



*Photo Credit Michael Collopy*

# **Fifty Years Later:** *One Moment That Changed Clint Hill's Life*

**By Kimberly Jondahl**

*“I’ve never emotionally left North Dakota. North Dakota has a very special place in my heart that will never go away.”*

*~ US Secret Service Agent Clint Hill*

A few critical seconds of November 22, 1963, still play through Clint Hill's mind. On that fateful day in Dallas, Hill, who grew up in Washburn, North Dakota, served as the first lady's United States Secret Service agent and witnessed President Kennedy's assassination.

Photographs from bystanders and the Zapruder film footage, shot with a home movie camera, capture images of an event that changed history and Hill's life. Footage shows President Kennedy in an open convertible, waving to crowds as the presidential motorcade travels along a Dallas street. Suddenly the president is seen clutching his throat after being hit by a bullet. Seconds later Agent Hill, from a position on the running board of the follow-up car, sprints toward the presidential convertible, scrambles onto the trunk, then pushes the first lady—crawling on her hands and knees on the trunk—back into her seat, positioning himself across the back of the car to shield Mrs. Kennedy and the slain president. Agent Hill reached the presidential limousine in only seconds. Yet during that time, the president was shot again, this time a fatal blow to the brain. The agent witnessed Kennedy's skull being shattered by a bullet, close enough to have blood spatter his face and suit.

Almost fifty years later, Hill's voice still cracks with emotion: "If only I'd have gotten there two seconds sooner." The retired agent still struggles with John Kennedy's death as his personal burden, although he was on protective detail for the first lady and not the president: "I've always felt that sense of responsibility and guilt that I was unable to get there quick enough to intercede and really make a difference." Even now, Hill says he wishes it would have been his bullet to take. "Every day I think back to November 22," he said. "It never leaves me."

## A NORTH DAKOTA CHILDHOOD

Born in Larimore, North Dakota, Clint Hill was adopted as an infant by Chris and Jennie Hill of Washburn, a small town located near the center of the state. "I think back on what a wonderful childhood I had,"

says Hill about his boyhood home, "how fortunate I was to come out of an orphanage, to be adopted, and to live there."

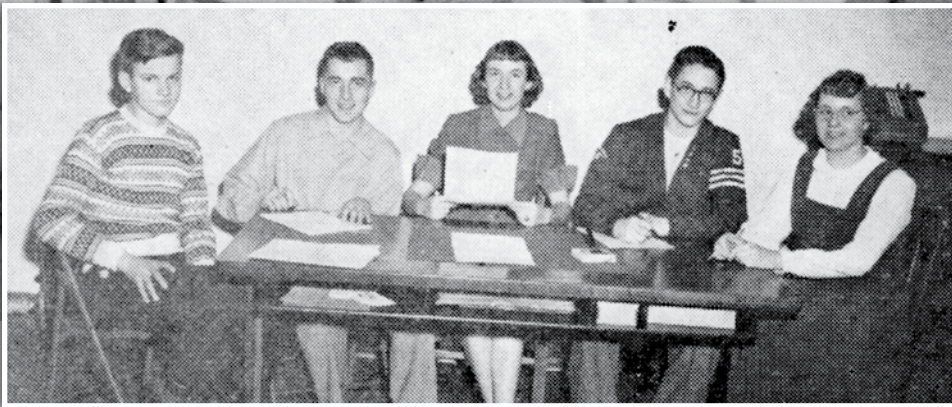
Growing up in the rural heartland, he excelled as a high school athlete in his town of about 900 residents, playing football, baseball, basketball, hockey, and spending free time ice skating across Painted Woods Creek a few miles from town. "I'd skate on that creek for mile after mile after mile and just enjoy being out in the wonderful out-of-doors."

Hill attributes the values of responsibility and excellence he carried throughout his White House service to his North Dakota upbringing. "I learned that if I were given a task, I needed to do it as well as I could. Those values stayed with me," he says. While attending Washburn's high school, Hill worked part time sweeping the floors of local attorneys' offices, then stocked shelves before being promoted to a clerk at Holton Mercantile Company's grocery store. Carrying hundred-pound bags of sugar to farmers' cars was a regular part of the job during World War II.

Additional local jobs served as valuable background for his future Secret Service career. He typed official documents as part-time work at the McLean County Courthouse, a skill that became useful years later. During summers Hill worked as a farmhand, doing chores on his aunt's farm a few miles from the hamlet of Raub, North Dakota. "My job during the summer was to ride horseback along their fence line to find out where the fence needed repairs and then come back with my cousin," says Hill. "He would be driving a team of horses and a wagon with a barrel of water, a bunch of fence posts, and a sledge hammer, and we would repair the fence as we moved along that particular portion." Those early horseback riding skills would help him garner a position as Secret Service agent to Jacqueline Kennedy, an accomplished equestrienne who rode her horses as often as possible. *Have you ever ridden a horse?* was one of the questions asked during his Secret Service interview for the post. Hill was one of few agents with riding skills.

