MARVIN KALB: Hello, and welcome to the National Press Club and to another edition of The Kalb Report. I'm Marvin Kalb. Our subject tonight, a conversation with Dan Rather, on a Presidency, a legend, and a day that changed America.

When John F. Kennedy became our 35th President in January, 1961, he was the youngest to take the oath of office, succeeding Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was, at the time, the oldest. Kennedy arrived projecting a joyous sense of optimism, of hope, of tomorrow being definitely better than today. Yet, less than three years later, November 22nd, 1963, 50 years ago today, he was assassinated in Dallas, Texas by a social misfit named Lee Harvey Oswald.

Was there a conspiracy? Unlikely, but there are many theories, none ever proven. Kennedy’s record as President is mixed. He had good days, but he had bad days too. He brilliantly maneuvered his way out of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. He negotiated the Atmospheric Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Russians in 1963. And he established the Peace Corps, spreading America’s message of individual freedom all over the globe.

But, and it’s a big but, he sanctioned the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, and a bloody military coup in Vietnam, which led the U.S. into that long civil war. He was our first television President, exuding wit, charm, grace. His family, a beautiful wife, two lovely kids, were made for television. Yet his private life was marred by rumors of womanizing. Most Americans, to this day, consider him the most popular President in modern American history. His, though, was an unfinished Presidency.

My friend and colleague, Dan Rather, was in Dallas for CBS News when Kennedy was killed. Rather then went on, as we all know, to become the anchor of the CBS Evening News, indeed one of the most experienced, fearless, and energetic reporters of our time. But for him, as for so many others, it all started in Dallas.
So Dan, I was in Washington that day, not in Dallas. But you were there helping organize CBS’s coverage of the President’s visit. Suddenly, you were in the middle of this huge story. Where were you when you first got the word that Kennedy was shot, was killed? And who told you?

DAN RATHER: Well I had been with CBS News fewer than two years. I was still a new correspondent. My major mission was to cover—my assignment was to primarily cover Dr. Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement. But, because I was a Texan, born and raised there, and had covered politics in Texas—And, let us remember, this was to be a “routine political trip” by the President. I was asked by my superiors in New York to organize CBS News coverage. I didn’t expect to be on the air. I wasn’t supposed to be on the air. But I organized our coverage for a five-city tour.

And that’s the reason I was in Dallas, I was to facilitate our coverage. But the late Bob Pierpont, who was the White House correspondent, was—my job was to take his material primarily, and the material of others, and make sure it got to New York for a CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite.

I placed myself in the position, in answer to your question, just past the overpass, a railroad overpass, automobile underpass, where the motorcade was to officially end. For those who know the geography is a schoolbook depository. The motorcade was to officially end as it got to the underpass/overpass area. I positioned myself just beyond that for a film drop. Without going into great detail, what was filmed. Film needs to be processed. We didn’t have videotape. [laughter] So we had film drops at various places along the motorcade.

So I had positioned myself where it turned out to be a sunny day. Our affiliated station, KRLD, was only a short distance away. So I said, “Well, I’ll make myself the final film drop.” So I'm just the other side of the overpass. I didn’t hear any shots. I didn’t know
what had happened. All I knew is that I thought I had seen the Presidential limousine go by in just a nanosecond. Was that the Presidential limousine? Was that the First Lady? What is this?

And I thought they took a wrong direction. They were supposed to go—the motorcade was supposed to end there. They go onto the Trade Mart, where the President was to make his speech. But they didn’t take what I thought was the route to the Trade Mart. So I had no sense anything had happened until I realized—and all this goes by in a few seconds—that the rest of the motorcade was not behind what I thought to be the President’s limousine.

When I realized the rest of the motorcade wasn’t coming, I knew that something was wrong. I had no clue what was wrong. But I'm out of position. I'm supposed to be the logistics and communications person back at the station. So I quickly started heading back to the station, saying, “Well, something’s happened. I don’t know what.” Then, when I got in front of the schoolbook depository, there was this scene of chaos. People shouting at one another, the police shouting.

Then I say, “Wow.” Again, I don’t know what’s happened. But I'm badly out of position. So I have to hot-foot it back to the station. Now, as soon as I got to the station, which is our feed point for the evening news, Merriman Smith, the great United Press correspondent, White House correspondent, had dictated a lead which said not only had the President—shots been fired at him, he had been hit, hit badly, and perhaps fatally.

At that moment, every reporter’s instinct clicks in, fighting your own emotions. Can this be happening in America?

MARVIN KALB: Did this happen, Dan, when you got back to the studio?
DAN RATHER: That’s right. As soon as I got in the studio. Before I got back to the studio, I didn’t know any shots had been fired. I didn’t know what had happened.

MARVIN KALB: So you found it out when you got to the studio.

DAN RATHER: As soon as I got to the studio. There were people at the—at our affiliated station who still didn’t know anything had happened, because the wires were just moving. This was just moving. So, having covered the police beat in Houston as an apprentice reporter, I said the first thing you’ve got to do is you're on the phone, because they’ve taken him to a hospital. The phone at the hospital—Remember how long ago this had been. The switchboard would get clogged. So I quickly called the hospital. The first time the hospital hung up. The second time I begged the switchboard operator not to hang up on me. She didn’t. And it went from there.

And, as a consequence of that, in fairly short order, we—not I alone, but our CBS News team, it was clear the President was dead. No official announcement had been made. It would be a while before the government decided to announce. I believed then, have believed ever since, and believe now, the President was dead before he got to the hospital. I think good doctors tried to revive him, but he was dead on arrival at the hospital.

MARVIN KALB: There was one story—I don’t know if it’s true, but it says that you were “in the corner window, just below the top floor, where the assassin stuck out his 30 caliber rifle.” Was that right?

DAN RATHER: No.

MARVIN KALB: No. [laughter] You were not?
DAN RATHER: No.

MARVIN KALB: You were not there?

DAN RATHER: No. Well, this is the thing. So much rumor, gosh, mythology has built up about the thing. But I've told you where I was. No. And I didn’t—Frankly, I didn’t know what the schoolbook depository was, to be perfectly frank with you, other than I knew it was in front of the schoolbook depository, it was in the papers, of where the motorcade would make its last turn.

MARVIN KALB: Right.

DAN RATHER: Of the official motorcade.

MARVIN KALB: But you were the first to report, to the best of my knowledge, that President Kennedy had died.

DAN RATHER: That’s true.

MARVIN KALB: Now that was based on what?

DAN RATHER: Well, that was based on the following information. Number one, Eddie Barker, who is now deceased, was the local station news director. He was at the Trade Mart. And I believe it was the head of the Board of Regents of the hospital, but a higher ranking member of the hospital staff was there. And he told Eddie Barker that at least he thought the President was dead.

MARVIN KALB: How would he know?
DAN RATHER: Well, because someone in the hospital had told him.

MARVIN KALB: Oh.

DAN RATHER: But, nonetheless, we have a high ranking member of the hospital administration who says the President is dead. When I got through the second time to the hospital, I was put in touch, eventually, with a doctor, with a priest. They said, just flatly, when I said, “What's the situation?” “Well, the President is dead,” they were emotional about it. So, what we’re looking at, we have a doctor, we have a priest, we have—I think he was head of the hospital Board—all saying, just flatly, the President is dead.

