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# 'The Death of a President'

## Gripping and Detailed

By MERRIMAN SMITH

UPI White House Reporter

The controversial William Manchester book, "The Death of a President," is much better than the buildup.

The book was preceded by a highly publicized wrangle with the Kennedy family, critical challenges and awkward errors in the advance magazine serialization.

The hard-cover product, however, is a gripping, incredibly detailed and reasonably authentic account of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the immediate aftermath.

### Hardly Definitive

Because of remaining errors of fact in some passages, there will be those who regard Mr. Manchester's book as slightly less than definitive history.

But such are the wages of serialization sin. An author sees a pot of gold at the end of the magazine rainbow and rushes into truncated print before he really is ready. This seems to be the case with Mr. Manchester's magazine installments.

They did serve an important role, however. The condensation brought to light some important errors and Mr. Manchester was able to correct them before hard-cover publication. Not all, but most.

### Amazing Work

To pick at Mr. Manchester's mistakes is to ignore the true stature of his book. In balance, it is an amazing piece of work. Laborious reading, perhaps, but with the exception of the Warren Commission report there is nothing else on the subject to compare with "The Death of a President."

The author told me a few days ago that less than 1 per

*NOTE: The following review of William Manchester's controversial book on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy was written by Merriman Smith, UPI White House reporter who was covering the late President when he was killed and who later won the Pulitzer Prize for his account of the assassination. He was one of only two reporters who accompanied President Johnson and Mrs. Kennedy back here aboard Air Force One.*

account of the assassination. While the former First Lady later had differences with the author, the 647 pages (plus appendices) provide an incredibly detailed account of a terrible episode of history written from a largely Kennedy viewpoint.

### Petulant Requests

Mrs. Kennedy should not object to the book in its present form. She comes off magnificently if one allows for some rather strange and petulant requests during the worst of the tension that followed the shooting of her husband on the streets of Dallas as she rode with him in an open car.

Mr. Manchester is hellishly cruel about Dallas as a culture medium for hatred. There was hatred of Mr. Kennedy, to be sure, but it is highly questionable whether this encouraged Lee Harvey Oswald to pull his trigger.

Mr. Manchester does tell of a few preachers and some private citizens who berated those in the town called "Big D" who tastelessly expressed pleasure over Mr. Kennedy's slaughter. But I got the impression that Mr. Manchester faulted the community heavily, particularly



WILLIAM MANCHESTER

between gunfire and burial. But the new President could not help making boorish personal gaffs in the eyes of the Kennedy crowd and the author.

### Clumsy Usurper

The JFK staff regarded Mr. Johnson as a clumsy, heavy-handed usurper. They would have regarded only one man in creation any differently — and that would have been their slain leader. It was Mr. Kennedy's White House and therefore, their White House forever. Any newcomer in those dark, shocked hours of grief who so much as touched a file cabinet or walked in an office hallway was pushy, disrespectful and behaving like anybody from Texas.

Mr. Manchester captures the Kennedy staff bitterness vividly. He is on solid ground here for I heard red-eyed stenographers call Mr. Johnson the vilest sort of names simply because he had succeeded their fallen idol. I heard some of Mr. Kennedy's ranking assistants imitate Mr. Johnson's Texas drawl acidly and accuse him of "trying to

pardoned for almost any sort of behavior in those confused, tearful four days of November. (Mr. Manchester captures this period splendidly as the funeral was planned as Mrs. Kennedy prepared to face life without her husband). They would have been robots had they behaved much differently. As it was, they were generally magnificent. And human.

### Forgive LBJ

Mr. Johnson faced a difficult task of being deferential and sympathetic to their rubbed-raw feelings and still keeping the Government in operation. He, too, should be forgiven for blundering into areas temporarily sanctified by grief, worrying too much about where he stood or sat, barking complaints over truly unimportant matters and failing at times to delegate authority sufficiently.

On the other hand, the new President could not have possibly conducted himself to the satisfaction of the Kennedy clan. Unfortunately this does not come across too strongly in the Manchester account. The mere fact that Mr. Johnson had been Vice President and came from Texas was enough to condemn him beyond any chance of redemption in the eyes of the grieving New Frontiersmen.

Never before has there been such an intimate picture of grief as that painted by Mr. Manchester of Mrs. Kennedy and her two puzzled children, Caroline and John. Perhaps Mrs. Kennedy will regard some of this as outrageous.

The Wall Street Journal \_\_\_\_\_  
The National Observer \_\_\_\_\_  
People's World \_\_\_\_\_  
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