

JFK'S DEATH

A historian's view, evoked by a bronze coffin

By **BOB HERBERT**

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"There was just chaos at Parkland Hospital," said the historian William Manchester. "A member of the Kennedy team called Vernon Oneal and asked him for a coffin. And he said, 'Well, I have coffins in many different ranges.' And he was told, 'Well, send your best one.'"

A massive, 800-pound solid bronze coffin was loaded into a hearse and taken to the hospital. John F. Kennedy's body was placed in the coffin and then driven to the Dallas airport.

Manchester, the author of *The Death of a President*, a detailed account of the Kennedy assassination and its immediate aftermath, learned from news articles last week that the coffin used to transport the president's body from Dallas to Washington was discarded at sea in 1966. At Robert Kennedy's orders, it was dropped from a C-130 cargo plane into the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Maryland and Delaware.

The coffin was known to have been damaged in 1963, and the fact that its whereabouts was a mystery for so many years helped feed the endless procession of conspiracy theorists. It was destroyed, presumably, to keep it from becoming a ghoulish symbol — a museum piece, perhaps, or a souvenir subject to the disrespectful whims of hucksters, self-promoters and the like.

"Vernon Oneal went to Washington twice to try to reclaim the coffin," said Manchester. "He told me he wanted to put it on exhibition, which means Bobby's instincts were probably correct in destroying it."

Manchester said the casket had been damaged accidentally by Secret Service agents and other presidential aides at the airport in Dallas. "What they didn't know is that when a coffin is placed in a hearse, it locks into place. You have to know where the trigger is to release the catch. Well, they couldn't do it. So they forced the coffin out and in so doing they broke a hinge and part of the housing."

A new casket was purchased in Washington and for a time the original was kept in a crate at the National Archives. "I had it uncrated," said Manchester. "I examined and described it. Now it's destroyed."

Manchester is 77 and struggling through a tough time. He lives in Middletown, Conn., and is in poor health. His wife, Julia Marshall Manchester — Judy —

died just over a year ago, in May 1998. They had been married for half a century.

Manchester did not try to conceal his sorrow as we spoke by telephone on Tuesday. "She died on the eve of a party to celebrate our 50th anniversary," he said.

Few people have studied the Kennedy assassination more intensely than William Manchester. I asked what thoughts came to mind as he looked back over three and a half decades to that November afternoon.

"I realize now that the majority of the people are not always right," he said. "That was first borne upon me during the McCarthy period. I covered the Army-McCarthy hearings for *The [Baltimore] Sun*. At the height of McCarthy's popularity, only 29 percent of the American people thought anything that he was doing was wrong. So the majority of the people were wrong.

"Now, in the wake of that dreadful Oliver Stone movie, I read that some 70 percent of the American people believed that Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy.

"I think I understand why they feel that way. And I think, in a curious way, there is an esthetic principle involved. If you take the murder of 6 million Jews in Europe and you put that at one end of a scale, at the other end you can put the Nazis, the greatest gang of criminals ever to seize control of a modern government. So there is a rough balance. Greatest crime, greatest criminals.

"But if you put the murder of the president of the United States at one end of the scale, and you put that waif Oswald on the other end, it just doesn't balance. And you want to put something on Oswald's side to make it balance. A conspiracy would do that beautifully.

"Unfortunately, there is no evidence whatever of that."

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