

That 'Damned Girdle': the Hidden Factor That Might Have Killed Kennedy

By JAMES RESTON JR.

Two years ago, the historian Robert Dallek revealed new details about the extraordinary range of shots, stimulants and pills President Kennedy took to control his physical pain and present his youthful image to the world. Important and interesting as these details are, they should not distract us from the one medical remedy that probably killed the president: his corset.

Members of Kennedy's inner circle had often witnessed the painful ritual that Kennedy endured in his private quarters before he ventured in public, when his valet would literally winch a steel-rodged canvas back brace around the president's torso, pulling heavy straps and tightening the thongs loop by loop as if it was a bizarre scene out of "Gone With the Wind."

Once in it, the president was

If not for an elaborate corset, he likely would have survived the Dallas shooting.

planted upright, trapped and almost bolted into a ramrod posture. Many would wonder how JFK could ever move in such a contraption. And yet move he did, and, besides his painkillers, his corset contributed to the youthful, high-shouldered military bearing that he presented glamorously to the world.

But this simple device imparted a fate almost Mephistophelean in its horror to the sequence of events in Dallas 41 years ago.

In researching my biography of Gov. John Connally of Texas

15 years ago, I was put on to the critical importance of Kennedy's corset in the ghastly six seconds in November 1963 by a former Texas senator, the late Ralph Yarborough, who was in the motorcade that day.

Yarborough growled softly about that "damned girdle," and this led me to the remarks of two doctors, Charles James Carrico and Malcolm Oliver Perry, buried in Volume 3 of the 26-volume set of testimony that attended the Warren Commission report.

In November 1963, Carrico was the youthful, 28-year-old resident in the emergency room of Parkland Hospital who first received the injured president in the trauma room; Perry came quickly to the emergency room to supervise the case — and then to pronounce the president dead half an hour later.

Before the Warren Commission, Carrico told of removing Kennedy's back brace in the first seconds after his body arrived in

the hospital. He described the device as made of coarse white fiber, with stays and buckles.

Apart from the never-ending controversy over how many bullets Lee Harvey Oswald actually fired from the Texas School Book Depository, most experts agree with the Warren Commission that Oswald's first bullet passed cleanly through Kennedy's lower neck, missing any bone, then entered Connally's back, streaking through the governor's body and lodging in his thigh. This was the first so-called magic bullet.

When Connally was hit, he pivoted in pain to his left, his lithe body in motion as it swiveled downward, ending up in the lap of his wife, Nellie.

But because of the corset, Kennedy's body did not act as a normal body would when the bullet passed through his throat. Held by his back brace, Kennedy remained upright, according to the Warren Commission, for five

more seconds. This provided Oswald the opportunity to reload and shoot again at an almost stationary target.

The frames of the Zapruder film confirm this ramrod posture: Kennedy's head turns only slightly in those eternal seconds, and his upper body almost not at all, from frame 225 (when the first shot entered his neck) to the fatal frame of 313.

Without the corset, the force of the first bullet, traveling at a speed of 2,000 feet a second, would surely have driven the president's body forward, making him writhe in pain like Connally, and probably down in the seat of his limousine, beyond the view of Oswald's cross hairs for a second or third shot.

With no bones struck and the spinal cord intact, the president almost certainly would have survived the wound from the first bullet. Both Carrico and Perry testified to this likelihood (and apropos of the decades-long con-

troversy, both testified that the small, round, clean wound in the front of Kennedy's neck was an exit wound rather than an entry wound).

To Perry, under the questioning of then-assistant counsel — now senator from Pennsylvania — Arlen Specter, the injury was "tolerable"; the president would have recovered. Because the bullet had passed below the larynx, the wound would not even have impaired his speech later.

In the new focus on cortisone shots, codeine painkillers, barbiturates, stimulants like Ritalin, and gamma globulin injections, the simple corset needs to be emphasized, tragically, in the context of those medical strategies President Kennedy used to create the illusion of the vigorous leader.

James Reston Jr.'s forthcoming book is on the Spain of Christopher Columbus and will be published by Doubleday next year.

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