Now, if I'm working the police beat at #61 Regent Street in Houston, back in my apprentice days, what we have is a dead man. No official announcement had been made. So, when New York asked me later, open phone line, asked me on the phone line, you know, what’s the situation, I said, “He’s dead.” “He’s what?” “He’s dead.” And the next thing I know, radio is playing the Star Spangled Banner and announcing that the President is dead, and that I have said so.

MARVIN KALB: And that was based on your—[laughter] – your overheard report? Or did you actually compose a report in your mind, go to a microphone and do it?

DAN RATHER: No, I didn’t compose a report. I just said we had an open phone line. You know, we didn’t have cell phones in those days. Sometimes I had two, well a phone in each ear. But there wasn’t any doubt in my mind that he was dead. I did say, after they played the Star Spangled Banner, I said to the editor on duty, “Well, maybe we should have discussed this. Maybe we should have run it by an authority.”

And interestingly enough, that on television, that they had no doubt the President was dead. But the television side of the operation at CBS News headquarters there in the same
building within different parts of the building—Radio immediately played—Well, to tell you the truth they, in their confusion, they first played a tune that was not the Star Spangled Banner, that they thought it was the Star Spangled Banner. And the second time, they played some piece of classical music. But they finally got it right and played the Star Spangled Banner. [laughter] But that happens when you have these things.

But on the television side, the decision was, okay, he’s dead. We know he’s dead. But we’re going to wait for the official announcement. And they waited for the official announcement, which happened, I don’t know, at 12-15 minutes later.

MARVIN KALB: But it seems to me, that took an enormous amount of guts on your part, because I would have been terrified, scared to death, to put out a report that the President of the United States was dead unless I was absolutely certain. Remember, that when Walter Cronkite quoted you, he said, “According to our correspondent Dan Rather,” it was almost as if he didn’t want to take full responsibility himself. [laughter] He would just assume that Rather was the guy.

DAN RATHER: Well I think it’s fair to say it wasn’t as if. I think—and understandably so. But while I do think that—who can say? But if you had been there, you said you would have been terrified. Respectfully, I would say no, because you would not have had time to have been terrified. But we know, when you're a pro, when something—when some emotional earthquake such as this happens, or if you like the metaphor better, when a sledgehammer hits your heart, which I did, you know, the President of the United States is dead, but your repertoire of instincts kick in.

You're not thinking about being terrified. You're not thinking about your own emotions. You're not thinking about what the consequences would be. You're a reporter. What do you got? Head of the hospital Board, doctors, priests, you got a dead man, and you know it. And I never had any doubt that the report was correct. I did, well I was a bit nervous
that we hadn’t discussed it. That is, yes I would have liked to have had time to maybe write something up in my notebook, or at least put my thoughts together. But in these kinds of situations, that’s not the way it works. Once you're into live television, you have a deadline every nanosecond. And so it was in Dallas.

MARVIN KALB: What is very interesting is that I was not there in Dallas, I was, at that moment, at the State Department trying to do a 45-second radio spot on a briefing that Averill Harriman gave us about a recent visit to Vietnam. And I thought that it was not really a story, and probably not worth more than a 45-second radio spot. And I was composing it in my mind, as I went to the studio. When I picked up the phone, I heard Alan Jackson, who was one of our principal radio anchors at that time, saying, “There is this report that the President is dead.”

And I remember the way it hit me, was this sledgehammer emotionally, I was not sure I could go on the air at that time. And, what I did was, I walked around the State Department building, I think even twice. And that must have taken 10 minutes-plus, before I felt composed enough to get on the air and be able to talk about something at this moment. But there, you didn’t feel any of that, because you had a professional responsibility to tell the country what it is that you knew.

DAN RATHER: Well again, it’s the difference for being on scene and being, if you will, in the eye of these hurricane of emotions, and being somewhat removed. But again, if you had been there, I feel confident in saying, for you or any other reporter, the reaction would have been the same. First thing is, you want to weep. You want to curse. You want to kick the wall. You want to pray. You want to call your wife. All the kinds of things that everybody—nearly everybody else is experiencing, including yourself. You said you had time to walk around the block and think.
But there wasn’t any time for that. And you know, as a pro, that either you drive your own emotions completely out of yourself or down so deep, your saying, “I can't deal with my emotions now. I can't get emotional about this.” This is a story, isn't every story. And I thought, at the time, you know, this is a story of a lifetime. And if one as a journalist must be forgiven for thinking that way, don’t misunderstand me, I mean I understood a President is dead. What does that mean for the country? But also, I had a job to do.

You would have felt the same way. No emotions. Forget about the emotions. Keep laser beam focused, what the tennis players call zoned. You get zoned on the story. Any reporter worthy of the name, what counts is the story, in the moment of particularly a cataclysmic event such as this. So there wasn’t time to think. My emotions kicked in, what most people experience over the four dark days in Dallas, Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday with the funeral, it was about seven or eight days after that when some of the pressure got off, that I won't say I collapsed emotionally, but I had the kind of emotional reaction most people had over those four dark days.

MARVIN KALB: Dan, you’ve covered the assassination story from every angle, from covering it for the CBS Evening News with Cronkite, you did documentaries years later on that story. What is your feeling about a conspiracy?

DAN RATHER: I don’t think there was one. But I'm open. No one has convinced me that there was a conspiracy. But look, this is America, and we’re Americans. We love to doubt as well as to know. My own belief is, and I think in terms of who killed the President, I think beyond a reasonable doubt, and certainly, other people have other opinions and I respect those, but I think one shooter, one gun. I think Lee Harvey Oswald was a shooter, and was the shooter. I consider the Rosetta Stone of that part of the case, the fact that he killed police officer J.D. Tippet as he got away, and he almost killed another police officer who was arresting him. I think Oswald did it. I think it’s beyond
reasonable doubt that he did so. I have no argument with those who feel otherwise. But you asked me how I felt.

With conspiracy, there is no way to know definitely and completely. Could there have been a conspiracy? Yes. Is there, in my judgment, persuasive evidence and testimony that there was a conspiracy? No. But, as we go along, I'm open to, as I say, convincing evidence or eyewitness testimony. But I would submit the following. It's been 50 years ago. Conspiracies are very difficult to hold. Tight conspiracies, two people, three people, four people, sometimes hold. But these conspiracy theories that say, “Look, it was the CIA and the FBI and the Defense Department and Lyndon Johnson,” again, I’ll go back to my experience on the police beat. Conspiracies that large really difficult to keep, and keep for 50 years? I don’t think so.

MARVIN KALB:  Let me play a game with you. Two days after the President was shot, the man who shot him was shot. And the man who shot him, Jack Ruby, was what? How would you describe him? He sort of ran a night club.

DAN RATHER:  Local night club operator and low level thug.

MARVIN KALB:  And was known to local gangsters, known to reporters, known, I'm told to the mafia. And that there were mafia people who would be in that room with him in his night club quite often. So what was the first thought that would pop into your mind on that Sunday, when you found out that Oswald had been killed?

