

# "A Reporter Must Trust His Instinct"

By TOM WICKER

I THINK I was in the first press bus. But I can't be sure. Pete Lisagor of the *Chicago Daily News* says he knows he was in the first press bus and he describes things that went on aboard it that didn't happen on the bus I was in. But I still *think* I was in the first press bus.

I cite that minor confusion as an example of the way it was in Dallas in the early afternoon of November 22. At first no one knew what happened, or how, or where, much less why. Gradually, bits and pieces began to fall together and within two hours a reasonably coherent version of the story began to be possible. Even now, however, I know no reporter who was there who has a clear and orderly picture of that surrealistic afternoon; it is still a matter of bits and pieces thrown hastily into something like a whole.

It began, for most reporters, when the central fact of it was over. As our press bus eased at motorcade speed down an incline toward an underpass, there was a little confusion in the sparse crowds that at that point had been standing at the curb to see the President of the United States pass. As we came out of the underpass I saw a motorcycle policeman drive over the curb, across an open area, a few feet up a railroad bank, dismount, and start scrambling up the bank.

Jim Mathis of the *Advance* (Newhouse) Syndicate went to the front of our bus and looked ahead to where the President's car was supposed to be.

"The President's car just sped off," he said. "Really gunned away." (How could Mathis have seen that if there had been another bus in front of us?)

But that could have happened if someone had thrown a tomato at the President. The press bus in its stately pace rolled on to the Trade Mart, where the President was to speak. Fortunately, it was only a few minutes away.

At the Trade Mart, rumor was sweeping the hundreds of Texans already

eating their lunch. It was the only rumor that I had ever *seen*; it was moving across that crowd like a wind over a wheatfield. A man eating a grapefruit seized my arm as I passed.

"Has the President been shot?" he asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "But something happened."

With the other reporters—I suppose thirty-five of them—I went on through the huge hall to the upstairs press room. We were hardly there when Marianne Means of Hearst Headline Service hung up a telephone, ran to a group of us, and said, "The President's been shot. He's at Parkland Hospital."

ONE thing I learned that day; I suppose I already knew it, but that day made it plain. A reporter must trust his instinct. When Miss Means said those eight words—I never learned who told her—I knew absolutely that they were true. Everyone did. We ran for the press buses.

Again, a man seized my arm—an official-looking man.

"No running in here," he said sternly. I pulled free and ran on. Doug Kiker of the *Herald Tribune* barreled head-on into a waiter carrying a plate of potatoes. Waiter and potatoes flew about the room. Kiker ran on. He was in his first week with the *Trib*, and his first Presidential trip.

I barely got aboard a moving press bus. Bob Pierrepont of CBS was aboard, and he said that he now recalled having heard something that could have been shots—or firecrackers, or motorcycle backfire. We talked anxiously, unbelieving, afraid.

Fortunately again, it was only a few minutes to Parkland Hospital. There, at its emergency entrance, stood the President's car, the top up, a bucket of bloody water beside it. Automatically, I took down its license number—GG300 District of Columbia.

The first eyewitness description came from Senator Ralph Yarborough, who had been riding in the third car of the motorcade with Vice President and Mrs. Johnson. Senator Yarborough is an East Texan, which is to say a Southerner, a man of quick emotion, old-fashioned rhetoric.

"Gentlemen," he said, pale, shaken, near tears. "It is a deed of horror."

The details he gave us were good and

mostly—as it later proved—accurate. But he would not describe to us the appearance of the President as he was wheeled into the hospital, except to say that he was "gravely wounded." We could not doubt, then, that it was serious.

I had chosen that day to be without a notebook. I took notes on the back of my mimeographed schedule of the two-day tour of Texas we had been so near to concluding. Today, I cannot read many of the notes; on November 22, they were as clear as sixty-point type.

A local television reporter, Mel Crouch, told us he had seen a rifle being withdrawn from the fifth- or sixth-floor corner window of the Texas School Book Depository. Instinct again—Crouch sounded right, positive, though none of us knew him. We believed it and it was right.

Mac Kilduff, an assistant White House press secretary in charge of the press on that trip, who was to acquit himself well that day, came out of the hospital. We gathered round and he told us the President was alive. We later learned that it wasn't true, but Mac thought it was true at the time, and he didn't mislead us about a possible recovery. His whole demeanor made plain what was likely to happen. He also told us—as Senator Yarborough had—that Governor John Connally of Texas had been shot, too.