### NOTE:

Author Kimberly Jondahl extends deep gratitude to Mr. Hill for sharing his personal story and healing journey. Information in this article came from the author's interview with Clint Hill on October 18, 2012, and remarks Mr. Hill made at a presentation on September 27, 2012, during Høstfest in Minot, North Dakota, extensive research at the JFK Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, and additional sources. Specific quotes from Mr. Hill are indicated by quotation marks.



Clint Hill attended school in Washburn, North Dakota, graduating from high school in 1950. Among other activities he was a member of the student council (second from left) and played basketball (front, third from right), as well as other sports. *Images from The Cardinal, a Washburn school publication, 1949, courtesy of the McLean County Historical Society*

In 1954 Hill graduated from Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, with degrees in physical education and history. He entered military service after college and trained at the US Army Intelligence Center as a special agent in counterintelligence. Hill's goal was to become a secret service agent. With no openings available, he found work as a detective for a time. In September 1958 he was offered a Secret Service position in Denver, Colorado. Hill was thrilled, as the Secret Service "was difficult to get in," with only 269 agents in the country. Less than one year later, Hill was assigned to President Dwight Eisenhower's Secret Service detail, spending his time either with the president or on call, ready to protect him at a moment's notice. "We all really respected President Eisenhower and had a great time," says Hill, who shared a tight-knit camaraderie with the other agents.

## MEETING MRS. KENNEDY

Following the November 1960 election, Hill was eagerly anticipating the changes that would come with a new president, the young John F. Kennedy, who Hill believed would "bring a fresh perspective and energy" into the White House. A change in administration could lead to changes in Secret Service positions in upper levels. Although a Democrat would be replacing the Republican Eisenhower, Hill assumed his position to guard the new president was secure. It was with great surprise that he was called to a meeting with Secret Service Chief U.E. Baughman. Hill had never met Baughman, and walked hesitantly into the headquarters building next to the White House.

Thinking he was about to be fired, his stomach in knots, Hill answered questions asked by the chief and other top



The first official White House portrait of Jacqueline Kennedy, taken in early 1961 by Mark Shaw. *United States Library of Congress*

executives for more than an hour. Hill says as the interview came to a close, he was astonished to be given the assignment to protect Jacqueline Kennedy. Special Agent Jim Jeffries was assigned as leader of the first lady's detail, and Hill would be his assistant. These two men would be responsible to protect the president's wife whenever she was awake, every day. If one agent were ill or had a day off, the other needed to be at the side of the first lady wherever she happened to be in the world. Additional special agents would secure the perimeter of her every location.

Hill's heart sank. In his mind, it was a major demotion. "I felt like somebody kicked me in the gut, because I didn't want that assignment at all," he recalled. "I wanted the excitement of being with the president. Now I thought I would have afternoon tea parties and the ballet."

Hill dreaded his first meeting with Jacqueline Kennedy on November 11, 1960. "She wasn't pleased to meet me, and I wasn't too happy to meet her," he admits. Hill recalls

that Mrs. Kennedy was not thrilled to learn she would, from that moment on, rarely be alone. "Privacy was her biggest concern," Hill says. She feared the two ubiquitous agents would restrict her movements and prohibit certain travels. Mrs. Kennedy was an intensely private woman. She was particularly wary of the media invading her life and that of little Caroline. But the agent she always addressed as "Mr. Hill" admits that within the hour he was captivated by her natural charm and poise. "When I met her, she was a beautiful, elegant, classy lady who was pregnant. It was a unique experience," he commented.

The glamorous first lady and her protector were close in age, but came from vastly different backgrounds. Thirty-one-year-old Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy was raised on the East Coast in a life of affluence and privilege. She was an intelligent woman of impeccable manners, she studied French in Paris, spoke fluent Spanish, and spent summers at her stepfather's twenty-eight-room oceanfront estate.

Hill, twenty-eight, had grown up in a small town on the windswept and remote Northern Plains, spending his summers sweeping floors and performing other blue-collar labor. They were worlds apart in upbringing, but Hill says the two quickly "got along and became friends."

**I**t was a job like no other, providing a unique view into the daily life of a new White House family brimming with youthful energy. Shortly after Hill began his assignment, Jacqueline delivered a son, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Jr. President Kennedy was on a return flight to the Capitol City and missed the birth, but Hill was at his post outside the first lady's room in Georgetown Hospital. "I paced the floors like an expectant father," he says, worried because Mrs. Kennedy had two previous miscarriages. Two years later on August 7, 1963, the first lady delivered another son, Patrick, who was born prematurely and died two days later. The Secret Service agent was there

again to watch over Mrs. Kennedy during her grief and depression for months afterward.

Hill understood the importance of parenting and Jacqueline's protective love for her family. He had his own four-year-old son and wife waiting for his sporadic homecomings to an apartment in Arlington, Virginia. A second son was born a few years later. The commute was only six miles from the White House, but his sons sometimes did not see their father for two-month periods. "I was gone 90 percent of the time. My children

**"I wanted the excitement of being with the president. Now I thought I would have afternoon tea parties and the ballet."**

grew up without a father,” says Hill. “I wasn’t there for my sons. But I was there for Mrs. Kennedy, President Kennedy, Caroline, and John.” Hill and other agents faced the difficult choice of either sacrificing their own family time or giving up an elite position within the Secret Service. “You either did the job or found something else.”

