

After the Battle, the Book

by Sylvia Meagher

On February 4, 1964 the Chairman of the Warren Commission, appointed by President Johnson to investigate the assassination of the first President Kennedy, remarked to the press that for reasons of national security the full truth might not be known "in your lifetime." The very next day a writer was approached by the Kennedy family on a matter made public subsequently at a press conference, on March 26, 1964, in the office of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. The important announcement which the reporters had been summoned to hear was that the Kennedy family had commissioned William Manchester—author of a highly idealized biography of JFK published in 1962—to prepare a "complete, accurate" history of the assassination and surrounding events. (It was almost two years before we learned that Manchester was the third or fourth candidate approached, others such as Theodore H. White and Walter Lord having valued their integrity above the honor of serving as the Kennedys' historian.)

The announcement that the Kennedys had commissioned their own book on the assassination appeared to presage a challenge to President Johnson's Warren Report by the family and the political heir of the late President. This impression was reinforced by an exclusive interview with William Manchester, "who was chosen by Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy to write an authoritative history of the assassination," published in *The New York Times* on May 9, 1965. The *Times* quoted Manchester as saying,

All the questions are not answered when the assassin is identified. Actually, Oswald is a minor figure in the story. The assassination was more than a crime, it was a huge thing. Questions must be answered about the transfer of power, about what happened to the establishment of the Federal Government, and to the American people.

A Hired Writer's Self-Assertion

Only when "the battle of the book" erupted in November 1966 did it become known that Manchester completely endorsed the Warren Commission's verdict against Lee Harvey Oswald as the lone assassin. The battle was joined when Manchester, who had servilely submitted to alterations in his manuscript by teams of Kennedy screeners, suddenly offered resistance to further censoring. The

Sylvia Meagher, a frequent contributor to our pages is the author of *Subject Index to the Warren Report and Hearings and Exhibits* (Scarcecrow Press, 1966) and a forthcoming study of the Warren Report, *Accessories After the Fact*, scheduled for fall publication by Bobbs-Merrill Co., New York.

The Minority of One June 1967

The Death of a President by William Manchester, Harper & Row, New York, 1967. 710 pp.—\$10.

Kennedys, seeking to impose new changes and deletions, not unnaturally were outraged when their previously tractable commissioned historian rebuffed attempts to make additional alterations. They hauled him and his publishers into court, and the headlines raged for some three months with accounts of recriminations and insults exchanged by the parties.

The news media promptly and gleefully reported every acrimonious remark—and there were many—and every controversial passage from the manuscript that could be ferreted out. Just the same, it never became entirely clear what the stakes were. Was it a struggle about material unflattering to the Kennedys? Or was it really a controversy about Manchester's ugly portrayal of LBJ? If the latter, did the Kennedys wish to disassociate themselves from an attack on LBJ? Or did they merely wish to make certain that the full ugliness of the portrait would not be overlooked even by those who did not read Manchester's book?

Manchester, who had a history of incontinence in manifesting blind adoration of JFK and his widow, now let fly with highly indiscreet accounts of what Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy had said on this or that occasion. The episodes he recounted were unpleasant commentaries on the arrogance, duplicity, and shabbiness of behavior of all the principals. As one reviewer of Manchester's book has astutely suggested, the commissioned writer's unexpected show of resistance to the Reverend Family coincided with *Look's* agreement to pay him \$665,000 for serialization rights. The hireling now demanded equal rights with his masters, displaying that firm self-righteousness which big money often seems to generate in Americans who acquire it.

The Integrity of the Book

Ultimately the Kennedys and Manchester (and his publishers) reached an out-of-court settlement, followed by the publication of extensive excerpts from *The Death of a President* in *Look*. Culminating this glutting flow of gossip, disclosure and scandal, the release of the book by Harper and Row on April 7, 1967 found all its titillating secrets prematurely stale. A reading of the full text can only be anticlimactic.