Salisbury told me to use the phone and take no chances on a wire circuit being jammed or going wrong. Stop reporting and start writing in time to meet the deadline, he said. Pay anyone \$50 if necessary to dictate for you.

The whole conversation probably took three minutes. Then I hung up, thinking of all there was to know, all there was I didn't know. I wandered down a corridor and ran into Sidney and Chuck Roberts of *Newsweek*. They'd seen a hearse pulling up at the emergency entrance, and we figured they were about to move the body.

We made our way to the hearse—a Secret Service agent who knew us helped us through suspicious Dallas police lines—and the driver said his instructions were to take the body to the airport. That confirmed our hunch, but gave me, at least, another wrong one. Mr. Johnson, I declared, would fly to Washington with the body and be sworn in there.

We posted ourselves inconspicuously

Tom Wicker, a member of the *New York Times* White House staff, was the only *Times* reporter in Dallas when President Kennedy was assassinated. This article appears here through special arrangement with *Times Talk*, that newspaper's employee publication, for which Mr. Wicker wrote his recollections of November 22.

near the emergency entrance. Within minutes, they brought the body out in a bronze coffin.

A number of White House staff people—stunned, silent, stumbling along as if dazed—walked with it. Mrs. Kennedy walked by the coffin, her hand on it, her head down, her hat gone, her dress and stockings spattered. She got into the hearse with the coffin. The staff men crowded into cars and followed.

That was just about the only incident that I got with my own eyes that entire afternoon.

Roberts commandeered a seat in a police car and followed, promising to “fill” Sidney and me as necessary. We made the same promise to him and went back to the press room.

There, we received an account from Julian Reed, a staff assistant, of Mrs. John Connally’s recollection of the shooting. Most of his recital was helpful and established who was sitting in which seat in the President’s car at the time of the shooting.

The doctors who had treated the President came in after Mr. Reed. They gave us copious detail, particularly as to the efforts they had made to resuscitate the President. They were less explicit about the wounds, explaining that the body had been in their hands only a short time and they had had little time to examine it closely. They conceded they were unsure as to the time of death and had arbitrarily put it at 1 P.M., CST.

Much of their information, as it developed later, was erroneous. Subsequent reports made it pretty clear that Mr. Kennedy probably was killed instantly. His body, as a physical mechanism, however, continued to flicker an occasional pulse and heartbeat. No doubt this justified the doctors’ first account. There also was the question of national security and Mr. Johnson’s swearing-in. Perhaps, too, there was a question about the Roman Catholic rites. In any case, until a later doctors’ statement about 9 o’clock that night, the account we got at the hospital was official.

The doctors had hardly left before Hawks came in and told us Mr. Johnson would be sworn in immediately at the airport. We dashed for the press buses, still parked outside. Many a campaign had taught me something about press buses and I ran a little harder, got there first, and went to the wide rear seat. That is the best place on a bus to open up a typewriter and get some work done.

On the short trip to the airport, I got about 500 words on paper—leaving a blank space for the hour of Mr. Johnson’s swearing-in, and putting down the mistaken assumption that the scene would be somewhere in the terminal.

As we arrived at a back gate along the airstrip, we could see *Air Force One*, the Presidential jet, screaming down the runway and into the air.

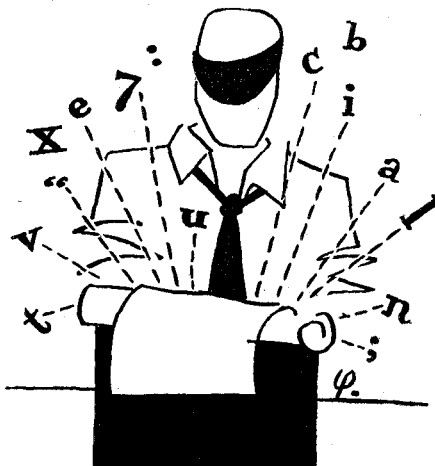
Left behind had been Sid Davis of Westinghouse Broadcasting, one of the few reporters who had been present for the swearing-in. Roberts, who had guessed right in going to the airport when he did, had been there, too, and was aboard the plane on the way to Washington.