Mrs. Kennedy avoided the spotlight, shying away from the press and public functions as much as life as first lady would allow. She was often absent from the White House, enjoying private time with the children at one of the Kennedy homes, a four-hundred-acre private Virginia estate called Glen Ora in Middleburg, Virginia. Here Mrs. Kennedy felt some freedom from the world of politics. Hill made the fifty-mile round-trip commute from his home every day until finding a reasonably priced place to stay.

Traveling at the first lady’s side, he also oversaw the many details of protecting her in international settings “Where Mrs. Kennedy went, I went,” Hill says. Finding accommodations near his charge was sometimes challenging, as Jacqueline always stayed in posh surroundings. Secret Service agents received twelve dollars per day to cover expenses, and Hill needed to pay for his own lodging, meals, laundry, and any additional personal expenses. When Jacqueline stayed at one of her favorite retreats that had horses, Hill’s office was in the stables. “The horses were on the first floor, and we were on the second,” he says about the Secret Service quarters.

When the first lady was in public, Hill says that he felt the weight of his responsibility to keep her safe. Crowds were enormous wherever the First Lady traveled. With her beauty and charm, strong interest in international cultures, and fluency in languages, she was a popular ambassador. “People loved Jacqueline Kennedy,” Hill says. He was with her on May 31, 1961, when citizens of Paris filled the streets to give Jacqueline an overwhelmingly warm welcome. Whether Mrs. Kennedy was in a motorcade winding through the streets of Paris or being greeted by about eight thousand enthusiastic fans at an airport in Lahore, India, Hill was constantly on alert, a weapon concealed but ready while he scanned endless rows of cheering bystanders craving a glimpse of American royalty. “She would draw as large a crowd as the president,” says Hill. “When they traveled together, the crowds would double.”

His security detail also involved dealing with presents given to Mrs. Kennedy during her travels. Some of those gifts created headaches for Hill. In March 1962 Hill accompanied the first lady to India, where she was presented



First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy and her children, John F. Kennedy Jr. and Caroline Kennedy, riding on November 19, 1962. Clint Hill’s horse-riding experience was a useful skill as a Secret Service guard for Mrs. Kennedy. Photograph distributed by the White House for the children’s birthdays, 1962. *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston*

with two tiger cubs. The party continued on to Pakistan, where Hill thought a tribal leader in a remote village was presenting a lamb to Mrs. Kennedy. “We can’t take that lamb with us,” Hill told him. The Secret Service agent was informed that the animal was about to be sacrificed in the first lady’s honor. “Not in front of her, you’re not!” barked Hill. “You can take the animal behind the tent and do whatever you want, but you’re not killing it in front of her.” The lamb was taken behind the tent as Hill quickly escorted Mrs. Kennedy to the car. During the same trip, Pakistan’s President Ayub Khan presented Mrs. Kennedy with a beautiful bay gelding. The first lady, who already owned several horses, instantly fell in love with the horse. “All I could think was, ‘How am I going to get this damn horse back?’” Hill comments. The horse arrived in the United States shortly thereafter. Life with Mrs. Kennedy, he had learned, would never be dull.

Although Mrs. Kennedy tolerated enthusiastic bystanders with grace and warm smiles during her many trips, she was determined to carve out a private life and a “normal” childhood for her children. Hill made it his mission to help her live out of the public eye as much as possible. “She always said, ‘Please keep the press

away, Mr. Hill.' And I did," says Hill. "The press was always a problem."

Living with the first lady nearly every day also meant joining in the daily routine with the rest of the Kennedy family. Hill became close to the two children even though they had their own Secret Service agents. It was all in a day's work for Hill to shuttle young John and Caroline between a vacation home on the beach and a yacht where the president and his wife might be relaxing with other Kennedy family members. The entire Kennedy clan spent most holidays at their properties in Palm Beach, Florida, or Hyannis Port, Massachusetts. "This is where they were happiest," says Hill of Hyannis Port, the location of the six-acre Kennedy Compound which was home to Joseph and Rose Kennedy. "This is where the president was happiest: out there with the wind to his back, on the sea, sailing a sailboat."

Wherever she went, the first lady stretched Hill's world in new ways—pulling him onto a tennis court in his agent's uniform of a dark suit and Florsheim dress shoes and challenging him to find ways to protect her while she was on horseback, riding a camel, or waterskiing. Hill was never completely certain how any given day would unfold. Mrs. Kennedy "liked to do things on the spur of the moment." She kept Hill hopping, trying to coordinate tight security details to keep the first lady protected during her spontaneous plans. "She loved it when I would get in trouble," Hill says with a smile. But the agent says he did not really mind when he had to scramble to keep up when Mrs. Kennedy did something to strain his ability to protect her. During his service, Hill was promoted from being second on detail to agent in charge of Mrs. Kennedy's protection.