Deprived of its value as sensation, the

book is leaden and frightfully dull, for the most part. The style is sophomoric and pretentious. Historical perspective is totally lacking, for Manchester's vision never rises above that of a public relations consultant. The book is soaked in sentimentality and obsessed with trivia. In short, Manchester's book is not only hopelessly compromised as a work of *managed* history—it is mediocre in its vision, style, and structure. He is no more endowed intellectually and morally to write the history of the assassination than Louella Parsons is endowed to write of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.

Manchester, who acknowledges that he submitted to a certain amount of censorship, and that he voluntarily scrapped two hundred pages of his manuscript for reasons unrelated to historical accuracy, nevertheless has the audacity to advertise his work as a "complete, accurate" history, the integrity of which stands intact. Surely it is not necessary to argue the fanciful nature of this claim, when Manchester himself in effect has conceded that the book is hopelessly compromised.

It comes as an added surprise that he has seen fit not to satisfy a fundamental obligation of any researcher—the documentation of asserted fact. Manchester explains: I went to the mat with the issue of annotation. I arose with a painful verdict: no page-by-page footnotes, other than those necessary to the immediate sense of a passage. It hurt because I knew that every statement, every fact, every quotation in my manuscript could be followed by a citation.

But this is no less arrogant and specious than Manchester's claim that his book is a work of integrity. Before the book was even released, serious errors and discrepancies came to light with respect to his account of the flight of Air Force One from Dallas to Washington. A reporter who had been present on the flight repudiated Manchester's version of the Bible which had supposedly figured in Johnson's taking of the oath of office; and a leading news magazine published photographs which gave the lie to Manchester's statement that not one of Kennedy's loyal lieutenants was present at the swearing-in. Confronted by photographic evidence that Kenneth O'Donnell was present, Manchester retorted, "Photographs can lie." (*Meet the Press*, NBC Television, February 12, 1967.)

Annihilation of "The Accused"

But it never occurs to Manchester that also photographs produced as evidence against

Lee Harvey Oswald can lie, for—and here is what indicts his book as wholly fraudulent and absurd—he swallows whole the discredited Warren Report thesis of a lone assassin. He proceeds to demand that Oswald must even be stripped of his legal right (since he did not have the benefit of a legal trial and was not found guilty by any court of law) to presumed innocence. For Manchester, a man is not innocent until pronounced guilty by a jury of his peers. To him Oswald is not merely "the accused assassin" or "the alleged assassin"; from the height of his ignorance, hysteria and effrontery, Manchester insists that Oswald is the assassin, and to hell with the legal niceties. On whose authority are we to brand Oswald the assassin? On the word of a "historian" who is neither omniscient nor even as perceptive as that large segment of the American public which does not believe the Warren Report?

This is not to say that Manchester's attitude toward the Warren Commission is one of pure admiration. He has, rather, a patronizing and disparaging view, at times. In *Look* of April 4, 1967 (page 64, column 2), Manchester says superciliously that Chief Justice Warren invited him to read a first draft of the Report "and declare, as a friend of the family, that its findings were acceptable to the Kennedys in every respect." He explains with self-satisfaction that he demurred, because he felt it would be improper.

Yes, it was a highly improper request. Was the Chief Justice ready to comply if the Kennedys demanded changes or deletions? Was the "truth" of the Warren Report no less subject to Kennedy censorship than the "history" of Manchester's book? And is Manchester incapable of seeing the analogy between the impropriety of Warren's proposition and that to which he submitted his own manuscript?

Although Manchester disdains the improper suggestion of the Chief Justice, and suggests that the Warren Commission glossed over the sins of the Dallas Police, the FBI and the Secret Service (at last one can agree with him on something), he has no criticism of the Commission's case against Oswald. *The Death of a President* was completed in March 1966, but it includes an epilogue written subsequent to Jack Ruby's death on January 8, 1967. By that time, the at first muted and inconspicuous dissent by a few critics had swelled into an ominous national controversy about the validity of the Warren Report, with widespread erosion of confidence in its findings.