Davis climbed on the back of a shiny new car that was parked near where our bus halted. I hate to think what happened to its trunk deck. He and Roberts—true to his promise—had put together a magnificent “pool” report on the swearing-in. Davis read it off, answered questions, and gave a picture that, so far as I know, was complete, accurate, and has not yet been added to.

I said to Kiker of the *Trib*: “We better go write. There’ll be phones in the terminal.” He agreed. Bob Manning, an ice-cool member of the White House transportation staff, agreed to get our bags off the press plane, which would return to Washington as soon as possible, and put them in a nearby telephone booth.

Kiker and I ran a half-mile to the terminal, cutting through a baggage-handling room to get there. I went immediately to a phone booth and dictated my 500-word lead, correcting it as I read, embellishing it, too. Before I hung up, I got Salisbury and asked him to cut into my story whatever the wires were filing on the assassin. There was no time left to chase down the Dallas police and find out those details on my own.

Dallas Love Field has a mezzanine running around its main waiting room; it is equipped with writing desks for travelers. I took one and went to work. My recollection is that it was then about 5 P.M., New York time. . .



I would write two pages, run down the stairs, across the waiting room, grab a phone, and dictate. Miraculously, I never had to wait for a phone booth or to get a line through. Dictating each take, I would throw in items I hadn’t written, sometimes whole paragraphs. It must have been tough on the dictating room crew.

Once, while in the booth dictating, I looked up and found twitching above me the imposing mustache of Gladwin Hill. He was the first *Times* man in and had found me right off; I was seldom more glad to see anyone. We conferred quickly and he took off for the police station; it was a tremendous load off my mind to have that angle covered and out of my hands.

I was half through, maybe more, when I heard myself paged. It turned out to be Kiker, who had been separated from me and was working in the El Dorado room, a bottle club in the terminal. My mezzanine was quieter and a better place to work, but he had a TV going for him, so I moved in, too.

The TV helped in one important respect. I took down from it an eye-witness account of one Charles Drehm, who had been waving at the President when he was shot. Instinct again: Drehm sounded positive, right, sure of what he said. And his report was the first real indication that the President probably was shot twice.

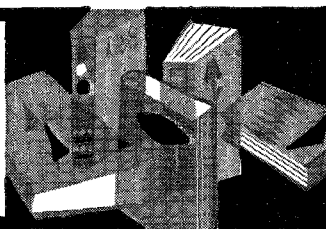
Kilduff promised more details in five minutes and went back into the hospital. We were barred. Word came to us second-hand—I don’t remember exactly how—from Bob Clark of ABC, one of the men who had been riding in the press “pool” car near the President’s, that he had been lying face down in Mrs. Kennedy’s lap when the car arrived at Parkland. No signs of life.

That is what I mean by instinct. That day, a reporter had none of the ordinary means or time to check and double-check matters given as fact. He had to go on what he knew of people he talked to, what he knew of human reaction, what two isolated “facts” added to in sum—above all on what he felt in his bones. I knew Clark and respected him. I took his report at face value, even at second hand. It turned out to be true. In a crisis, if a reporter can’t trust his instinct for truth, he can’t trust anything.

When Wayne Hawks of the White House staff appeared to say that a press room had been set up in a hospital classroom at the left rear of the building, the group of reporters began struggling across the lawn in that direction. I lingered to ask a motorcycle policeman if he had heard on his radio anything about the pursuit or capture of the as-

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# Books in Communications

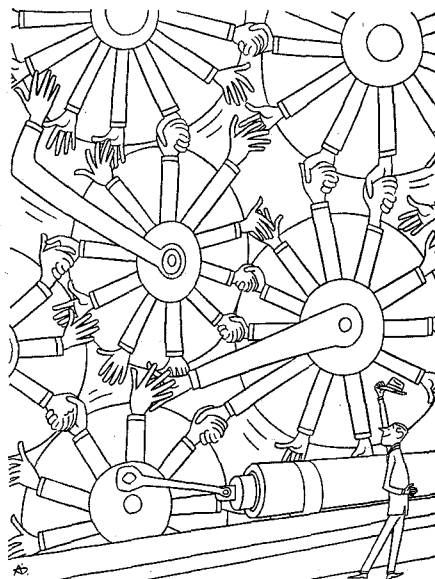


## Beating the Drums

**P**UBLIC RELATIONS is often a private horror. In the United States today, according to one estimate, over 100,000 full-time PR people are beating the drums, each in some specialty he has lovingly staked out as his very own; by 1970, the number may swell to as many as 250,000. Obviously, for the corporation seeking PR help, it's a big, wide, wonderful world, but it's also a headache. In order to shape its relations with its many publics, a company is frequently obliged to surround itself with a whole constellation of PR firms, each of which remains blissfully unconcerned about what its fellows are up to. The result can be a little like a car with a separate driver for each wheel.