DAN RATHER:  Well, again, take back to that time, incredible, almost unbelievable, that the assassin has been assassinated in the police station. You couldn’t make this up.

MARVIN KALB:  No.
DAN RATHER: But I want to be—[laughter] I want to get serious about the Jack Ruby thing. I understand the doubts about Ruby, that he was—you asked me—a local night club operator. And he was well known to police. He did have some mafia connections. All those things are true. So many people say, “Well, all those things being true, he must have been involved.” Well, I don’t think so.

Number one, if the mafia were looking for a hit man, I would suggest that Jack Ruby would be among the last people that they would choose for a hit man. [laughter] No, again, I don’t think so. And they say, “Well, but he had access to the police station.” The Dallas police were overwhelmed. One can fault them if you like. I don’t. I think almost any police force in the country would have been overwhelmed. But they were overwhelmed.

But, about Ruby, and we’ll move on if you will, I don’t think Ruby—Ruby, to his dying day—keep in mind, he was in prison a long time. He spoke to his rabbi almost continuously. And it’s my understanding, in fact I think it’s a fact, that the rabbi, up to the end, said, in effect, “Jack you're dying. You know it, I know it. You don’t have any more days. If there's anything you want to tell me about the Kennedy assassination, if there's anything you want to get right with God and get right with us, tell me.” And Ruby’s answer, in effect was, “No. I said at the time, just after it happened”—forgive my—this is a quote—“I just wanted to kill the son of a bitch. And I did.” And I believe that’s the book on Ruby.

But there are hundreds of books who take a different view.

MARVIN KALB: Right.

DAN RATHER: But I would want to move on, but I want to suggest the following. There are a lot of opinions about who killed the President, and was it a conspiracy, and
was Ruby involved. And everybody is entitled to their own opinion. But we’re not entitled to our own facts. [laughter] And the facts are the facts. And, before anybody makes a judgment, particularly younger people, younger generations, don’t depend on a filmmaker—and I’m not jumping on Oliver Stone here, he’s a great filmmaker. He made a Hollywood film. It wasn’t a documentary.

MARVIN KALB: But you know, Dan, when you talk about facts, as a reporter in Washington, given the responsibility of looking at the foreign angle—Because very quickly, within a matter, literally, of less than an hour, the government sources within the U.S. government were putting out information about the killer, that Oswald had been in the Soviet Union—we’re in the middle of the Cold War, 1963—Oswald had spent two and a half years in the Soviet Union, returned with a Russian wife and child, was seen demonstrating in pro-Castro New Orleans demonstrations, one after another, and then, sometimes in anti-Castro demonstrations.

DAN RATHER: True.

MARVIN KALB: He might have been at the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City. All of these things were known, literally, that afternoon. So, if you were sitting there as the CBS diplomatic correspondent, and our bureau chief says to you, “What is the foreign angle?” the circumstantial evidence certainly seemed to point toward the Russians, whom Kennedy had bested the year before in the Cuban Missile Crisis. They were humiliated, Khrushchev was. He was kicked out of office a year after that. The Russians. So it was there. But there was no evidence.

DAN RATHER: Well, you raised a very good point, because I was about to ask you, removed as you were, and as everyone in Washington was, but obviously, hit emotionally hard, involved at the center of western civilization, certainly the Russians had a motive, the Cubans had a motive, the mafia had a motive. There were plenty of people that had
motives. But you said the circumstantial evidence, I would again gently and respectfully say, the circumstantial suspicions.

Now I believe it to be true, that the reason almost immediately people said, “Well listen, Oswald had some connection.” No question. We now know, as a fact, that the CIA had had their eye on Oswald, at the very least.

MARVIN KALB: Yes.

DAN RATHER: And you would expect them to. And so did the FBI expect them to. It is also true—and this is one of the things that has fueled so many conspiracy theories—that neither the FBI nor the CIA cooperated fully and completely with the Warren Commission Report.

MARVIN KALB: Yes.

DAN RATHER: About the Warren Commission, I believe the Warren Commission basically reached the right conclusions about the case. But the process by which they reached it was flawed. And that has spawned off a lot of conspiracy theories. But, back to your point, that President Johnson—I’m not sure he believed it to his death—but for a very long time, had took the position, in his own mind, and expressed it to others, that if there was a conspiracy, he believed it was the Cubans. He had decided that they had the biggest motive.

But I’m not surprised that the day the bureau chief [00:24:40] but Bill Small said, “What's the foreign angle on this?” You know, the Russians had plenty of motive, as you pointed out. And so did the Cubans. So did the mafia. And because both the CIA and the FBI had brushed with Oswald’s reputation, it was inevitable that these conspiracy theories start.
But now let’s get back to evidence. I would suggest there is very little evidence—there's plenty of evidence that they knew who Oswald was. But where was the evidence that they were involved, in any way, in his firing the shots? But my guess is, that 50 or 500 years from now, if anyone discusses the Kennedy assassination, they will be having a conversation pretty much like we just had.

MARVIN KALB: Well, it could very well be. I want to ask you about the “what if” game here for a second. What if Kennedy had not been assassinated, and, in fact, had been reelected? So Johnson was not President of the U.S. Do you think that we would have had a Civil Rights law, a voting rights law, such as were passed under Lyndon Johnson in ’64 and ’5?

DAN RATHER: No, I don’t think—I don’t think we would have had them any time in the ‘60s. I'm not sure we would have in the ‘70s. We’ll never know, because history didn’t play out that way. I feel very strongly, and if you look at the indicators, while President Kennedy finally got sort of tuned into the Civil Rights movement, when he came into office, it was not a high priority with him.

MARVIN KALB: Right.

DAN RATHER: And, while he did introduce some Civil Rights legislation, I don’t think even he thought there was much of a chance of getting it passed any time soon. Now, would it have been, by 1965, when according to this legislation it was passed, if he had gotten a second term. But, where it falls off the cliff, for me, is it was by no means certain President Kennedy was going to be elected in ’64. A lot of people now assume well listen, he would beaten Barry Goldwater. But if President Kennedy had not been assassinated, Barry Goldwater might not have been the Republican nominee in 1964. Who’s to say.
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MARVIN KALB: True. One other “what if.” A lot of Kennedy’s people say that, if he had been reelected, he would have pulled our forces out of Vietnam. Do you buy that?

DAN RATHER: No I don’t. But I was going to ask you. You were the diplomatic correspondent. [laughter] No, I mean it. And you had sources, and you were covering the Vietnam war. But my answer to you is no, I don’t think so. And I don’t think the evidence at hand indicates that. I do understand those who say President Kennedy, in his second term, would have been too smart. He would have seen. But President Kennedy was the one who put the first U.S. troops into Vietnam.

MARVIN KALB: He called them advisors at the time.

DAN RATHER: Well, but eventually, it reached what, maybe 15,000 troops. But I'm not going to let you off the hook. What was your opinion at the time? And what is it now, as to whether he would have pursued the war?

