a painful back injury for which he had to be laced up in a large, stiff vest corset to keep him upright. Just to look at the corset revealed JFK's vulnerability. The author witnessed this part of the historical record with sorrow and awe.

Simply speaking, Kennedy could not duck the second fatal shot. He was only human, after all.