

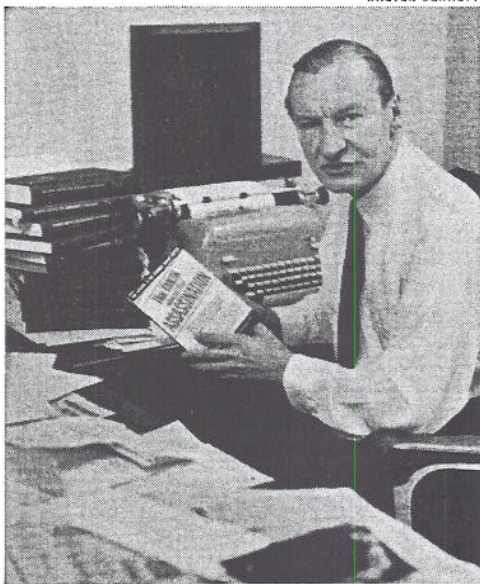
THE ASSASSINATION

Truth v. Death *TIME* 3/17/67

Like the events it describes in minute detail, William Manchester's *The Death of a President* has become a source of endless contention. Phase one of the controversy, the author's public clash with the Kennedy family, has given way to dispute over Manchester's accuracy on several substantive points. Last week Manchester's forthcoming \$10, 710-page work came under serious challenge from a \$1, 128-page paperback titled *The Truth about the Assassination*.

Truth was written by Charles Roberts, an able newsman who has been *Newsweek's* White House correspondent since 1954. Roberts was in Dallas the day of the murder and became one of the two newsmen (the other: U.P.I.'s Merriman Smith) to fly back to Washington on the

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THE CORRESPONDENT
On the contrary.

plane carrying the dead President and his successor. And, unlike Manchester, who was originally commissioned by the Kennedy family, Roberts has written his account "without authorization from anyone, not as a Kennedy man or as a Johnson man, but as a reporter who covered both Presidents."

"Correct, Compassionate." Roberts and Manchester chiefly differ in describing the interplay between Lyndon Johnson and Kennedy's bereaved intimates during the hours immediately after the murder. The overwhelming impression created by *Death's* prepublication publicity is that Manchester condemns Johnson for needless cruelty. In the *Look* serialization, Manchester writes that "aspects of Johnson's behavior in a very understandable state of shock may have proven exacerbating." To this, Roberts replies that Johnson's assumption of power was "careful, correct, considerate and compassionate."

A major point of friction was the logistical and procedural snarl of returning to Washington. Manchester implies that it would have been much easier on

Mrs. Kennedy if Johnson had left the presidential plane to her and the coffin and used the similar vice-presidential jet himself. Says Manchester of the two Boeing 707s: "Each carried the same equipment, both were guarded." On the contrary, says Roberts, U.S.A.F. 26000, the presidential craft, "then contained far more and better communications equipment—transmitting, receiving, coding and decoding—than any of the back-up jets."

"Inevitable Delay." Then there was the question of when to depart. Johnson wanted to be sworn in officially before take-off. Kennedy aides wanted to leave Love Field as soon as the coffin and Mrs. Kennedy arrived. Manchester, relying on interviews conducted later, reports a tense scene between Johnson and Kenneth O'Donnell, J.F.K.'s appointments secretary, in which O'Donnell "over and over" insisted: "We've got to go, we've got to get out of here, we can't wait." But Roberts says he could detect no "atmosphere of crackling tension." Further, he quotes O'Donnell as saying later: "I realized it was an inevitable delay. So I don't believe I commented on it. I just listened to him."

Roberts also discusses the already-exposed Manchester error concerning the attendance of Kennedy aides at the swearing-in. In the *Look* serialization of his book, Manchester said no "male Kennedy aide" attended. Published pictures disproved this (*TIME*, Feb. 24), and in the hard-cover version to be published officially next month, this may be one of the mistakes Manchester corrects. Further, Manchester reports that Johnson had trouble persuading Kennedy aides to enter the conference room for the ceremony. Not so, says Roberts—who was in the room. Johnson's invitation to witness the swearing-in was so readily taken up that the small chamber was filled.

Cooler in Dallas. In his general characterization of Johnson, Manchester depicts him immediately after the shooting as "incapable of coping with the fact of his succession," as "far readier to take orders than to issue them," as being in a "muddle" and talking in a "feeble whisper" to one Texas associate. According to *Death*, it was only later, on the plane, that Johnson recovered. Roberts' subjective appraisal: Johnson "was the coolest man in Dallas, or aboard Air Force One." Even on inconsequential details, Roberts finds fault with *Death*. He says that the book used for Johnson's swearing-in was not John Kennedy's personal Bible, as Manchester and others report, but a small missal, which perhaps had never even been opened by Kennedy. The book subsequently disappeared.

Despite his differences with Manchester, Roberts' main mission in *Truth* is to debunk the tomes purporting to prove—contrary to the Warren Commission findings—that J.F.K. was the victim of a conspiracy. On this question, Manchester and Roberts are in accord. Lincoln's body was disinterred four times,

and Roberts speculates that the widespread doubts about the assassination raised by the conspiracy mongers may in time lead to demands that John Kennedy's remains also be unearthed.