MARVIN KALB: At the time, I just felt that we were being dragged into something that we truly did not understand. And for not one minute do I believe that Kennedy would have pulled forces out of Vietnam. Because deep down, Kennedy was, in his foreign policy, anti-Communist, anti-Soviet. He would not have wanted, on his tour of duty, to have the record that, under Jack Kennedy, South Vietnam fell to the Communists. That was not in the Kennedy family legacy. And so no, I don’t think that would have happened in a minute.

But I want to take a minute now to remind our audiences on radio, television, all of the social media, that this is The Kalb Report. I'm Marvin Kalb. And I'm talking with my friend and colleague Dan Rather about the Kennedy assassination, and what it did in and to America.
Dan, Phil Graham, who you know, I'm sure, the publisher of the Washington Post many years ago, he’s credited as saying that great line, “Journalism is the first rough draft of history.” Looking back, now, at the November 22nd, 1963, that weekend, do you believe that the draft that was written that weekend holds up?

DAN RATHER: In the main and in general, yes. Was it done perfectly? Absolutely not. Were mistakes made? Of course they were. But taking into full account the four dark days, Friday when the President was assassinated, Saturday when his alleged assassin was being questioned, and Sunday when still incredibly, the assassin was assassinated in the hands of the police, and then Monday, when the First Lady orchestrated and planned an absolutely beautiful funeral in Washington, that pulled the country together, I think journalism, on the first draft, did a better job over those four dark days than it often does on big disastrous, cataclysmic breaking news stories.

MARVIN KALB: It’s an extraordinary thing to remember, that during that four day period, no commercials on the three major networks. Only CBS, on Sunday, broadcast a football game. [laughter]

DAN RATHER: I’m sorry.

MARVIN KALB: Am I right about that?

DAN RATHER: No. [laughter] No, forgive me, no. No, but it’s important to have the record straight. Look, CBS, including my own performance, as always imperfect. But this is one difference between 1963 and here in the second decade of the 21st century. The National Football League had a contract with CBS to carry the games on Sunday. The NFL decided to carry—to go ahead with their games. And CBS said, “You can play the games. We’re not going to carry them.” And CBS News coverage went all through Sunday. There is a widespread misconception, because the games were played.
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MARVIN KALB: Which was picked up, obviously. [laughter]

DAN RATHER: No. But because these days, it’s hard to imagine any network taking coverage of, say, the war—I’ll give you an example. When we moved into Iraq, CBS had a contract with the NCAA to carry a basketball tournament. So, in the first full day of the war, CBS carried the basketball tournament. But, at the time of the Kennedy assassination, as I say, the NFL, they played their games, but CBS didn’t carry the games.

MARVIN KALB: So the games were not seen on any network?

DAN RATHER: No.

MARVIN KALB: I have to go back to my research about this. [laughter] Do you think that journalism is still the first rough draft of history now?

DAN RATHER: I do. I do. Maybe a somewhat rougher draft these days.

MARVIN KALB: Much rougher draft. [laughter] I would think not, actually, because the—there is so much that we consider to be journalism 30, 40 years ago, that I'm not sure is journalism today. And there are so many things out there on the social media side, that you could not comfortably, in any way, use as a basis and to proclaim, in any way, that it’s a first draft of history. I suppose maybe in the broadest terms, you could still stick with that generalization. But I don’t know.

I'm asking you to compare your coverage of the Kennedy assassination with your coverage of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. What was the same, and what was different about the two?
DAN RATHER: Well, there are some similarities. But one must keep in mind how long it had been between 1963 and when 9/11 happened. Technologically, the ability of journalistic cover, and for that matter, technologically, such things as individuals taking photographs—not very many people had a cell phone camera at that time, but rough equivalence. The similarities were this, that television was the national hearth. It may be the last time that that will be the case. But it was in 1963, television at that moment, in those instances in Dallas, and the hours that followed, superseded print and radio as what I call the national hearth, where the nation turned, everybody turned and watched the set. Such was the case in 9/11. Yes, you had a lot of other—the competitive bit was enormously bigger in. But where did most people tune? They tuned to one of the big three networks this time, as they did in 1963, when there were only three.

Now, what was different, is there were a whole lot more outlets for news, many more outlets for news. Also, that everybody stayed on the air 24/7, for weeks on end. Keep in mind, at the time of the Kennedy assassination, even CBS, which I would argue, not because I was part of it, had the most distinguished coverage. We didn’t always win the competitive battle, but we did that weekend. But, nonetheless, television stations went off the air sometime after midnight. Nobody stayed on the air 24 hours around the clock. People tend to forget that. CBS went off, stations went off the air at 12:30, one, 1:30 in the morning, came back in the next morning. In 9/11, of course, nobody left air. Once you took air, we were on air for weeks on end.

MARVIN KALB: How long were you on air for one stretch of time?

DAN RATHER: You know honestly, I don’t remember. I know the first day I came in, I was on the air before 10 a.m. And I didn’t go home until after three a.m. the following morning. And I slept about an hour and a half, two hours, and came back. I don’t remember, but I slept very little during that first week.
MARVIN KALB: Dan, you know, it’s been said that the coverage of the Kennedy assassination, and then the 9/11 were sort of the bookends of television news when it was at its best. That before those incredible four days of the assassination, television had not yet found a place of acceptability and legitimacy within the news business. And then, after 9/11, we were in the digital age. And that really changed the very nature of journalism as well.

DAN RATHER: Well, again, as a broad generalization, I agree it was a bookend, that 1963, the assassination of President Kennedy was the beginning of the television news age as we came to know it. And I do think, with the rise of the digital age, that September 11th might have been the back bookend, if you will. That television is now, and will continue to be, a very important communication source for news. But the internet, if it isn't already, will soon be the place where most people get the most of their news.

MARVIN KALB: I know. But do you think that the American people are now better served by the social media, by the internet, than they were before you had the internet, and you had the three networks, the major papers?

DAN RATHER: It’s always a difficult question, Marvin, because one doesn't want to be yesterday’s man and say, “Well, it was better during my time.”

MARVIN KALB: No. But, if you feel it was better, tell us. [laughter]

DAN RATHER: Well, no. I think in some ways it was better then. And I think in some ways it’s better now. But we can dance on the head of this pin. But the fact is, we are in the digital age. We’re in the internet age. And, whether you and I like it or not—and I, for one, don’t always like it—that the definition of who is a journalist is open to question.

MARVIN KALB: Yes it is.
DAN RATHER: For example, I don’t mean to put you on the spot, but define for me, in this new digital age, who you think is a journalist.

MARVIN KALB: Well I find that very difficult, actually, because often I'm not sure. And when I listen to people, I wonder what is their motivation in telling me this? Is their motivation to try to inform me of something that they’ve learned and they’ve picked up and they want to pass on? They’ve checked it out? If I feel any degree of comfort with that, yes, I’ll put that person in as a journalist. But, if that is not the case, if I have a sense that people are just saying things because they want to make political points, because they want to score against somebody—

DAN RATHER: -- well I would suggest—

MARVIN KALB: -- then the answer is no.

DAN RATHER: One reason I asked, I would suggest that at the time of the Kennedy assassination, that the spine of American journalism, that the main body of American journalism subscribed to the idea that most journalists were expected to be honest brokers of information. That was your role. Yes there were people who did commentary, there were people who did editorials. But we’re reporter journalists. And that person is out trying to be an honest broker of information, not trying to sell some political or ideological point of view.

