

## THE ASSASSINATION:

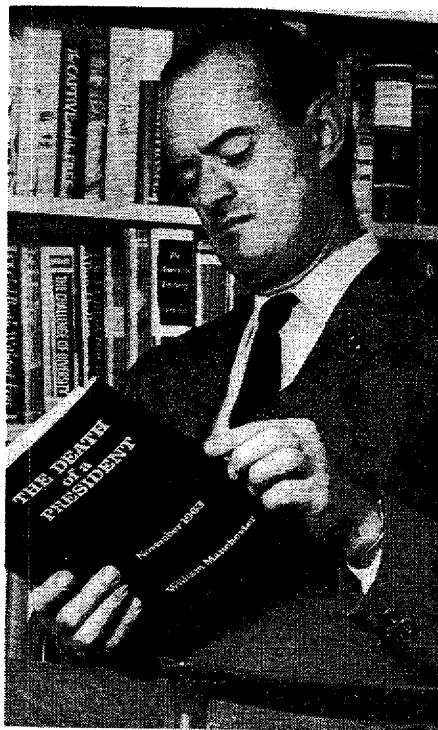
### The Book

After the most elaborate ruffles and flourishes in modern bookmanship, William Manchester's "The Death of a President"\* is finally being published this week—and it turns out to be the ultimate hail to the chief, the apotheosis of John F. Kennedy from senseless murder to epic myth.

Manchester's technique is familiar enough. He calls it "contemporary history," but it is actually high-intensity journalism: an often moving, sometimes infuriating blend of meticulously fact-ridden reportage, portentous philosophizing and unabashed emotionalism. His intent is to recreate the texture of JFK's death and transfiguration; his achievement is something else. Like New Frontiersmen Theodore Sorensen ("Kennedy") and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. ("A Thousand Days") before him, Manchester has enlisted his artistry in the service of a very personal conviction: that the fleeting Age of Kennedy was a magical moment in the life of America and the world—Camelot incarnate, and You Were There (whether you appreciated it at the time or not).

Whatever their feelings about John Kennedy, a good many sophisticated readers are likely to be put off by author Manchester's highly emotional approach to his material. ("At times you may find my presence exasperating," he candidly admits in the foreword.) His intense involvement is what makes long passages of "The Death of a President" heart-rendingly memorable. But it is also responsible for the book's excesses, notably an almost morbid preoccupation with every last poignant detail of the tragedy. Some of the detail, indeed, was so offensive to Jacqueline Kennedy that she haled Manchester into court to censor it—turning the battle of the book into the literary spectacle of the decade.

**Tapestry:** Manchester's prodigious research is already part of the legend of the book. The pre-publication publicity and the serialization in *Look* skimmed off the newsiest nuggets—especially the tension between the Johnson and Kennedy cadres—but exhausted only a fraction of the full lode. The complete text (710 pages, including maps, diagrams, appendices and index) is a dazzlingly intricate reconstruction of five days that were to shake the world, beginning with JFK's flight to Texas on November 21,



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### Manchester: Hail to the chief

1963, and ending with his funeral. The whole panorama is woven with the fanatical attention to detail that medieval artisans lavished on their tapestries.

The reader learns not only what Jacqueline Kennedy was thinking as she waited outside Parkland's Trauma Room One but also what passed through the mind of the bull-necked Dallas cop guarding the door (a Kennedy Democrat, he feared that the widow would see him only as a racist brute). The reader learns that Kennedy kept rubber ducks and boats in his White House suite for baths shared with John Jr.; that all the men went hatless in the funeral procession because Teddy Kennedy's rental tails came sans topper; that Jack Ruby kibitzed a press conference as an Israeli press translator after Lee Harvey Oswald's capture; that the CIA received an A-1-A alert from agents in Geneva warning de Gaulle would be assassinated at the funeral; that Mrs. Marguerite Oswald never forgave a newspaper photographer for shooting her with her stockings rolled down.