Manchester virtually ignores the controversy and the open repudiation of the Warren Report by numerous institutions, publications and personalities—cardinals and judges, pundits and politicians, as well as the original few who found the Report malodorous. Like the Chief Justice and the members of the Commission, Manchester does not deign to "dignify" the criticism by confronting, much less answering, explicit charges against the Warren Report.

Never having interviewed or psychoanalyzed Oswald, Manchester does not shrink from flat assertions about Oswald's emotions and alleged psychopathic condition, in the

same manner as he relates the emotions and actions presumably confided in him by persons he did interview. He specifies the exact moment when Oswald felt desperate, when he felt rejected as a husband and a male, when he "went mad," when he fired a last shot—even that he slept soundly in his jail cell after the assassination. Here speaks a charlatan, not a historian. He exceeds even the Warren Commission in readiness to wrest incriminating "fact" from inimical evidence, in doing violence to logic, in unconscionable and malicious departure from objectivity and simple fairness. What are Manchester's forensic qualifications, that he ventures to pinpoint from vague, negative or non-existent data the very instant at which Oswald "went mad"? Decorum should have compelled Manchester to be more discreet than to diagnose Oswald as paranoiac, or to charge (as he did in his article in *Look* of April 4, 1967) that Robert Kennedy acted in a completely irrational manner during the campaign to suppress the book, or parts of it; after all, Manchester is the only one of the three who is known to have been under psychiatric treatment.

He takes cognizance of the disrepute into which the Warren Report has fallen only once, indirectly, in a footnote: Defending the autopsy finding that a bullet struck Kennedy in the back of the neck (despite a large body of evidence suggesting that the wound was actually several inches below that alleged point of entry), Manchester says blandly that the issue is resolved by the autopsy X-rays and photographs. Did he see those X-rays and photographs? No; but he "discussed them with three men who examined them before they were placed under seal." Manchester does not name the three men, but assures us that they had "special professional qualifications." Each was a stranger to the other two; but they all said that the X-rays showed no entry wound below the shoulder and that the photographs revealed that the wound was in the neck.

Apparently we are asked to take on faith not only Manchester's word for this or that, sans annotation, but also the pronouncements of three anonymous experts with whom Manchester conversed on an unspecified date. But the historical record must not rest on the unsupported word of the historian, especially when he is indentured to interested parties, and when he is demonstrably careless and unreliable on questions of simple fact. For example, Manchester persistently refers to Charles Brehm, an eyewitness to the assassination, as "Charles Brend." He says that the seven-man Secret Service office in Dallas is a five-man office. He asserts that FBI agent James Hosty learned on November 4, 1969 that Oswald worked at the Depository, when Hosty himself testified (as did Ruth Paine) that he learned this on November 1st.

No, I am not about to take Manchester's word for anything that depends on his conscientious scholarship or reasoned judgment. It is rather silly for him to excoriate the coroner who tried to prevent the illegal removal of the President's body from Dallas on the ground that the doctor "should have realized that an assassination without a

scrupulous post-mortem was unthinkable." Before the book was issued, or its epilogue written, Dr. Thornton Boswell, one of the Bethesda autopsy surgeons, had admitted that he had made an unfortunate diagram error during the autopsy, and that he would have been more careful if he had realized at the time that the diagram would become a part of the public record. It is scarcely becoming to Manchester to ridicule as "unthinkable" a lack of scrupulousness which is not only quite "thinkable" but has been admitted by the perpetrator.

All of Manchester's pronouncements about the criminal evidence in the assassination and about Oswald's guilt must be discarded on grounds of his irresponsible, uninformed and uncritical adherence to the Warren Report. Anyone who has studied the evidence embodied in the official record will find Manchester's portrait of Oswald so recklessly wide of the mark, so deformed by a paroxysm of rage and venom, that it verges on sheer fiction. Indeed, it illuminates only the artist who has substituted a creature of his own disturbed imagination for the real human being who emerges, incompletely and mysteriously, in the testimony and documents published by the Warren Commission.

