

Trivia and grievous errors mar 'Death of a President'

Mark Lane, noted lawyer and author of "Rush To Judgment," a biting critique of the Warren Commission Report, takes issue with William Manchester's account of the assassination.



WILLIAM MANCHESTER

THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT by William Manchester (Harper & Row, 1967, 710 pp. \$10)

THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT represents a triumph for anti-intellectualism. Walter Lippmann called the book "petite histoire," an accumulation of little stories incidental to history.

Yet it cannot be denied that William Manchester was exposed to the comments and conclusions of many who endured that moment of history in Dallas.

It is therefore unfortunate that his inability to distinguish trivia from substance, his insistence upon projecting himself into the thread of the narrative and his highly emotional style, which not infrequently borders on hysteria, flaw whatever literary merit his work might possess.

Nevertheless, the book might rank as a valuable historical reference work were citations or some other form of documentation afforded the reader in support of Mr. Manchester's many contentions. No such documentation, however, is offered. In these circumstances, the reader is required to rely entirely upon Mr. Manchester's memory, accuracy and judgment.

A careful examination of those areas in which his assertions may be compared with the known facts and which are therefore susceptible to informed analysis indicates that Mr. Manchester is too often grievously in error.

Mr. Manchester's shortcomings appear to flow from his lack of knowledge regarding the events of November 22, 1963, his servility to the crucial conclusions of the Warren Commission and his unashamedly hysterical treatment of perhaps the leading actor in this drama Lee Harvey Oswald.

Referring to Oswald, he writes, "Noticing him, and even printing his name in history books . . . seems obscene. It is an outrage. He is an outrage. We want him Out [sic]."

A most frustrating experience for the reader is the inability to determine just where that which Mr. Manchester alleges to be fact ends and where that which he concedes to be opinion begins.

For example, we are told that Oswald sat in front of a television set on the night before the assassination:

"Apparently he was intent upon the flickering Zenith screen. In fact, he was going mad . . . and it seems clear that the total eclipse of his reason occurred shortly before 9 p.m. that evening . . ."

Unable to marshal any evidence to show that Oswald was insane, Mr. Manchester merely said so and even provided the moment when the metamorphosis occurred.

The author had little difficulty identifying a major contributing factor to Oswald's frame of mind at the time of the assassination. The prevailing political climate in Dallas influenced and inflamed him.

Mr. Manchester notes that "five thousand cheap handbills" bearing two photographs of the President and the headline "Wanted For Treason" were distributed in Dallas the day before the President's arrival. He was willing to offer his own opinion as to its effect: "Any hater, left or right, could find fuel in it."

In fact, the handbill charged President Kennedy with "turning the sovereignty of the U.S. over to the Communist controlled United Nations," being "lax in enforcing Communist Registration laws," and giving "support and encouragement to the Communist inspired racial riots."

It is hard to conceive how Oswald, ostensibly of the left, could have gained encouragement from the contents of that handbill.

In describing the ceremony in which Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as President, Manchester claimed that every male Kennedy aide, except Dr. George Burkleley, had declined to be present for this event. He cited pictures taken by Major Cecil Stoughton in support of his contention, but Stoughton's photographs show conclusively that Manchester was wrong.

Nineteen of these pictures, published in *Time* magazine on February 24, 1967, record the presence of five male Kennedy aides at the swearing-in. This error is far less disturbing than Mr. Manchester's published assertion that Kenneth O'Donnell, one of the aides photographed as he stood quietly alongside Jacqueline Kennedy, was "pacing the corridor like a caged tiger, his hands clapped over his ears as though to block the oath."

O'Donnell said that Manchester, who interviewed him, never asked

about the subject, and Mary Gallagher, who Manchester later said was the source of the quote, denied that she ever said it.

When he was questioned by newsmen during a television interview, Manchester admitted that he may have been in error and casually suggested that it would be "presumptuous for a contemporary historian . . . to claim that he bats one thousand."

A reader of *The Death of a President*, forearmed with a knowledge of the evidence in the twenty-six volumes published by the Warren Commission, might consider it presumptuous for Manchester to refer to himself as an historian, contemporary or otherwise.

Apart from endorsing the central conclusions of the Commission, he devotes little space to the facts of the assassination itself, and his indifference to the intricacies of the testimony is little short of monumental.

One of the few eyewitnesses to the assassination whom Manchester does cite is Charles Brehm, to whom he repeatedly and erroneously refers to as "Charles Brendt."

Another is Arnold Rowland. Rowland's account of his observations just before the shooting was found to be so challenging to the Commission's conclusion that Oswald acted alone, that nearly two pages of the Warren Report were utilized in an attempt to discredit his damaging testimony.

Yet Manchester innocently, almost merrily, adduces Rowland's testimony in support of Oswald's lone guilt: "He [Rowland] saw Oswald silhouetted in the window, holding what appeared to be a high powered rifle mounted with a telescopic sight."

Rowland did not testify that he saw Oswald. He said he saw two men on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository. In the window from which shots allegedly originated, Rowland said he saw an unarmed Negro man. In a window far removed from that one, Rowland testified, he saw a man with a rifle.

If Rowland's evidence is to be credited, then the Commission's conclusions—and Manchester's—must fall. If Rowland is disbelieved, then those conclusions can be temporarily salvaged.

But only through blatant misrepresenta-



MARK LANE

tion and distortion, such as Mr. Manchester indulges, can Rowland be brought forth as a Commission witness.

Of course it is now well established that the Commission's conclusions rest upon the view that three shots were fired from behind the President, all by Oswald, and that a wound inflicted to the back of the President's neck confirms the Commission's contention as to the origin of the shots.

The documents which in and of themselves would be dispositive of this question are the photographs and X-rays of the President's body, presently under lock and key in the National Archives.

Manchester asserts as a fact that "the X-rays show no entry wound below the shoulder" and that the photographs "clearly reveal that the wound was in the neck." While those assertions are dramatic, their impact is considerably diminished by Manchester's admission that he has never seen the X-rays or the photographs.

In *Look* magazine, he stated, ". . . this writer has not seen the material . . ." In his book, he said, "Because this material is unsightly it will be unavailable until 1971—at which time presumably it will be less unsightly. Manchester added, "However, the author has discussed it with three men who examined it before it was placed under seal. All three carried special professional qualifications."

Thus the American people, the majority of whom, according to the Gallup poll, had abandoned all faith in the Commission's conclusions, are now asked to share Mr. Manchester's faith in three unnamed persons with "special professional qualifications."

Unlike other published works on the subject, the integrity of which is susceptible to verification through numerous cited references, Mr. Manchester's book demands a deep investment of faith, generally reserved for matters less empirical and more theological.

In the face of Mr. Manchester's less-than-perfect batting average, as he himself put it, this faith appears to be unwarranted. Such is the legacy of the Warren Commission Report—speculation and conjecture masquerading as history, while the very fabric of history remains suppressed in the National Archives.

—Mark Lane