But now, in the second decade of the 21st century, where we are now, the mainstream of American journalism has moved more in the direction of, listen, that whole idea of being an honest broker of information, it was a fraud from the beginning. It was never really possible. And so, you should feel free to report your biases, at least have your biases out
front. And so, in that way, I don’t think it's as good today as it was yesterday. I understand the argument that it’s better. I don’t buy that argument.

However, if you look, if you can spend the time, there are more places to get more information now than there has ever been. And that’s a definite plus.

**MARVIN KALB:** Well, do you think that television coverage, as we were used to it, and practiced it, can still provide an important piece of the information that the American public needs to make good decisions?

**DAN RATHER:** I do. And here is the reason. Because television—and I include, now, when you put television on the internet, which is a way to do there, your streaming, television strength has always been, and it remains, it can take you there. It can transport you to the scene. The President has been shot in Dallas. We take you to Dallas. That’s its strengths. Television’s shortages, its weakness, has always been depth, context, perspective. That’s its weakness. But I do think that television has an important role to play. And I’ll be surprised if it doesn’t continue for quite a long while, for the reason I just stated.

**MARVIN KALB:** Dan, you’ve often said that, in the current context, there is fear in many American newsrooms today. Two questions. Do you still feel that? And tell us why.

**DAN RATHER:** I do think that’s true. I get a lot of argument. And those who argue to the contrary may be correct. But there has been what I call the politicalization, the corporatization, and thus the trivialization of news. Those are the big three. And I do think that there's a fear of being labeled unpatriotic, being labeled extremist, that it’s always been safer in journalism to get in the middle of the herd and move with the herd. It’s always been a little bit dangerous to get away from the herd, but never as much as it
is today. And I do think that there's fear in newsrooms. And all of us, and I include myself in this criticism, should think about that.

I do see signs, some signs that things are getting a bit better. I think we reached a low point in the period immediately before and just after the advent of the Iraq War. That was the low point for us now. I see some signs we’ve learned.

MARVIN KALB: Dan, I want to go back to Kennedy for some concluding thoughts. And I was looking this morning at the front page in the New York Times from November 23rd, 1963. It was a story there quoting Pope Paul VI as saying that “Hatred and evil remain in the world and in the United States.” And James Reston, who was a very famous columnist for the New York Times, wrote, “The worst in the nation has prevailed over the best. And some strain of madness and violence is in this nation itself. And we have seen the manifestation of it in Dallas.” And I was wondering whether you share that sense of evil, violence in America? Did you sense that in Dallas, which I think, at that time, was called by some the “city of hate”? What was your sense?

DAN RATHER: Well, I don’t think—I think there is a strain of what was described by Scotty Reston and others, that I think it’s not peculiar to this country, unique to this country. This is a strain in humankind. This is out of my depth as a working reporter to get philosophical on. But in the wake of the Kennedy assassination, I do think it was a bit over-stated of this “something evil in the country.” I'm not here to argue with the Pope. I have enough trouble already. [laughter] I don’t want to argue with the Pope.

But no, but all of that’s a bit strong. It is true about Dallas. Dallas has changed tremendously. Dallas, in the context of the Kennedy assassination in Dallas, was Dallas was a citadel of resistance to desegregation. It was certainly one of the citadels of absolute detestation of President Kennedy, by no means everybody, but particularly among the leadership of Dallas.
However, that makes it all the more ironic that the killer of the President was this clearly to the left Communist, if not to hard Communist sympathizer. So always, we know this as journalists, and most people know this, that you have to allow for light and shade. You have to say yes, there are people in this society who are evil. Yes, there is violence in this society. But, on the other hand, look what America did in the wake of the Kennedy assassination.

I think, in many ways, it was among our finest hours. And here is why. We know, from history, that the way you—the test for a society, the test for a people, is how they handle the transfer of the ultimate leadership in times of the most extreme stress. In this country, shock—utter, absolute shock in the death of President, but no one talked about putting a ring of tanks around the White House. No one talked about saying, “Listen, we need to have another election.” No one spoke of suspending the Constitution.

We had a smooth transfer of power at the very Apex, when we were under extreme pressure. And what that said about the country, the strength of the country, and I think it was a great deal, and we talk about lessons of the Kennedy assassination, what do we learn, that’s something we learned, and we should be very careful to pass on to our children and grandchildren.

**MARVIN KALB:** And yet, at the same time, Dan, the 1960s—and it’s been argued that the Kennedy assassination was the beginning of what I would describe as a period of extreme unrest in this country, tremendous Civil Rights demonstrations, the war in Vietnam, anti-war demonstrations, many things were happening at that time. Within five years, Robert Kennedy was killed. Martin Luther King was killed. This was a country in great distress.

**DAN RATHER:** Also a country in the midst of great change.
MARVIN KALB: Very much so.

DAN RATHER: And overall, in the main changes better. What we can spend another program talking about the legacy of President Kennedy.

MARVIN KALB: Well let’s do that.

DAN RATHER: But remember, President Kennedy was the first President born in the 20th century.

MARVIN KALB: Yes, indeed.

DAN RATHER: And, when he talked of the torch being passed, I suggest to you, he—you know, hearts can inspire other hearts with their fire. And President Kennedy had that kind of fire. And the assassin’s bullet didn’t extinguish that. In some ways, I agree, I think that younger people were reminded, what we least expect often happens. What we most expect sometimes doesn’t. Also, you can't wait.

And the torch had been passed. And I agree, the ‘60s became tumultuous, partly because young people in the country said, “Listen, we’ve listened to our elders long enough. It’s a new day. We had this young, vigorous, articulate President talking about the future of going to the moon in the future.”

MARVIN KALB: And we went.

DAN RATHER: And we went. And, let us not forget, in the context of the Kennedy administration, in the Kennedy years, he was only President for 1,000 days. But, during that period, that women’s ability to control reproduction with anything other than the
crudest developments, in other words, the pill came in and became popular over this same period. So, when you talk about what happened in the ‘60s, there were a lot of other things that affected what happened later in the ‘60s besides the Kennedy assassination.

MARVIN KALB: Do you think that Jack Kennedy was a great President?

DAN RATHER: No. He didn’t have time to be a great President. I think he had—keeping in mind, it was only 1,000 days—I think he had promise of being a great President. I think he could have been a great President. I think one reason he’s popular is because people understand, even people who weren't alive at the time, that he embodied much of what we like to believe is the American character, never mind our personality. And that is, we are forward looking. We’re a futuristic people. We’re always looking for a new frontier, as we found in space with the high frontier. That’s the reason he’s popular.

But in just short of what three years, not possible for him to have a great Presidency. Great promise. And that’s part of the Kennedy mystique. It’s part of the reason he’s a legend.

MARVIN KALB: That’s an interesting point, really, about legend and fact with somebody like Kennedy. I'm wondering, because there are so many documentaries being done about him, so many films, so many books, magazine articles. This past week there's been almost a non-stop seminar on the Kennedy administration.

DAN RATHER: True.

