

**BOB HERBERT**

# The Mystery Of JFK's Old Coffin

**T**HERE 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 this 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.

"Everything connected with that crime has become an icon," said Manchester. "There are people who would have loved to put that coffin in a museum. In fact, and I mentioned this in my book, Vernon Oneal went to Washington twice to try to reclaim the coffin. He told me he wanted to put it on exhibition, which means Bobby's instincts were probably correct in destroying it. It was probably a sound decision."

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 Washing