

Excerpt 2 from Oral History Interview with Helen Thomas

On November 22, 1987, Tom Reilly interviewed journalist Helen Thomas, whose career spanned from 1943-2013. The interview focuses on Thomas's career in journalism, with a specific emphasis on her time as a White House correspondent from 1961-2013. Here, she recounts the assassination of US president John F. Kennedy and her role in its coverage by the United Press International (UPI).

Transcript:

TR: Today is a November 22—

HT: What a day!

TR: Twenty-four years to the day now, as it turns out. That uh—could you just sort of describe a little bit what happened to you?

HT: Well I was not in Dallas, I mean—I guess that this is the day that everyone, where were you?

TR: Yeah

HT: I was in a restaurant with an AP [Associated Press] reporter and a member of Mrs. Kennedy's staff and it was kind of a farewell lunch. And because I was going off on a vacation that day, Merriman Smith was in Dallas and he was alone in fact with the president. I don't know—we had one of our annual downholds so we didn't send two people with the president to Texas.

And uh—so I was going off on my vacation. It was around noon and I was in a very big, fancy restaurant on Connecticut Avenue, which is about, say, ten blocks from the UPI office and the National Press Building, and we were having, I guess, an aperitif and all of a sudden I heard this loud noise. A radio behind me—us, a hand radio, a—a—

TR: A transistor?

HT: A portable radio. Right. And I thought well gosh, this isn't football season, this isn't—or this isn't something that—and it was getting louder and louder. And finally, I walked over to the table and I said, "What's going on?" They said, "Kennedy's been shot." I said, "What?" [I] ran back to the table. The AP reporter and myself jumped up, we ran out, we left the White [laughing] House girl holding the bag with these lunches coming and the checks and so forth. She made a beeline for the AP office. I grabbed a cab and went to the National Press Building, UPI office. Stormed in and they said, "You're on vacation," I said, "No, I'm not." And he said, "Okay, get to Andrews Air Force Base right away," because then there there's going to be a press plane going to Dallas.

Well ah—by this time, I mean, I could see the bulletins and I saw the flash from Merriman Smith saying that he had been shot and also having a secret service banging his fist on the limousine saying, "He's dead." But nevertheless we didn't believe it and we thought he was still alive—and they had still not made the announcement, formal announcement, that he was dead. So I grabbed a cab and was on my way to Andrews Air Force Base and turned on the radio announced that he was dead.

Then it came—got to the air force base where everybody was beginning to gather. Because we knew by this time that the—that he was immediately being flown back and that Johnson was coming back on the plane, he was being sworn—going to be sworn in on the plane. So that was a question of waiting for hours at the air—airport as congressmen and the leaders and everyone began to show up, waiting for the plane—for Air Force One to come back and um, it was traumatic. I was crying and, you know, impartial reporter be damned with the whole idea that Kennedy was dead was—it was traumatic in every sense. We felt that the whole world had stopped for a few minutes, and ah—I guess I will never have an experience like that of having this total all-encompassing sadness that you felt. Um—

When the plane arrived, it was dark—yeah, it was really dark but then the lights were all on, the plane arrives and it was this dramatic moment when we saw the coffin—the casket being lowered and Bobby was on the—on the elevator with it.

And we saw Jackie get into a car and into the ambulance where they were taking the body to Bethesda Naval Hospital where there was going to be an autopsy and so forth. And we saw Johnson get off and—they were coming down the front, Johnson and Lady Bird and so forth were coming down the front of Air Force One, and in the back were the reporters who had been on the plane, who had watched the swearing in and so forth. And I saw Merriman Smith, and I shouted as loud as I possibly could and he ran to me and slapped a whole role of incredible copy and I had a phone, an open line to our office and began to read about the swearing in of Johnson, all the atmospherics and so forth. And it was one of the most dramatic— I don't know what I did with those papers because I know that I had them in my hand, and I'll be looking for the rest of my life to find—'cause I know that I had the original copy from Air Force one.

Well after that, it was a nightmare. Went back to the White House, at 3 o'clock in the morning—meanwhile they—people were really cooperating, people were stunned and nobody—and there was not the kind of total organization and discipline because—there you were—we had a very small pressroom. We had a pressroom that was really—what became the National Security Office and—during the Nixon era—and so, but this time we had phone booths and then we had another little desk with a telephone. So we were quite limited, you know, communications-wise. And uh—just stayed at the White House practically all that night. Found out when they were bringing the body back, which was at 3 a.m. in the morning. Saw the ambulance pull up to the north portico and by this time we had heard that Jackie had walked into the White House and told the Chief Usher, he said—no Chief of Protocol, he said, “Mrs. Kennedy is there anything that I can do for you?” And she snapped, “Yes, find out how Lincoln was buried.”