## THE DAY OF THE ASSASSINATION

On November 22, 1963, Hill started his morning in Fort Worth, Texas, at the Hotel Texas, providing security detail for Mrs. Kennedy. President Kennedy had gone downstairs to deliver a breakfast speech when another agent called Hill. The president wanted Mrs. Kennedy at the breakfast meeting right away. When Hill entered the Kennedy suite, the first lady was finishing getting ready, attired in a pink Chanel suit with a navy collar, her matching pillbox hat and gloves still on the dresser. She had not planned on attending the breakfast, but quickly finished getting ready. When the first lady entered the Grand Ballroom, the crowd erupted in applause. Hill noted the president's irritation with her lateness, but says he



President Kennedy, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, and John and Caroline at Hyannis Port, August 4, 1962. *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston*

covered it with humor. At the microphone, the president quipped, "Nobody wonders what Lyndon and I wear." In a somber moment of his speech, Kennedy declared, "This is a dangerous and uncertain world. No one expects our lives to be easy—not in this decade, not in this country."

Soon after breakfast, the group was ready to depart for Dallas. "Before leaving the hotel, the president, Mrs. Kennedy, and Kenneth O'Donnell (a top aide to the president) talked about the risks inherent in presidential public appearances." According to O'Donnell, the president commented that "if anybody really wanted to shoot the president of the United States, it was not a very difficult job—all one had to do was get a high building somewhere with a telescopic rifle, and there was nothing anybody could do to defend against such an attempt."

The Kennedys, Vice President and Mrs. Johnson, and Secret Service detail boarded planes for Dallas, only fifteen minutes away. Another team of Secret Service agents had already left for Austin to prepare for an overnight stay at Johnson's ranch. The presidential group was enroute to a



Texas Governor John Connally and his wife, Nellie, were seated ahead of President and Mrs. Kennedy in the limousine departing from the Dallas airport on November 22, 1963. Photograph by Victor Hugo King. United States Library of Congress

luncheon at the Trade Mart, where President Kennedy planned to deliver a speech to about 2,600 people who had purchased tickets.

This was a political trip to help mend a bitter division among the Texas Democratic Party. The party was experiencing major internal state rivalries. Kennedy had narrowly won Texas electoral votes in 1960, even with Texan Lyndon B. Johnson on his ticket. There was a growing fear among the Democratic Party that the Lone Star State might vote Republican in 1964.

Some people were nervous about the president's trip. Only one month before Kennedy's trip, Adlai Stevenson, US ambassador to the United Nations, had been in Dallas to talk with the local United Nations Association. He was booed and heckled during his speech by protesters. Senator J. William Fullbright of Arkansas also had been the target of vicious press coverage in Dallas and admitted he was afraid to make an appearance there. In his book, *Death of a President*, Fullbright later recalled that he had warned Kennedy against going to Dallas.

Kennedy did not appear to be concerned; he had survived a war, the deaths of siblings and children, and his own life-threatening health problems. The president was used to traveling, often to multiple destinations in a day. The Dallas motorcade was just another short trip from point A to point B, an appearance for photo ops and for the public to connect with their president. The motorcade route was never a secret. On November 19, the *Dallas Times Herald* published the general route for public viewing.

In Dallas, the motorcade vehicles were polished and ready. Filing into the presidential Lincoln limousine, the president sat in the rear right seat of the open car with the first lady to his left. Texas Governor John Connally took his place on a jump seat directly in front of JFK, and his wife, Nellie, sat ahead of Mrs. Kennedy. In the front seats were two Secret Service agents—Bill Greer as driver and Roy Kellerman in the passenger seat. Security code names for the president and his bride were Lancer and Lace. Hill was Dazzle. As the limousine started moving, Hill jogged beside it for a short time, then jumped onto

the left running board of the Secret Service follow-up car, with four agents and two White House staff members inside. Three more agents, in addition to Hill, stood on the outer running boards. Vice President Johnson's open vehicle was next in line, followed by his Secret Service agents. This was a standard motorcade situation. The president always requested to travel in public motorcades with the limousine top off. He wanted maximum exposure between himself and the constituents who had elected him to office.

Film footage shows Hill moving back and forth between the cars on Main Street when crowds grew heavier. He left the follow-up car four times to board the back of the limo, specially equipped for the agents with a handhold and rear bumper step. At one point, the president can be seen turning and making eye contact with Hill while the agent boards the vehicle.

Hill comments about his repetitive movements between vehicles, which he practiced regularly during Secret Service training sessions:

That was a common practice. I had done it many times previously that day as we traveled down Main Street. I had gone from the follow-up car up onto the back of the presidential vehicle. Because the crowds were so dense, so thick and heavy, they were off the sidewalk into the street. The driver of the presidential car was trying to keep the presidential limousine to the left of the street to keep the president, who was in the right rear, as far away from the crowd on the right side as he could. When he did that, it put Mrs. Kennedy, who was in the rear left seat, right up next to the crowd. So when he started to move to the left, I would jump off the vehicle right behind the president's vehicle, run and jump up on the back of the presidential vehicle so I was in close proximity to Mrs. Kennedy to prevent anything from happening to her.