MARVIN KALB: Why? Why? Why so?
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DAN RATHER: Well, I think the elements are fairly clear. Here was a young, handsome President, youthful, with a wonderful family. He was the first television President. He was the first, I would argue, Hollywood President. His family had—a movie star President, if you will. And not only his life, but his Presidency chopped off at the very moment when he was showing the greatest promise.

Listen, whether you're talking about the ancient Greeks or the Latin poets, these are the kinds of things that make a legend. And also, that Mrs. Kennedy, the First Lady, when she [00:49:10] about Camelot, and sought to fix in the public’s mind the King Arthur legend with the Kennedy legend, brilliant. And I do think that’s the reason that 50 or 500 years from now, in the history of the country, they won't be studying the Kennedy Presidency as a great Presidency, because it was so short. But they will be studying it as an indication of what the country thought it could be, as it rounded the turn in mid-20th century.

MARVIN KALB: Well, the amazing thing is, you remember that extraordinary picture in front of St. Matthew’s Cathedral on Rhode Island Avenue, the picture of Mrs. Kennedy coming out with her daughter Caroline and Jack, John-John. And she whispered into his ear. And then, when the caisson passed on Rhode Island Avenue, the young man stood there, at age three, and saluted. That photograph is simply extraordinary. And every time I look at it, I'm not sure whether I just smile or cry. It is an amazing picture which is with us to this day.

DAN RATHER: Well, and Mrs. Kennedy—say President Kennedy was the first television President. She was the first television First Lady. She understood that this new thing called television could be put to societal good, to the good of the country. Remember, she gave a tour of the White House with the late Joyce Collingwood, because she and her husband understood, as no President and/or First Lady had ever understood
before, that the television gave the President immense new possibilities for influencing people.

And the power of the Presidency is, to a very large extent, the power to persuade. And they understood that television images would help them to persuade in an instance of the funeral you just mentioned. She understood that, for a very long time, possibly into infinity, people would be looking at the images of that funeral on that Monday. And in that sense, she was very television-aware.

MARVIN KALB: And it’s amazing, as well, that when she called Teddy White a great journalist, and he was doing a piece for Look Magazine, it’s an extraordinary story, and I hope it’s true, but I’ll tell it. She and he worked on the story together.

DAN RATHER: That’s true.

MARVIN KALB: And they spoke to the editor in New York, making changes right up until the last minute. The woman who was being quoted, who was so much part of the story, who said, “Now we write in the word Camelot,” who gave birth to that kind of image, legend, that could never happen in journalism today. But it did then. And we also, at that time, never wrote about—or broadcast about Kennedy’s private life. There were so many stories of womanizing, which I mentioned earlier, in my summary line. And we never dealt with that.

DAN RATHER: No. Well, the journalists were not a creed, but the understanding with journalists, at that time, almost totally different from today, was certain things you just turn your head the other way. You don’t write them. You don’t broadcast them. And, as a young reporter, I include myself in those who said, “Well, if it’s a severe drinking problem, or having—how shall we put this—an eye for a well turned ankle,” [laughter] or
whatever, it was, “Look, the test is, does it affect his performance in his duties? And, if it doesn’t, then you don’t report it.”

**MARVIN KALB:** Leave it alone.

**DAN RATHER:** Now, nobody would leave anything alone.

**MARVIN KALB:** Is that good or bad?

**DAN RATHER:** I think it’s better now. As a reporter, how can you not believe in transparency? And the people should know. But it also was change, because the journalistic rumors have changed, the public’s perception has changed. There was a time that having an affair outside your marriage would eliminate you from consideration.

**MARVIN KALB:** Yes.

**DAN RATHER:** Nelson Rockefeller comes to mind in 1964. Today, that’s not true. And so, as journalism has moved to—listen, if we know it, we’re going to tell it, the public mood has been, well, speaking of allowing for light and shade, we have to understand human nature. And, while I don’t approve of what he’s doing, drinking, whatever it is, I'm going to take into account. But I may decide that he’s the best for the office, and I’ll vote for him.

**MARVIN KALB:** Dan, we’ve got just a minute to go. But do you remember this movie, a western, called *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*?

**DAN RATHER:** Yes.
MARVIN KALB:  The newspaper editor there says, “When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.” [laughter] And we’ve touched on this a moment ago. But how much of Jack Kennedy, as we look back right now, is legend? How much fact? How would you put the balance?

DAN RATHER:  Always difficult to judge. But certainly—

MARVIN KALB:  I'm going to give you about 30 seconds. [laughter]

DAN RATHER:  Well, put me down what the newspaper editor says. When the legend comes in conflict with the fact, print the legend, because that’s what everybody else is going to print.

MARVIN KALB:  Everybody else is going to end up doing pretty much the same thing. Dan, the tyranny of the clock, because our time is up. And I want to thank you for spending this evening with us, and for sharing your thoughts about the assassination. And a good bit more. That was one of the great formative stories of our lives, and I think in the life of America as well. And let me thank our wonderful audience here at the National Press Club, and everywhere else through this new social media around the world.

Let me also express my own personal gratitude, to all of you who cherish the role of a free press in a free, open and virile society, because if you’ve got a free and open society, you got it because you also have a free press. But that’s it for now. I’m Marvin Kalb.

And, as our colleague Ed Murrow used to say many years ago, good night and good luck.

[applause]

MARVIN KALB:  It is now your turn to ask questions of Dan. And, if you're really not nice, you’d ask them of me too. There is a microphone there, and there's one here. And
please, when you stand up to ask a question, let us have your name, some affiliation, some line of work. And please ask a question. Don’t make a speech. Let’s start there.

CONNIE LAW: Hi, very good. Connie Law in Audio/Video News. Who let the ball down? Who in the secret service did not actually pursue? Who let Kennedy take that route? Wasn’t there any attempt to stop him? And who, in the FBI—did anybody in the FBI say, “Let’s go after this guy Oswald”? He was watched. He was questioned. But he wasn’t arrested. And are Presidents really safer today?

MARVIN KALB: Are Presidents really--?

CONNIE LAW: -- Safer today?

MARVIN KALB: -- safer today? The question having to do, Dan, if you didn’t get that, to the CIA, the FBI, the people there who should have known and didn’t, was somebody dropping a stitch? Was somebody not performing as they should? What have you heard? What can you share with us?

DAN RATHER: Well, it is a fact, having said we should deem the facts. The fact that the CIA knew about Lee Harvey Oswald, and at the very least, had monitored some of his movements, is a fact that the FBI had been given a list of people in Dallas to check out before the President visited. And Oswald was on that list. He was not checked out. These things are true.

However, you have to keep them in some perspective. The FBI office in Dallas, they had literally hundreds of names. And again, you couldn’t go to everybody. Look, a lot of people dropped stitches. I think you could make the argument, yes the FBI dropped a stitch. The CIA dropped a stitch. You can argue that the secret service did so. I would not be among those who blame the secret service, because the secret service, their preference
was to have the canopy on the limousine. And the canopy that [00:58:12] is not bullet proof, but is bullet resistant.

