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## Lawrence O'Brien: Silent Lieutenant

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IN ALL the re-hashing and re-hashing again of the Kennedy assassination, one of the late President's principal lieutenants and friends has been silent. Lawrence F. O'Brien, now Postmaster General, was for nearly 20 years through John F. Kennedy's entire political career a close and loyal ally.

Although he has found what he considers errors in the serialization of the William Manchester book, *The Death of a President*, he has not spoken out and is unlikely to until the full text appears. O'Brien's recollection of what happened on the presidential plane when Lyndon Johnson was taking the oath as President and on the flight back to Washington is at variance with the Manchester account.

As he recalls it, the President, newly sworn in, asked O'Brien to sit beside him on one of the lounges in the forward cabin. He began by saying that he knew how totally bereft O'Brien must feel. But the President went on, he hoped that O'Brien would stay with him as he stood in great need of his help. The Kennedy legislative program was still to be passed by Congress and O'Brien's conspicuous skill on Capitol Hill was essential. He had been Kennedy's special assistant for congressional relations.

O'BRIEN'S answer was that he wanted to resign since he felt he had done his stint in government, yet he would stay so long as he could be helpful in the first period of adjustment. After the Kennedy funeral, he came back to the White House, took off his formal clothes and went to work. The matter immediately in hand was a bill relating to wheat shipments and the removal of restrictions hindering the sale of what was then a large surplus.

With virtually every piece of legislation sent up to the Hill since then, O'Brien has had a hand. He is an experienced pro who works with the quiet diligence of one who knows his job.

What astonished him in the months following his decision to work with the new President was to find that among many Kennedyites he was regarded as a renegade who had gone over to the

usurper. The government in exile had formed up and among the principals in that cabal it was considered almost a form of treason to have gone over to the Johnson side. To point out that he was the President, a President in a difficult situation having inherited the office under tragic circumstances, made no difference.

While they did not openly badger O'Brien, they went after members of his staff. An administrative assistant who went to a luncheon session with some of the exiles was roundly denounced as a turncoat who would get short shrift when the rightful heirs to power were restored.

IN AUGUST of 1965 O'Brien again sought to resign and reports that he would step out were printed. The President asked him to be Postmaster General and he accepted. He has divided his time between his office in the White House and the overwhelming job of trying to modernize the postal system. Pushing for automation, data processing and other management tools in an enterprise as vast as General Motors—700,000 employes—he soon discovered what the inhibitions imposed by Congress on the one hand and the unions on the other meant in administering his far-flung domain.

On the eve of the congressional campaign of last year, there were rumors that he might return to Massachusetts to run for the Senate seat being vacated by the retirement of Senator Leverett Saltonstall, the last of the Yankee Republicans. O'Brien read the signs of strife and confusion in the party correctly and stayed out. In November the Republican Governor, John A. Volpe was re-elected with a majority of 63 per cent of the vote and this in a state where the Democrats are two to one in registration over the Republicans. Edward Brooke overwhelmed Endicott Peabody for the Senate seat.

Having stayed clear of the embittered quarrel over the Manchester book, O'Brien can hardly have been unaware of the way it has blurred the whole Kennedy picture. It has made them look too eager, too grasping, too bent on keeping all the rewards themselves, too concentrated on self-aggrandizement and the harvest of the headlines.

The author and the publishers will do extremely well with *The Death of a President*. But for those who hoped to advance the Kennedy cause the book and all the emotion it has stirred up can only be a cause for sorrow and regret.