Crowds were thick, but peaceful, as the motorcade traveled along Main Street, then a short distance on Houston Street. Greer made a 120-degree hairpin turn onto Elm Street, making it necessary for the heavy, elongated limousine to slow considerably right in front of Dealey Plaza, location of the Texas Book Depository and other high-rise buildings.

Footage from the scene shows open windows on that warm day with people leaning out to catch a bird's-eye

view of the Kennedys. According to Governor Connally, just before the group turned onto Elm Street, his wife turned to JFK and remarked, "Mr. President, you can't say Dallas doesn't love you." Moments later, at about 12:30 p.m., the president of the United States was murdered as cracks of gunfire rang through Dealey Plaza.

The number of shots, the number of shooters, and the motive behind the killing are still disputed today. Hill was within five feet of the president's vehicle, a close eyewitness of the unfolding events. From Hill's perspective, three shots were fired from the Texas Book Depository's sixth floor by Lee Harvey Oswald. Hill maintains that the first bullet seared through the back of the president's neck and out the front, causing him to clutch at his throat and lean toward Mrs. Kennedy:

I saw what happened. I know it was the first shot because I saw his reaction, and that's the reason I reacted. When I heard the explosive noise, it came from the right rear of the motorcade over my right shoulder. I, at that time, had been scanning an area to the left, which was a grassy area there—Dealey Plaza. There were not many people there, but I was checking that area out.

When I heard the noise, my vision started to go toward that noise to see where it came from and what happened. But I only got as far as the back of the presidential vehicle, because I saw the president grab at his throat and move to his left. It was an unusual motion. I knew something was wrong. That's when I jumped from the follow-up car and ran toward the president's car with the intention of getting up on top of the back of the presidential vehicle to form a shield behind President and Mrs. Kennedy, between them and whoever was trying to do them harm.

He explains the second and third shots as coming within seconds: "While I was running, they tell me that there was a second shot, but I never heard it. Just as I approached the vehicle, another shot hit the president to the left of the right ear."

**T**hat bullet killed the president. Hill arrived a few seconds too late to possibly save the life of the leader of the United States. As Hill approached the limo, a portion of President Kennedy's skull was shattered by a





US Secret Service agent Clint Hill climbed onto the presidential limousine and draped himself across the president and first lady as the vehicle sped to Parkland Hospital in Dallas. *AP photo*

bullet, scattering blood and bone fragments across Hill's face, his dark suit, the vehicle's interior, the trunk, and the first lady's pink suit. Hill scrambled to get his footing and pull himself onto the moving limo. Meanwhile, Mrs. Kennedy was on her hands and knees climbing onto the trunk. Seeing her on the back of the moving vehicle, Hill was worried the first lady would "go flying off the back of the car." Mrs. Kennedy was in shock, according to Hill. "She was trying to retrieve some brain matter off the rear of the trunk. She didn't even know I was there," he says.

Hill pulled himself onboard and pushed Mrs. Kennedy back into her seat. The president fell across her lap. Hill draped his body above and behind them as a human shield against any further shots. "I assumed when I made my move to get up on the car that there would be more shots coming. We had no idea that there were only going to be three," Hill shared. "We assumed that this was going to be a continuum period of gunfire to kill everybody that they could, whoever was doing the shooting."

Agent Greer sped up while Hill covered the Kennedys. Hill's left hand clutched the left door frame, his left foot

was tight against the right side, and his right foot hung over the right side of the car. As Hill covered their bodies, he looked down into a gaping hole in the president's skull. "I could see through the skull. Most of the brain material was gone from that area of his head," he says. He turned, gave the agents in the follow-up car a thumbs-down signal, and "screamed to the driver" to hurry to the hospital. Then he had a thought that would play a loop in his mind for years to come: "How did I let this happen to her?"

Hill's sunglasses blew off as he tried to maintain his precarious position while the Secret Service driver sped up to "sixty to eighty miles an hour," reaching Parkland Hospital in about four minutes. During that frenzied drive, the agent glanced at the seat ahead. "At one point I looked at the governor," he comments. "That's the first time I realized that he'd been hit."

When they arrived at Parkland, an agent ran to get two gurneys for both gravely wounded men. Agents carefully removed Governor Connally, critically injured, from the jump seat, and Mrs. Connally got out of the vehicle, but a silent Mrs. Kennedy would not budge for agents to remove

the president. “Mrs. Kennedy had a hold of his body, and she wouldn’t let go,” says Hill. She looked up at Hill with pleading eyes, and Hill understood: “I realized she didn’t want anyone to see the president like that. I took off my suit coat and covered his head and upper body, and then she let go.” Hill and other agents transferred the limp body to a gurney.

The trauma teams were going into action for both wounded men. Hill placed a call to the White House to inform Secret Service officials what had happened. The call was interrupted by a phone call from Robert Kennedy. The attorney general of the United States asked, “How bad is it?” Hill did not want to be the one to tell Robert that his brother was dead. He closed his eyes and said, “It’s as bad as it can get.”