But nonetheless, when something such as this happens, there is plenty of blame to go around, if you want to second-guess. And one of the reasons, as I mentioned before, that we have so many conspiracy theories, is because the FBI did not want to acknowledge what they had been alerted to. The CIA never wanted to acknowledge that they had been involved with Oswald. So no one should be surprised when so many conspiracy theories grew up and, even as we speak today, new ones are being invented, with that circumstance.

MARVIN KALB: Thank you very much, Connie. Yes, please.

TOM CURTIS: My name is Tom Curtis. And I am Chair of the Heritage Society, George Washington University. I have a little precede to my question. I was a senior in high school when we heard the news. And I have to tell you that my classmates and I were absolutely devastated by the news. But, more importantly, we felt a loss of innocence. Up until November 22nd, ’63, times were different. It was a—It was a period of great innocence. And after that, it seems like, again, Marvin you said this in your closing remarks, we had the Robert Kennedy assassination, the Martin Luther King assassination—

MARVIN KALB: I'm going to have to ask you for a question.

TOM CURTIS: The question is, do you really, do you feel, at this point, that we’ve become a meaner and a more aggressive society since 1963? Have all of these events accumulated to make us not such a nice place to live?
MARVIN KALB: Did the assassination itself change this country, so that you might have the feeling that, after it, everything that’s happened since has made it not that nice a place to live?

DAN RATHER: Thank you for the question. By the way, if you [01:00:12] I think the previous question said are Presidents safer today than they were at the time.

MARVIN KALB: Yes.

DAN RATHER: And I think the answer is yes, they are. I didn’t want to leave that hanging. Now your question. I don’t think so. That I think a strong case can be made that once President Kennedy had been assassinated, that at the very least, it would plant the seed in other people’s minds, not only was the assassination an option, but you might exercise that option and get away with it, quote/unquote. And, in the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, and the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the attempted assassination of George Wallace a little later on, I do think it’s possible to draw a straight line between the Kennedy assassination and those events.

But now, 50 years later, I don’t think so. I think we’re a better country today, in many important ways, than we were in 1963. Civil Rights and our efforts to do away with institutionalized racism being one example. A lot has been done. Certainly, a lot needs to be done. But in that way, we’re a better country. I don’t need to tick off a whole list. But I think we’re better off as a country today, that we’re a better country today, in many important ways, than we were in 1963. I don’t think we’re a more dangerous country today because of it.

One of the things that grew out of the Kennedy assassination was an increasing skepticism. I don’t say cynicism. There's a difference between skepticism and cynicism. But I think growing out of the Kennedy assassination, rightly or wrongly, justifiably or
unjustifiably, more people were prepared to ask more questions and be skeptical when authority spoke. And that’s part of what the ‘60s and the early 1970s were about.

**MARVIN KALB:** Absolutely. Yes, please.

**ESTELLE HARRIS:** Hi, my name is Estelle Harris. And I'm a retired teacher. And Mr. Rather, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you think the future of the evening news broadcast is among the three networks.

**DAN RATHER:** Well, it would not surprise me that, over the next five to seven years, if at least two of what we consider the old victory networks, ABC, NBC, CBS, decided to do away with the evening news, it wouldn’t stun me if all three decided to get out of the evening news business. I hope that’s not the case. But I wouldn’t be surprised to see it happen. But I want to caution you that, on my best days, I hope I'm a half decent reporter about telling you what has happened or what is happening. When it comes to predictions, I'm not very good. [laughter]

**MARVIN KALB:** Dan, why do you say that? That’s an interesting observation, that we may not have evening newscasts in five to seven years.

**DAN RATHER:** Well, because so much is changing so quickly in the distribution of news and information. Not just new technology, but new techniques, whether the networks consider it their most profitable use of the time, I question whether it will do so. And also, people below the age of about 55, by and large, don’t watch evening newscasts. And advertisers prefer younger viewers. So it’s just my judgment.

**MARVIN KALB:** [simultaneous conversation]
DAN RATHER: But no, there are other reasons. So I wouldn’t be surprised to see them eliminated. I think probably, if I had to guess—and this is sheer guess—the most likely scenario is two of the big three get out of it, and one of them stays with it and makes a pretty good profit, and sees it as an asset for the network. But I’ll come back to the pace of change has accelerated so much in just the last few years, that it’s—you know, will there even be a news division of ABC, NBC, CBS? Never mind will there be just an evening news. Will they even have a news division, I think is an open question.

MARVIN KALB: Which of the three do you think stays around? [laughter]

DAN RATHER: You mean which of the three, if there's only one left standing?

MARVIN KALB: Yes.

DAN RATHER: I think it would be CBS. [laughter] And I hope it would be CBS. [Applause]

MARVIN KALB: Yes, sir.

SIRATHER MAIMIZOMID: I'm Sirather Maimizomid. I'm from Pennsylvania, a student at GW. My question is, with regards to Lyndon Johnson and the Kennedy assassination, my question is, given LBJ’s strained relations with much of the Kennedy family, from your vantage point, how do you assess how LBJ was personally and emotionally affected by the assassination?

MARVIN KALB: How was Lyndon Johnson emotionally affected by the assassination of the President?
DAN RATHER: Well, I don’t think there's any doubt that Lyndon Johnson was affected deeply emotionally by the assassination. And what we—what was revealed, as time went along, part of the reason that he was very emotional about it was recognizing the difficulty he was going to have in his relations with some members of the Kennedy family, primarily Robert Kennedy, that I think within minutes, if not instance of the President’s death, that Lyndon Johnson realized that he was going to have great difficulty. And he had—I do think that he did his best to treat the Kennedy family with tremendous respect. But one, on the other side of that, can understand how a Robert Kennedy, to pick one example, could be so resentful every time he saw Lyndon Johnson saying, “This guy is sitting where my brother should be sitting.”

I mean, this is what makes the whole Kennedy story, I think, survive through all these years, and will survive through the ages. This is rich. It’s the stuff, again, of the ancient Greeks, this kind of human interrelationship. Johnson wanted desperately to be not only liked, but be respected by, first of all, the Kennedy family, and secondly, members of the larger Kennedy political [01:06:58].

MARVIN KALB: The northeast establishment.

DAN RATHER: But, at the same time, he realized that with some, by no means all, nothing he could do would ever reduce their resentment of him and dislike of him. And for all of the great moments he had as President, I think he was always—I think haunted would be too strong a word—but he would be deeply disappointed that what he desperately wanted, for the Kennedy family, and the Kennedy people, to like him, that just wasn’t going to happen. That was not his destiny.

MARVIN KALB: He kept a number of the Kennedy clan around him real close, for a couple of years, before they sort of peeled off.
DAN RATHER: Well yes.

MARVIN KALB: I mean Mack Bundy and McNamara.

DAN RATHER: Some historians have argued, by no means all, that this was a great mistake of Lyndon Johnson, that he kept the Kennedy cabinet intact as much as he could. He kept Kennedy people deep down in the whole government apparatus. And not only in retrospect with other people who said it at the time, “Listen. If he’s going to have the kind of Presidency he aspires to have, he’s got to have his own people.” But he chose to do it otherwise.

And, as one—forgive the personal reference—who actually talked with President Johnson a couple of times about this very thing, his view was, number one, it wasn’t in his heart to do that, that he felt that he needed to keep the Kennedy people around. And secondly, that he thought it would be detrimental to his Presidency if he seemed to be cleaning house of the Kennedy people out. And so, on neither score, did he think he could do it, and therefore he didn’t do it.

