Sarah T. Hughes, John F. Kennedy and the Johnson Inaugural, 1963

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The highpoint of Sarah Tilghman Hughes' judicial career was reached amid one of the great tragedies of recent Texas history, the assassination of John F. Kennedy in Dallas by Lee Harvey Oswald on November 22, 1963. In the afternoon of that day, aboard Air Force One, which was parked at Love Field, Judge Hughes swore in Lyndon Baines Johnson as the thirty-sixth president of the United States.

In that brief moment of presidential history she became a national celebrity. Already prominent in Texas, this unhappy inaugural made her name known to multitudes of Americans, and although she had long been a force in modern feminism, she now became the first, and to date, only woman to administer the oath of office to an American chief executive. Moreover, she became a role model for young women who increasingly sought her advice about careers, especially in the law.¹

On the surface, the president and the judge were an unlikely pair to be joined in this event. She a petite, old-family American from the East; he was a tall, rugged, hard-talking Southwesterner from the Texas hill country. Politics brought them together. They were fiercely partisan Democrats of the liberal wing, and they were friends. He had helped maneuver her into a federal judgeship when the president's brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and the American Bar Association had objected. They thought she was too old; she was sixty-five years of age.²

By the time of her appointment as Judge, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Texas, Fifth Circuit, Hughes had become accustomed to rubbing elbows with political greats and near-greats. Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn and United States Senator Ralph W. Yarborough were close friends who had joined Johnson to secure her appointment.

In 1952, when Republicans denied Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine a token vice-presidential nomination, Democrats were quick to put forth Hughes as a nominee at their convention. They hoped to illustrate the different attitudes taken by the parties concerning women's abilities. Hughes was national president of the Business and Professional Women's Clubs and, as such, an ideal person with whom to make the point. Flattered by the gesture, she declined, but joined others in denouncing Republican insensitivity to women. Later claims that she was the first woman nominated by a major party for vice president were wrong on two counts. Not only did her refusal keep her name from being listed as a candidate, Democrats had nominated Mrs. Leroy Springs of South Carolina in 1924.³

Sarah T. Hughes came to Texas in 1922. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, on August 2, 1896, she was the daughter of James Cook and

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Elizabeth Haughton Tilghman. Her family, part of the hardworking middle class, had come to America in the 1660s, and among her ancestors she claimed kinship with the famed United States marshal of the Oklahoma Territory, Bill Tilghman.

Following graduation from the public schools of Baltimore, Hughes attended Goucher College, where she earned an A.B. in biology. For two years she taught science classes at Salem Academy in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and then enrolled in the George Washington University Law School, where she earned an LL.B. in 1922.

While in law school Hughes was a member of the Washington, D.C. police force, working with female lawbreakers and juvenile delinquents. She had thus begun a career notable for breaking gender barriers since both law and law enforcement were bastions of male employment.

While at George Washington University she met George E. Hughes of Palestine, Texas. Following a brief courtship, they were married on March 13, 1922 and moved to Dallas soon after the wedding. For several years George Hughes practiced law with a private concern but took employment as an attorney with the U.S. Veterans Administration in 1928, a job he held until retirement. He died on June 1, 1964, two years after leaving the federal service.

In 1923 Judge Hughes became a junior member of Priest, Herndon, and Ledbetter, a law firm in Dallas. She remained part of the firm until Governor James V. Allred chose her to be the first woman to sit as a district judge in Texas in 1935. She was appointed to the bench of the 14th District Court in Dallas. The next year she ran a hotly contested race for the seat and was reelected. Voters returned her to office in six subsequent elections, the last being in 1960.

Before Allred's appointment, Hughes served three terms in the Texas House of Representatives. One of the first women elected to the legislature following the adoption of woman suffrage, she was involved in the main issues of the day — oil proration legislation, penal system reform, and public school land usage. One of her first legislative actions was to introduce a state income tax bill which failed in the face of determined opposition. She was also instrumental in getting money appropriated by the state to fund the Texas centennial celebration in 1936. For a variety of reasons, not the least being her desire to promote the public interest, newspaper reporters in Austin voted her Texas' most effective state legislator in 1933.

Judge Hughes' success at the polls deserted her but twice. She was beaten by J. Frank Wilson when she sought the Democratic Party's primary nomination for the United States House of Representatives in 1946. She claimed her liberal views cost her the election. She also lost as a candidate for the Texas Supreme Court in 1958.

As a jurist, Hughes was known for her intelligent, speedy, and impartial administration of justice. Among her accomplishments while serving the 14th judicial district were her leadership role in securing an amendment to the Texas Constitution that allowed women to serve as
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jurors (1953) and the construction of Dallas' first juvenile detention center (1950).  

A judicial activist, Hughes once explained her legal philosophy by noting, "I'm not nearly so interested in the technical aspects of law as I am in the way it affects human beings." Among her most famous decisions as a federal judge were: Roe v. Wade, 1970 (the legalization of abortion in the United States), Schultz v. Brookhaven General Hospital, 1969 (equal pay for equal work for women), and Taylor v. Sterrett, 1972 (upgrading prisoner treatment in the Dallas County Jail). She considered the latter to be her most important decision. She was also involved in several cases related to Billie Sol Estes and to the Sharpstown bank scandal.  