Heroes, Goddesses, and Betes-Noires

Manchester's Oswald is a spurious portrait. How, then, is it possible to accept his portraits of Jacqueline Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, or even John F. Kennedy? Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy emerge as virtually pure and perfect—as of March 1966. We know already that later in the year Manchester added a few touches that made his portraits more human in terms of fallibility, and perhaps a little monstrous. Which Mrs. Kennedy, which RFK, is to be regarded as the authentic portrait?

Lyndon Baines Johnson is another major character-portrayal by the creative Manchester. It can be said that LBJ is damned with faint praise. Manchester does not editorialize about LBJ except for some lip-service to his occasional virtues and a half-hearted defense of the manner of his assumption of the powers of the Presidency in an hour of catastrophe and consternation. But by no means does the book launch the calculated attack on Johnson which seemed to be the cause of the battle of the book. Whether the published innocuous portrait of LBJ coincides with, or is different from, the original is problematical. Manchester may have toned down his treatment of LBJ at one or another stage of submitting to Kennedy censorship but, if we read between the lines, LBJ still emerges as ruthless, vulgar, oily, hypocritical, monstrously vain, arbitrary, cruel, and lustful for power. One wonders—is Manchester trying to tell us something? Is he trying to hint that Johnson was the prime mover of events in Dallas? Or that the Kennedy lieutenants (who proclaimed on the flight back to Washington that for them the only President on board the plane was in a casket) thought LBJ was implicated? Certainly the extreme bitterness they manifested, as Manchester describes the flight, legitimizes (even compels) such a speculation.

When he turns to the city of Dallas, Manchester has no inclination to soft-pedal

or dilute its dangerous and frightening mood, as did the Warren Commission. He lets his disgust pour out for the uncontrolled ultra-rightists, their maniacal political doctrines, and their affinity to Hitler's storm troopers. Yet he does not see this primarily as the product of an unrestrained Cold War, or a calculated demonology invented and promoted by powerful forces working toward specific ends—he sees it mainly as an evil directed against his personal Hero, the already-legendary JFK, all but deified through the clever application of public relations techniques and the genuine nostalgia of admirers who loathe his successor. Dallas hated Kennedy with a murderous energy, before and after his death. To Manchester, that is an ultimate personal affront. Yet he believes, and wants us to believe, that Oswald, a man totally antithetical to the climate of Dallas, killed another man whom the Dallas ultras cursed and wanted to tear limb from limb.

For Manchester, the assassination is essentially a personal tragedy. He sees himself, as well as the murdered President, as a martyr. His pity for himself is almost as great as his pity for the victim and the bereaved. The political setting of the crime, the forces at work in this country which led inexorably to the crime and the subsequent murders, these have all but escaped Manchester's child-like preoccupations. How can anyone understand the assassination in Dallas on November 22, 1963, if he does not give thought also to the assassination in Saigon on November 1, 1963? If he does not see any connection between the two events, or between those events and the present carnage in Vietnam? When we progress from the murder of a head of a country to the murder of a country, the historian should at least ponder the possibility of a connection.

When the real history of the assassination is written, it will perhaps become apparent even to Manchester that it was not a random lunatic individual act but a logical piece in a large mosaic that is not yet complete. *The Death of a President* is not that history. It is an anachronism already, grandiose but hollow, and essentially a personal catharsis. One hardly can wait to be rid of the taste of it.

The two million dollars or more that Manchester will earn from this colossus of a book should do a lot to console him for his suffering in writing it and his ordeal with formidable tormentors who tried to obstruct its publication. For his bad, careless and untrue book, he will become a very wealthy man. No one will denounce him as a "scavenger," since he preaches the gospel of the lone assassin according to Warren—and that buys immunity. With two million in the bank, Manchester will not need to fret about the scorn with which his book is being received in reviews from orthodox spokesmen for the academic and literary Establishments. He will not even need to fret about the displeasure he has incurred from this President, or the next.

In America, it does profit a man to lose his soul.