MARVIN KALB: Yes ma'am.

JUSTINA FELICIAC: Hi, my name is Justina Feliciac. I am a senior at the George Washington University. My question relates to the Kennedy family and their mourning process. So was there anything in place to respect their privacy at this time? And, if they were more private about their process of mourning, I guess, would anything have been different today, in terms of like their remembrance of John F. Kennedy?

MARVIN KALB: She’s interested, if I understand, in the mourning process of the Kennedy people, and the privacy that they had. Did anything affect that privacy? How did they feel about it? Am I correct about that?
JUSTINA FELICIAC: Yeah. And how would it have been different if they were more private in the way they mourned.

MARVIN KALB: How would it have been different if it was—

JUSTINA FELICIAC: Like I guess the memory of, like, the whole day of the assassination, and the funeral.

MARVIN KALB: If it had been more private?

JUSTINA FELICIAC: Mmm-hmm.

MARVIN KALB: It was right there on television. I'm not quite sure I grasp the drift of the question.

DAN RATHER: I'll take a swing.

MARVIN KALB: Do the best you can.

DAN RATHER: First of all, I appreciate the question, but I'm not sure I understood the question. That it happened so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that even—very few people thought about privacy. And the few that did were unable to affect very much privacy. For example, when her husband, when she arrived at the hospital with her husband, there were doctors—and I'm not criticizing them—who tried to keep Mrs. Kennedy out of the room where they were working on the President. And she, as a good wife would, said, “No, my place is at my husband’s side.”
Now, if somebody at the hospital had sort of been in charge at the moment and said, “Well, of course she’s going to be with him,” that’s not exactly privacy, but at the hospital, she had—she didn’t want privacy of the sort of going in another room. By the same token, chaos reigned, in many ways, at the hospital. And nobody was thinking about privacy. And the few who possibly were thinking about it simply couldn’t have affected privacy.

Now, once they got back into the Air Force One, I would say before they got to Air Force One, neither Mrs. Kennedy nor anybody else had much privacy. Once they got aboard Air Force One, then some semblance of privacy—and once it got back to Washington, a great deal of privacy was available. But remember, that the First Lady—and again, I think this speaks well of her—others would say, “Well, she was not in a very good state.” She didn’t want to take the dress off that had the blood on it. She said—this is not a direct quote, but something, “I want them to see what they have done.” And it took a lot to get her to change clothes when they finally got back.

Now I can understand that, and I admire her for that. But as I say, there are others who saw that as, “Well, she needs some kind of psychological help at the moment.” But your question was about privacy. When this kind of thing happens, even Lyndon Johnson, who, from the instant the President was known to be dead, he knew he was going to be President, he had a hard time getting any privacy himself until he got back to Air Force One.

**MARVIN KALB:** Okay. Yes, please.

**NICHOLAS SORENSON:** Hi there, good evening, thank you both. My name is Nicholas Sorenson. I go to George Washington University. My question is, for both of you, since you are in agreement on this point, is about what would Kennedy have done had he lived, with regard to Vietnam and Civil Rights legislation? And my question is, in
his growth and in his 1000 days in office, from relative newcomer into politics to what we might all agree would be a consummate statesman, learning from things like Bay of Pigs, and relying on Joint Chiefs of Staff, which he did less from that experience, and we know that he gave greater attention to Civil Rights in the third year, was seeing it differently from an issue that didn’t deserve as much attention.

MARVIN KALB: You sound as if you want a 50 minute lecture. [laughter] And I don’t think we can possibly do that.

NICHOLAS SORENSON: That’d be nice, but I’ll wrap it up, yeah.

MARVIN KALB: And we did address at least two of those issues, the Civil Rights and Vietnam. But do you have a specific question?

NICHOLAS SORENSON: Yeah, why were you both in agreement that he would not have taken troops out, hoping to avoid another military problem, and not pass these social reforms, which Johnson felt it was important to go through with, and he was remembered for?

MARVIN KALB: Okay, I'm going to deal with the issue of why we both feel that Kennedy on the issue of Vietnam would not have withdrawn troops, okay. As far as I'm concerned, the evidence overwhelmingly runs in that direction. And that’s why I believe it. I also have a feeling that the whole mystique about Kennedy, the legacy rather than the fact, builds up an image that was largely constructed by the people immediately around him. And that image of Camelot would suggest that he would withdraw from an ugly war such as took place in Vietnam.

But it was Kennedy who gave permission for the military to move against President Diệm, which ended in Diệm’s death. And Kennedy was shocked by the death. But he was
the one who gave the order. So he was not above taking some nasty action in order to achieve what he felt was necessary. And that was not to allow South Vietnam to go Communist. Dan, you can—

**DAN RATHER:** Well, first of all, I do want to emphasize, we will never know. Those who believe that President Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam in his second administration, they have some points on their side, which is, he was a learner. He had a record of learning from his mistakes. But your question is why did we both agree. And come down—let me just underscore for emphasis. That the best you can do, in trying to project what might have happened in the second Kennedy term, is look at what happened in his first term.

One of the hallmarks was his staunch anti-Communism. This goes back all the way through his Senate years, his time as a Congressman, he was a staunch cold war warrior, believing that the very existence of survival of the nation was at stake. He wanted to go to war in Laos. It was the military people who talked—of Laos—the military people said, “Look, for God’s sakes don’t go to war in Laos, it’s landlocked. We can't leverage our sea and air resources in Laos.”

So, at every turn, and it was President Kennedy, he didn’t just send advisors, he sent advisors first. But, by the time he was assassinated, I think we had at least 15,000 troops in Vietnam. So, when you say, “Well, what would have happened a second term?” We don’t know. But, if you look at what happened in the first term, the indications are, in my judgment, my opinion, are not pointing to a President who was prepared to withdraw.

Also, keep in mind that this would have been—to withdraw, at that point in 1964, 1965, 1966, even 1967, would not have been a popular decision in this country. There's a lot of misconception about this. The country, as a whole, didn’t start turning against the Vietnam War until the casualties rose, and in every neighborhood in the country, the kid
who was the point guard or the quarterback on the team two years ago, came back without his legs or his eyes, or came back in a flag-draped coffin. It wasn’t until the casualties really mounted in the period ’67 to ’69 that the country, as a whole, turned against the war.

So, in assessing—and this is the point—what would President Kennedy have done had he been reelected in 1964, the sense of the country was, that this was a war, a nasty war we had to fight because of the so-called domino theory. But we could talk about this the rest of the evening. I know you'd be relieved to know we are not. [laughter] But those are the reasons we say, in our opinion—which is all we can give you—unlikely that he would have withdrawn from Vietnam soon, even if he had been elected for a second term.

**MARVIN KALB:** Dan, we have run out of time. And I’d like first to extend my apologies to all of the people standing up on both sides. There's just no more time for a question. But maybe you can catch him afterward. I'm not sure. [laughter] But I do want, once again, to thank Dan Rather very much for being with us. And thank you all for being with us.

[applause]

END