Doctors officially pronounced the president dead at 1 p.m. Secret Service agents contained their emotions and went to work taking care of the grim details. Hill called a local mortuary to order “the best casket you have” for the president. He talked with members of the White House staff who were making immediate arrangements for Vice President Johnson to be sworn in as president and arranging transportation for the Johnsons, Mrs. Kennedy, and the president’s body back to Washington, DC. It was a sad mad scramble. Hill says he could hardly stand seeing the anguish on Jacqueline Kennedy’s face as she sat in a hospital chair, quietly composed in her blood-spattered pink suit.

No one seemed to know the motive behind the killing or what might still be coming. Would there be another attack? Were the vice president and first lady still targets? Then a problem developed in transporting JFK’s body back to Washington, DC. According to Texas state law, Kennedy’s body could not be removed from the hospital until an autopsy had been performed, perhaps hours or days later. Texas authorities firmly insisted that the body remain there. “That was not acceptable,” says Hill. “This was the people’s president.” Some reports indicate the discussion among Secret Service agents and Texas authorities ratcheted to a tense point where Secret Service guns were drawn in the hospital hallway. Hill says, “There was some heated discussion but no guns were drawn.” A short time later, the president’s body was driven from the hospital to Air Force One. Mrs. Kennedy insisted upon riding in the hearse to the airport, climbing in the back with the casket. “I crowded in right behind her,” Hill says softly. “There we were—Admiral George Burkley [personal physician

of the president], Mrs. Kennedy, the president’s body, and me, still in bloody clothes.” Then there was another glitch. The casket was too wide for Air Force One’s entrance. “We broke the handles off the casket,” Hill comments, “just enough to get through the door.”

After everyone boarded the plane, Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in by Federal Judge Sarah Hughes as the thirty-sixth president of the United States. Shortly before the swearing-in ceremony began, Mrs. Kennedy called Hill to her side. Hill recalls her saying, “What’s going to happen to you now, Mr. Hill?” He was overwhelmed by her concern when so much had to be running through her mind. Tearfully he responded, “I’ll be okay, Mrs. Kennedy, I’ll be okay.” At 2:47 p.m., Air Force One took off for Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, DC, with somber passengers and a new United States president.

Hill stayed by Mrs. Kennedy’s side in Washington, DC, as she and a stunned nation mourned. On Sunday the president’s body was placed in the Capitol rotunda, lying in state for public viewing. The Associated Press reported that a public outpouring of grief and support, 250,000 people waited as long as ten hours in a line that stretched nearly ten miles, paying respect to their slain leader. Some were never able to see the casket; the line was too long.

Hill accompanied Mrs. Kennedy and others as they selected JFK’s final resting place in Arlington National Cemetery. On the morning of Sunday, November 24, he helped to open President Kennedy’s casket for a private final viewing by Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy. Mrs. Kennedy asked Hill to find a scissors, which he provided. She snipped a locket of hair from her husband before Robert lowered the casket lid.

The funeral took place on Monday, November 25, which was also son John’s third birthday. Mrs. Kennedy insisted on walking during part of the funeral procession from the White House to the US Capitol, creating “a security nightmare for everyone involved,” Agent Hill remembers. He recalls the eeriness of that walk. The streets were lined with thousands of people, as usual, but the typical roar of spectators was absent. “I just remember it was quiet,” he says. “I was used to the cheering crowds. The only sound we heard was the muffled military drums and a clop-clop-clop of horses as we moved along.” Hill was at John F. Kennedy’s grave site while Mrs. Kennedy lit an eternal flame she had planned as a lasting tribute to her husband.