The Lie Detector

THE LIAR'S ABSENTMINDEDNESS IS A BLESSING; IT OFTEN LEADS US TO THE TRUTH

GOOD TREATMENT OF POW'S

From a Washington dispatch in *The New York Times* of April 4:

"Mr. McCloskey [State Department spokesman] contended that the United States and South Vietnam were treating North Vietnamese soldiers captured in the fighting in the South in accordance with the regulations of the 1949 Geneva convention . . ."

BOMBING IS NO WAR ESCALATION

From a Washington dispatch in *The New York Times* of April 21:

"Officials declined today to describe the raids on the power plants [in Haiphong] as an 'escalation' of the bombing attacks against the north."

"We don't characterize it in any way whatsoever," Phil C. Goulding, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, said."

IT'S NOT HAIPHONG AT ALL

From *The New York Times* of April 21:

"The initial announcement of the raid, made by Gen. William C. Westmoreland's headquarters here in Saigon, said that the closest target had been 1.1 miles northwest of Haiphong."

"When pressed, a public information officer said the plant was 1.1 miles from 'the center of the business area, but still outside the city limits' on official United States maps."

HAIPHONG WITHOUT LIGHTS

From a Saigon dispatch on the effects of U.S. bombing of two power plants in Haiphong, in *The New York Times* of April 21:

"Late tonight, pilots of reconnaissance planes said that both Haiphong and Hongai, a smaller port to the northeast, were without lights."

THE "MISSIONARY ZEAL" OF G.I.'S

Gen. William C. Westmoreland during his address at an AP luncheon in New York, on April 24:

"A young corporal undertakes the support of a montagnard family whose breadwinner has been assassinated. An American squad or platoon adopts a hamlet, bringing to its people the material things they need and the spiritual uplift which will help them to self-sufficiency. Many communities in Vietnam are living a better life because of the encouragement and help our American troops have given to them. A true missionary zeal among our troops is commonplace and is one of the unique characteristics of this war."

"I am constantly impressed by the concern for the lives of others shown by the men of my command."

WAR PRISONERS ARE EXECUTED

From a Saigon dispatch in *The New York Times* of January 25:

"American units turn terrorists over to the South Vietnamese civilian authorities, at whose hands they are subject to possible execution."

THE BOMBING IS AN ESCALATION

From the same dispatch:

"One senior American official, who was unwilling to permit the use of his name, described the strike on Haiphong as a 'tremendously important intensification—escalation, if you will—of the air war.'

"He said it was part of a series of steps ordered by the White House . . ."

WELL, REALLY IT IS HAIPHONG

Continuation of the same dispatch:

"However, Admiral Richardson [commander of the U.S. carrier task force operating in the Gulf of Tonkin], the pilots who took part in the strike and a number of South Vietnamese who formerly lived in Haiphong all agreed that the [bombed] plant was within the city limits and within the built-up area. A Navy map of the strike area, prepared but not yet made public, indicates this."

HAIPHONG LIGHTING NORMAL

Wilfred Birchett in a Hanoi AP dispatch of April 25:

"Street and house lighting was normal with no restrictions when I visited Haiphong a few hours after the raid. The only blackouts that night and the following night occurred when alerts sounded the approach of reconnaissance planes."

"THE OBJECT IS KILLING"

From Robert Hutchins' syndicated column in the *Los Angeles Times* of April 16:

"Edward Lamb, a famous industrialist . . . has just returned from South Vietnam. The American authorities there were so proud of their efficient killing machine that they hastened to show him everything. Lamb told us what he had seen . . . This must be one of the worst exhibitions of callous brutality in the history of the world."

"The object is killing. The methods are bombing, burning and starvation. Of these the last is the most effective and the least attractive."

"But to starve the Vietcong, you have to starve the people, the men, women and children of South Vietnam. . . . Lamb described the big bulldozers being used by American troops. One of them can clear 60 acres a day."

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THE MINORITY OF ONE

INDEPENDENT MONTHLY FOR AN AMERICAN ALTERNATIVE—DEDICATED TO THE ERADICATION OF ALL RESTRICTIONS ON THOUGHT.