During 1960 Hughes served as co-chairman of John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign in Dallas County and toured with him when electioneering brought him to Dallas. The following tribute to Kennedy begins with that campaign and illustrates her deep affection for the youthful president. It was written sometime in the late 1960s:

"John Fitzgerald Kennedy, 1917-1963,  
Tribute to a Great American"  
by Sarah T. Hughes

It was a bright sunny September day in 1960 that John Fitzgerald Kennedy came to Texas to campaign for the presidency of the United States. I rode with him in an open car from Fort Worth to Dallas. The highway was lined with people, cheering, waving [sic]. There were children too, whole classes given permission to see this vibrant young American.  

We stopped at several places — Arlington, Grand Prairie, Chance-Vought, and there was wild cheering, a reaching out simply to touch John Kennedy. One woman caught at his handkerchief and pulled it from his pocket. Undaunted, he reached across me for one in the pocket of Lyndon Johnson.  

We drove into Dallas up Main Street through joyous throngs of people yelling their approval of a new leader. Barely moving through dense crowds the car turned into Akard and down to the auditorium where John Kennedy spoke to a wildly enthusiastic audience. And then it was over — Dallas' day of glory in September 1960, and he flew away to speak that night in St. Louis, and again and again in other cities before the election in November.  

I saw him twice after that — at his inauguration, happy and vibrant, when he sounded a clarion call for America to take the hard and challenging road to a new frontier. To his fellow countrymen he said "Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country."

The last time I saw him was in 1962 in his office at the White House when he received the four new Texas Federal Judges. He showed a personal interest in each of us, and his handshake was warm and friendly. For Judge Noel's nine-year old son he had a PT boat which he had himself been wearing as a tie clasp.  

November 22, 1963 a large and enthusiastic crowd sat in the Dallas Trade Mart waiting with anticipation to hear John Fitzgerald Kennedy. We waited in vain. He was dead.  

I loved John F. Kennedy. He inspired me to do my best. I admired
his courage, his intellect, his knowledge and understanding of history, his wisdom, his wit, his leadership, his devotion and reliance on God. In death I honor him as a great American.

President John F. Kennedy, Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson, and U.S. Senator Ralph W. Yarborough shown with Kennedy's four appointees to federal district courts in Texas. The Judges are, left to right, James Noel, Houston, Southern District; Sarah T. Hughes, Dallas, Northern District; Adrian Spears, San Antonio, Western District, and Leo Brewster, Fort Worth, Northern District. The boy in front of Judge Hughes is Ed Noel, Judge Noel's son. The photograph was taken on March 7, 1962, when the judges' appointments were confirmed by the U.S. Senate. The setting is the White House.

Lyndon B. Johnson takes the presidential oath of office from Judge Sarah T. Hughes, aboard Air Force One, Love Field, Dallas, on November 22, 1963, following the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Also shown are Mrs. Johnson, to the right of the president, and Mrs. Kennedy, to his left. The photographs were taken by Captain Cecil Stoughton, official White House photographer.
It was the assassination and subsequent inaugural that gave Hughes national prominence and made her one of the nation's most recognized women. She said afterward that she liked to believe that President Johnson chose her for the honor because of their friendship and his fondness for her, but that she was realistic enough to know that his feelings toward the other federal judges in Dallas made her the most acceptable choice. One was a Republican and the other, a Democrat, had ruled against Johnson in an earlier case.¹⁰

The following document is Hughes' description of the swearing-in ceremony and the events surrounding the assassination. She wrote it a few days after the event, perhaps at the request of Ronnie Dugger, editor and general manager of the Texas Observer. It appeared in the Observer on November 29, 1963, and was later entered into the Congressional Record by Senator Yarborough. The senator described her account as a "brief and poignant description of the ceremony" and "of historical significance."

THE PRESIDENT IS SWORN IN
By Sarah T. Hughes

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 seems 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 aide 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 had 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, 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.

Judge Hughes, honored frequently later in life, died on April 23, 1985, following several years of illness. She was interred at the Hillcrest Mausoleum and Memorial Park in Dallas. Her papers were deposited at the North Texas State University Archives in May 1985, where they are available to researchers.

NOTES

1As an example of Sarah T. Hughes as role model, see Sarah T. Hughes Papers, NTSU Archives, Ltr., Hughes to Carol Click, February 8, 1965. The judge wrote Click, a fourteen-year old, that to become a lawyer she should take courses "to increase your ability to think creatively, to understand people and their problems and to communicate ideas. Courses in government, political science, sociology, history, English, speech and sciences are particularly helpful."

NTSU is unprocessed, thus citations to particular archival boxes or standard archival descriptions are impossible to make.


The biographical material presented here is from the Hughes Biography File, Hughes Papers.


Hughes Scrapbook, Hughes Papers.

Biographical Sheets used to support Hughes appointment as Federal Judge, Hughes Papers; Oral History Interview #27, p. 3; "Relentless Fight for Underprivileged," Bulletin Board, United Fidelity Life Insurance Company, Hughes Papers.


Hughes Papers, Ltr., Hughes to Roger Stavis, March 8, 1982.