At least one PR man, however, predicts that all this is coming to an end. He is William Safire, a thirty-four-year-old iconoclast who argues in *The Relations Explosion* (Macmillan, \$4.95) that the chaotic proliferation of PR agencies is ultimately going to give way to a new communications concept that will "fuse together all the relations services to deal cohesively with all the publics that any business has to serve." The change, he says, will be painful but, for those firms able to stay afloat on this wave of the future, profitable enough to make the old days seem like a bad dream.

The pressure for such amalgamation is coming from what Safire calls the "maverick manager," a new breed of business generalist who doesn't give a



—From "The Relations Explosion."

One view of public relations—"a separate driver for each wheel."

hang for the traditional compartments of corporate communication—industrial relations, stockholder relations, employee relations, and the like. He simply wants measurable results and doesn't care which department achieves them. Thinking in terms of (to use Safire's military analogy) missions rather than hardware, he will freely roam across established boundaries in pursuit of his goal—and in the process will no doubt send a good many old-line PR men scurrying straight back to the newspa-

per business. The result of this pressure will be a new kind of PR man, the author predicts, a scholarly chap schooled in the trade and in the sociological exotica of Festinger, Lazarsfeld, and Reisman. And—who knows?—he may even wear a white coat and goatee. In PR, as any PR man can tell you, anything can happen. (Even, indeed, such a piece of vividly metaphorical writing as this soaring flight of Safire's: "All the relations services will find themselves as reluctant bedfellows, because individual mistresses located all over Baghdad can never compete for a caliph's attention like an under-one-roof harem.")

The author's main argument is persuasive enough, but the bulk of *The Relations Explosion* is too much like hash: not so much prepared as accumulated. There are long chapters of anecdote (one of which tells of the author's own role in the Nixon-Khrushchev "Kitchen Debate" in 1959), chapters about an imaginary PR combine of a generation hence, and even some nice little diagrams of levers that could have been lifted right out of your babysitter's physics book ("Leverage, it would appear, means many things to many people . . ."). Safire's thesis may make a few old handshake-and-backslap PR men think of taking the cure, but others are likely to find that what was intended as strong medicine is too diluted to bother with.

**Inside View:** Public relations as it is today, rather than as it may be someday, is the concern of John W. Hill in *The Making of a Public Relations Man* (McKay, \$4.95). Hill, who got his start on Midwestern newspapers just after the turn of the century, later moved to a trade paper and from there, almost by accident, fell into the fledgling PR trade. It's a lively tale he tells, full of revealing and sometimes charming recollections that will prove valuable to anyone with a hankering to emulate a man who, as chairman of the board at Hill and Knowlton, has seen his agency grow to be one of the biggest in the field. And his explanation of what public relations is all about is refreshingly remote from those ubiquitous bogeymen, the hidden persuaders: "In its modern sense, public relations was brought into being by the ever-increasing complexity of the economic, social, and political problems that have assailed the human race since World War I. Its roots are fixed in the basic fact that public opinion, confused, obscure, and unpredictable as it may often seem, is the ultimate ruling force in the free world. A fundamental function of public relations is to help public opinion reach conclusions by providing it with facts and interpretations of facts."

—JAMES F. FIXX.

## This Smallness

By Harold Witt

**T**HIS smallness has a hunger at the heart—she gropes and grasps and rolls her blindnesses, working her featherweight of hands and feet, a mouth of iron pulled by the magnet breast.

Hers is the first perfection of desire, of subtler lusts, the blatant purity, for what she wants, the tiny shameless crier and pink demander of security,

so lately nothing but our reaching out in love and wonder; then, as in web-thick air, a flash of petals—and the world of doubt blooms with the balance of her being there.