POLITICAL BOOKSHELF

An Unflattering Look at LBJ

Even while William Manchester's book, "The Death of a President," complicates the relationship between the Kennedys and Lyndon B. Johnson (page 39), another new book is bound to add to the problem. One co-author, newspaper columnist Charles Bartlett, was one of John F. Kennedy's closest friends. Bartlett reports that in May 1961, the then Vice President balked for two weeks when Kennedy assigned him to go to Saigon to reassure Ngo Dinh Diem that the U.S. would continue its support. Finally, Bartlett says, Mr. Johnson told Kennedy: "Mr. President, I don't want to embarrass you by getting my head blown off in Saigon." "That's all right, Lyndon," Kennedy supposedly answered. "If anything happens to you out there, Sam Rayburn and I will give you the biggest funeral in the history of Austin." Bartlett adds Mr. Johnson finally agreed to go along with Mrs. Stephen Smith, JFK's sister, and her husband, who served "as a tender of Kennedy's concern for the region." The other co-author of "Facing the Brink,"