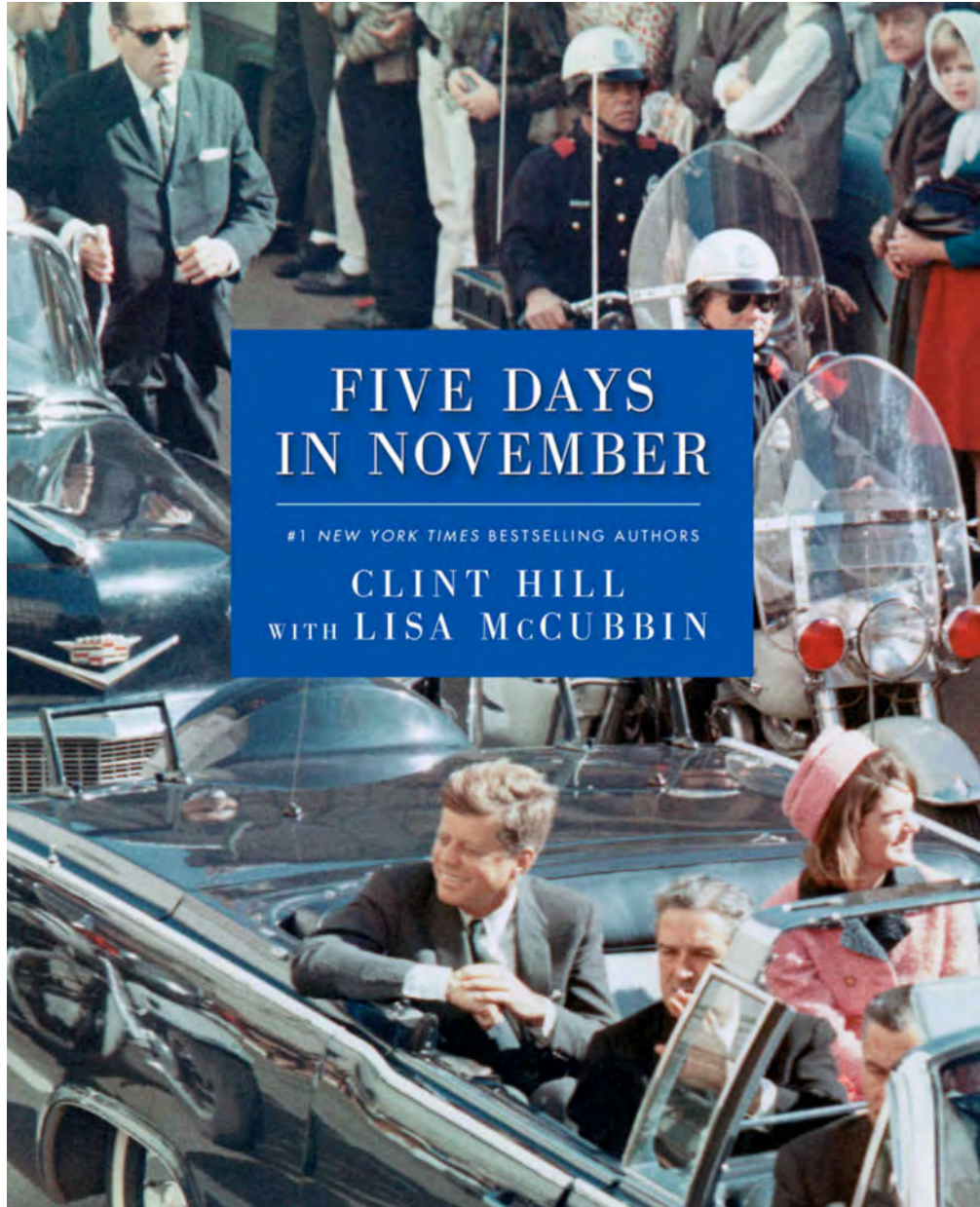
## “How did I let this happen to her?”

## THE AFTERMATH

In early December, Hill was presented with the US Treasury's highest award for bravery. He recalls that he didn't want it or think he deserved it. And he felt little comfort in the outpouring of cards and letters thanking him for possibly saving the first lady's life. His president was killed on his watch. A few days later, he learned that Mrs. Kennedy would be receiving Secret Service protection for the next year. She had chosen him as one of her two agents, and he was grateful. On December 6, he rode along as she departed the White House for the last time and moved into a private Georgetown home. Hill still carries the sadness and guilt of that year of service:

I stayed with her for that next whole year. That was very painful and difficult in itself. The Christmas of 1963, we were in Palm Beach, Florida. There were these two children who had just lost their father and this lady who was now a widow, and there was a great deal of sadness. Every day I saw them, and it just bothered me terribly that I had been unable to prevent the assassination from happening because that was my responsibility, that was our job to keep the president alive. And we were unable to do so.

Their parting at the close of that year was bittersweet for Hill. Mrs. Kennedy moved into a large apartment in New York City. Hill was reassigned to White House detail in November 1964 and was placed in charge of presidential protection for President Lyndon Johnson in 1967. When Richard Nixon became president in January 1969, Hill was named special agent in charge of vice presidential protection. "They decided that since I'd been with both Kennedy and Johnson—and President Nixon did



Clint Hill, with Lisa McCubbin, has authored several books including *Five Days in November*. As Part of his extraordinary life journey, Hill was honored with the North Dakota Theodore Roosevelt Rough Rider Award in November 2018.

not think much of either one of them apparently—that it would be best if I did not go stay with Nixon because it would be a strained relationship,” he comments.

Hill and the former first lady continued to have sporadic communication. “Between the time that I left her in November of 1964 and for the next few years while I was on the White House detail assigned to the Johnson Administration, she would call me periodically to discuss certain things that were going on with her children and with herself about travel arrangements and things of that nature,” he recalls. “In Christmas of 1966, I remember she sent me a book as a gift, and inscribed it to me.” On June 5, 1968, Senator Robert Kennedy had just won California’s Democratic presidential primary when he was assassinated in Los Angeles like his brother. The senator’s funeral was the last time Hill saw Mrs. Kennedy. “That fall she married [Aristotle] Onassis, and I didn’t have any more contact with her,” he says.

Hill poured himself into his physically active career. “I was busy, so I did not have the opportunity to mourn or to really think very much about the assassination,” he says. In 1970 he was promoted to deputy assistant director of Secret Service protection, then moved up the ranks to become assistant director of Secret Service protection a few years later. His career was soaring, but his inner spirit was spiraling into depression. At his new desk job, away from the daily action, Hill was finally taking time to reflect on the meaning of November 22, 1963. “At that time I really thought about what happened in Dallas. I gradually began to deteriorate emotionally, and that affected me physically,” he recalls.