**Drawbacks:** Yet Manchester's impressive marshaling of detail has its drawbacks. So concerned is he about telling it precisely the way it was that Manchester pedantically devotes half a paragraph to whether Kennedy's Air Force aide or the undertaker opened his coffin on one occasion. And his treatment of some facets of the story—particularly how Kennedy kin and comrades spread the news—is numbingly repetitious.

There are more serious flaws, too. For all the depth of Manchester's research in some areas, it is surprisingly spotty in

others. Time and again, he takes the reader backstage—even into the Presidential bedroom aboard Air Force One—but his treatment of Kennedy's Bethesda autopsy, one of the most tantalizing pieces in the assassination jigsaw, is skimpy. So is his report on Oswald's long interrogation at Dallas police headquarters. In fact, so is Manchester's entire handling of the assassin (he has no doubt that Oswald killed President Kennedy). Instead of reportage, he occasionally verges into almost hysterical rhetoric. "He shot the President of the United States in the back to attract attention," writes Manchester. "Noticing him, and even printing his name in history books, therefore seems obscene. It is an outrage. He is an outrage. We want him Out."

Outrageous as the idea may be, Lee Harvey Oswald is in the history books for good. Coming in terms with him is the central problem in dealing with the death of John F. Kennedy. This Manchester ultimately fails to do. The essence of Oswald's act was not so much obscenity as absurdity—a random shot in the dark with meaning only in the assassin's damaged mind and life. "It was expedient," Manchester writes, "to dismiss the killer as a freak who had existed *in vacuo*." So he fills the vacuum by tirelessly documenting Dallas's record as a city of violence and hate. The trouble is that all Manchester's demons are right-wingers, and he never persuasively explains how their Kennedyphobia unhinged a self-styled Marxist to the point of murder.

**Bent:** But Manchester's most serious weakness as an historian (or, indeed, a journalist) is his lack of detachment—a bent toward the Kennedys that throws him off balance in portraying Lyndon Johnson and his Texas coterie. Manchester refracts the story of the transition of power through the prism of his own sensibility; beneath his lens, Lyndon Johnson emerges as a not very likable political chameleon, distinctly inferior to the wondrous JFK.

It is mostly a question of nuance and shading. Manchester's Johnson on the telephone is very nearly a sinister figure: "With the two White House switchboards at his disposal he found fulfillment; one hand was wrapped around the receiver in a stranglehold—no one has succeeded in covering so many inches of plastic—while the other played deftly over the colorless buttons of the Signals console." After Jackie Kennedy's exquisite post-funeral audience with Charles de Gaulle, Manchester pans his camera to Mr. Johnson's diplomatic reception at the State Department, where "The President . . . was enjoying himself hugely." When LBJ decides to risk walking in the funeral procession, he writes: "One of Johnson's Texans quoted

\*Harper & Row. \$10.

him as saying: 'I'd rather give my life than be afraid to give it.' This wasn't quite accurate. What the President really said—to [a military aide]—was: 'You damned bastards are trying to take over. If I listen to you, I'll be led to stupid, indecent decisions. I'm going to walk.'

**Cavils:** Manchester sometimes questions Mr. Johnson's substance as well as his style. He cavils at two of the new President's proudest post-assassination achievements: passage of major legislation—notably the civil-rights and tax-cut bills—and the paring of the budget below \$100 billion in early 1964. On the first, Manchester observes that, a month before his death, Kennedy accurately predicted when each bill would be passed—clearly implying that President Johnson did nothing more than JFK would have done had he lived. On the second, Manchester accuses LBJ of sowing the false impression that Kennedy had left him a \$103 billion budget; actually, says Manchester, Kennedy had cut the budget to \$101 billion and, like his successor, would have cut more. And the aggressive liberalism of the new President's domestic program, he suggests, was more expedient than authentic.

The result of all this is to disfigure "The Death of a President." It was to have been the definitive story of the Kennedy assassination and its aftermath; it is far less than that. Its reportage of the anguish of the New Frontier, of the pageantry and pathos of the funeral, of a world in mourning may never be surpassed. But the enduring chronicle of those days—the distillation of events and emotions into the cadence and perspective of history—remains to be written.

—EDWARD KOSNER