

# The President Is Sworn In

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It was 2:15, Friday, November 22. I had just reached home from the Trade Mart, where a large and enthusiastic crowd had gathered to see and hear President John F. Kennedy. We waited in vain, for he had been assassinated as he was leaving the downtown area of Dallas.

Numbed and hardly realizing what had happened, I drove home. There was no reason to go to court. In the face of the tragedy that had befallen us, all else seemed of little consequence.

I phoned the court to tell the clerk where I was. Her response was that Barefoot Sanders, U.S. attorney, wanted to speak to me. Immediately I heard his familiar voice, "The Vice-President wants you to swear him in as President. Can you do it? How soon can you get to the airport?" Of course I could, and I could be there in ten minutes.

I got in my car and started toward the airport. Now there was another job to be done—a new President who had to carry on, and he must qualify for the office as quickly as possible. He had much to do, and I must think of him, and do the job that had been assigned to me.

There was no time to find the oath administered to a president, but the essentials of every oath are the same. You have to swear to perform the duties of the office of President of the United States, and to preserve and defend the Constitution of the United States. I was not afraid. I could do it without a formal oath.

Police blocked the entrance to the location of the plane, but there was no difficulty. They knew me, and I told them I was there to swear in the Vice-President as President. One of the motorcycle officers went to the plane to confirm my statement and then escorted me to the plane.

It was a beautiful sight, the presidential plane, long and sleek, a blue and two white stripes running the length of the plane, with the words, "The United States of America," on the blue stripe. It seemed to exemplify the strength and courage of our country.

I was escorted up the ramp by the chief of police to the front door, where one of the Vice-President's aides and the Secret

Service met me. I was trying to explain that I did not have the presidential oath but could give it anyway when someone handed me a copy.

In the second compartment were several Texas congressmen, vice-presidential aides, Secret Service men, and the Vice-President and Mrs. Johnson. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson have been my friends for many years, but on such an occasion there did not seem to be anything to say. I embraced them both, for that was the best way to give expression to my feeling of grief for them, and for all of us.

By that time a Bible that was on the plane had been thrust into my hands. It was a small volume, with soft leather backs. I thought someone said it was a Catholic Bible. I do not know, but I would like to think it was, and that President Kennedy had been reading it on this, his last trip.

The Vice-President said Mrs. Kennedy wanted to be present for the ceremony, and in a very few minutes she appeared. Her face showed her grief, but she was composed and calm. She, too, exemplified the courage this country needs to carry on. The Vice-President leaned toward her and told her I was a U.S. judge appointed by her husband. My acknowledgement was, "I loved him very much."

The Vice-President asked Mrs. Johnson to stand on his right, Mrs. Kennedy on his left, and with his hand on the Bible, slowly and reverently repeated the oath after me: "I do solemnly swear that I will perform the duties of President of the United States to the best of my ability and defend, protect, and preserve the Constitution of the United States." That was all to the oath I had in my hand, but I added, "So help me God," and he said it after me. It seemed that that needed to be said.

He gently kissed Mrs. Kennedy and leaned over and kissed his wife on the cheek.

Here was a man with the ability and determination for the task ahead. Great as are the responsibilities of the office, I felt he could carry on. I told him so, and that we were behind him, and he would have our sympathy and our help.

As I left the plane I heard him give the order to take off, "Now let's get ready and go." I drove away with my thoughts on this man, upon whom so much now depended. □