In summer of 1975, much to his dismay, Hill’s physician told him that he would no longer qualify for the Secret Service. Hill retired on July 31, 1975. In August he went back to his roots in North Dakota for a few months to seek healing. He visited his sister and worked on her farm near McCanna picking rocks and running the combine—searching for an outlet to release a deep pain just beginning to surface. Hill had a financial interest in the large farm and poured himself into working the land. “I did everything physically possible to just get involved,” he says. “I got so dirty that one day while picking rocks that my sister said she didn’t even recognize me. All she could see were the whites of my eyes.” In September he returned to Washington, DC, for a large retirement party in his honor.

All of the country’s agents in charge attended, as well as Judy Agnew, Senator Humphrey, Senator Ted Kennedy, Ethel Kennedy and other dignitaries.

In December 1975, the former agent consented to an interview with journalist Mike Wallace on the popular television show *60 Minutes*. The American public watched Hill struggle as he opened up about his inability to protect President Kennedy. “It was my fault,” Hill said tearfully, his anguish clearly visible on his face. He added, “If I had reacted just a little bit quicker . . . and I’ll live with that to my grave.” For Hill, the interview was a breaking point, opening a long-suppressed flood of emotions.

I didn’t really think I was that emotionally distraught. I didn’t think I was going to have a problem. It wasn’t too bad the first time that they did the interview. The trouble was, when they taped the interview, the team went back to New York. Don Hewett, who ran *60 Minutes* in New York, told them they didn’t get enough emotion. They were going to have to redo some of it. They

didn’t tell me that was the reason. They told me that they had some technical

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difficulties and needed to reshoot some of it, that I should wear the same clothes. They came back, and then Mike hit me with the assassination events. And that’s the thing that they really wanted to dwell on. In that process, I broke on camera. It was emotionally very damaging. From that point on, I deteriorated a lot.

Hill says that Mike Wallace realized the interview had damaged Hill’s already fragile emotional state. He called the retired agent about once a week for a year to make sure he was okay. After the interview, Hill, in emotional turmoil, retreated from the world for six years:

I confined myself to my residence, really into my basement. Friends and associates would stop by, and I would not even get off the couch. I could have cared less. I didn’t want anything to do with anybody. I bought myself a bunch of scotch and some cartons of cigarettes, and I secluded myself in that basement.

In 1982, his physician told him, “Either quit what you’re doing or die.” Hill shares, “I decided that I wanted to live, so I quit cold turkey.”

It wasn’t until 1990 that Hill found some inner peace. He and his wife made a pilgrimage to Dallas, walking the Dealey Plaza area route, exploring the grassy knoll, and going to the sixth floor of the Texas Book Depository where he believes the shots were fired. The journey proved to be a long-needed catharsis.

I came away with the conclusion that, on that particular day, Lee Harvey Oswald had every advantage and we didn’t have any. Because of the angles and the way that street is in front of that building, the weather conditions at the time, the fact that we were using an open car, and the fact that we would be just about to go onto an expressway where we would be speeding up to 60 or 65 miles per hour (which meant no agents could be on the back of the car), I realized I did everything I could that day. I really couldn’t have done more, so that gave me some sense of relief even though I did still feel responsible and a sense of guilt. And I always will, I suppose. But that at least gave me some satisfaction by going there that day.

Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis died in late evening on May 19, 1994, from non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. President William Clinton had called Hill into the Oval Office that same morning to let him know the gravity of her condition and thank him for his service. Hill mourned his friend’s death in private. A chapter in Hill’s life quietly closed.

Aside from a few interviews, Hill remained publicly silent about the assassination for decades. Recently, however, he has begun speaking publicly. “It’s pleasing to me that I can now relate information, especially to the younger people, about that period of time in the ‘50s, ‘60s, and into the ‘70s, and tell them the facts as I know them because I was there,” he says. “I like to talk not only about the assassination, but about other periods of time as well. That is very rewarding to me.” The retired agent who witnessed the daily inner dynamics of the Kennedy family’s life in the White House maintains a respectful silence about certain details of their lives. Hill admits that “Mrs. Kennedy and I had secrets” he will never reveal.

It’s been an extraordinary life journey for this man with North Dakota roots. In 2010 Hill wrote the foreword for fellow agent Gerald Blaine’s *The Kennedy Detail*, coauthored by Lisa McCubbin. He has authored with Lisa McCubbin two of his own books, *Mrs. Kennedy and Me* and *Five Days in November*. He continues to share portions of his personal story around the country, taking comfort that he can finally talk about that dark day with those who remember and with a new audience of young people.

Hill’s selfless act of risking his life to protect the country’s president and first lady cannot be taken lightly. The agent’s actions might be viewed as part of his professional duties, but no other Secret Service agent responded in a similar fashion. No one else took the risk. President Kennedy could have been describing Secret Service Agent Hill when he once remarked, “The courage of life is often a less dramatic spectacle than the courage of a final moment; but it is no less a magnificent mixture of triumph and tragedy.” Hill lives that very triumph and tragedy—bearing a fifty-year burden while finding a new sense of satisfaction in educating others about an important time in history.

## AUTHOR

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