

“walking courier”¹ from his station outside Trauma Room One, where the last pulse of John F. Kennedy was fading, to the minor-surgery suite where the next President was waiting. Within minutes thereafter, Clifton had linked the communications and telephone net from the Presidential plane, Air Force One, to the minor-surgery suite. And by 1:20, when Kenneth O’Donnell said to Lyndon Johnson, simply, “He’s gone,” the new leader was in contact with every ganglion of communication in the entire world.

From then, and for the next few days, and for weeks and months and years to come, all of Lyndon Johnson’s moves would make these ganglia quiver. But his first move, instinctively, was to still them. For immediately after O’Donnell there came Malcolm Kilduff, press attaché of the trip, to ask whether he might announce the death of President Kennedy. Kilduff recalls Johnson saying, “No, Mac, I think we’d better wait for a few minutes; I think I’d better get out of here and get back to the plane before you announce it. We don’t know whether this is a worldwide conspiracy, whether they’re after me as well as they were after President Kennedy, or whether they’re after Speaker McCormack or Senator Hayden. We just don’t know.” He mentioned the wounding of Secretary Seward in the Lincoln assassination, and the need, again, of getting back to the secure base of the plane at Love Field.

His next move, after discussion with friends in the cabin on the plane, was to make the ganglia quiver. The office of President was already his in substance; but it must be constitutionally, publicly, proclaimed. Thus he decided to take the formal oath there at the field before departure. Representatives of the press were summoned; thirty people filed into the hot and steaming cabin to hear him; an Army photographer caught the famous picture of the new President, hand upraised; on one side of him stood his wife—on the other, the gallant, blood-smearing widow of the dead President. Then, while the jets of the great plane howled, straining for take-off, Clifton threw the roll of exposed film to a waiting aide on the field so that, while the plane flew, the nation might have visual evidence of a new President in the first ceremony of office. And then, by a curt order of the President, the plane was in the air.

On the flight the party learned that there was no conspiracy; learned of the identity of Oswald and his arrest; and the President’s mind turned to the duties of consoling the stricken and guiding the quick. One might well try to envision him on this trip, for there is something essentially Johnsonian about it. Of all men in public life, Lyndon Johnson is one of

¹ The walking courier is a multi-clad military officer always within instant call of the President; he carries a plain briefcase called “the football,” which holds the emergency plans and optional responses available to the President at any moment of warning of atomic attack.