

Bulletin #467

'The Death of

A Book of Stature,

The following review was written by Merriman Smith, reporter who won the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

By MERRIMAN SMITH
UPI White House Reporter

Washington, April 1 — The controversial William Manchester book, "The Death of a President," is much better than the build-up.

The book was preceded by a highly publicized wrangle with the Kennedy family, critical challenges and awkward errors in the advance magazine serialization.

The hard-cover product, however, is a gripping, incredibly detailed and reasonably authentic account of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the immediate aftermath.

Because of remaining errors of fact in some passages, there will be those who regard Manchester's book as slightly less than definitive history.

To pick at Manchester's mistakes, however, is to ignore the true stature of his book. In balance, it is an amazing piece of work. Laborious reading, perhaps. But with the exception of the Warren Commission Report, there is nothing else on the subject to compare with "The Death of a President."

Offensively Defensive

Manchester also is offensively defensive. This may relate to his row with Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy and others over certain expunged passages, to say nothing of assorted legal actions, pending or possible. But the attitude is there.

In his first paragraph, Manchester warns the reader, "If you doubt me, you may as well stop at the end of this paragraph." His publishers, Harper & Row, should hope that not too many bookstore browsers spot this paragraph and decide not to risk \$10, the book's list price.

The book predictably is one-sided. After all, Manchester was picked by Mrs. Kennedy as the author of what was to be the definitive account of the assassination. The 647 pages (plus appendices) provide an incredibly detailed account of a terrible episode of history written from a largely Kennedy viewpoint.

Mrs. Kennedy should not object to the book in its present form. She comes off magnificently if one allows for some rather strange and petulant requests during the worst of the tension that followed the shooting of her husband on the streets of Dallas as she rode with him in an open car.

Manchester is hellishly cruel about Dallas as a culture medium for hatred. There was hatred of President Kennedy, to be sure. But it is highly questionable whether this encouraged Lee Harvey Oswald to pull the trigger.

At this distance in time from the actual event, my interest turned more to Manchester's viewpoint of President Johnson than to the actual assassination details. My feeling is that President Johnson comes off poorly in the book.

Manchester's Johnson, when it came to official action, performed excellently during the dreadful interregnum between gunfire and burial. But the new President could not help making boorish personal gaffs in the eyes of the Kennedy crowd and the author.

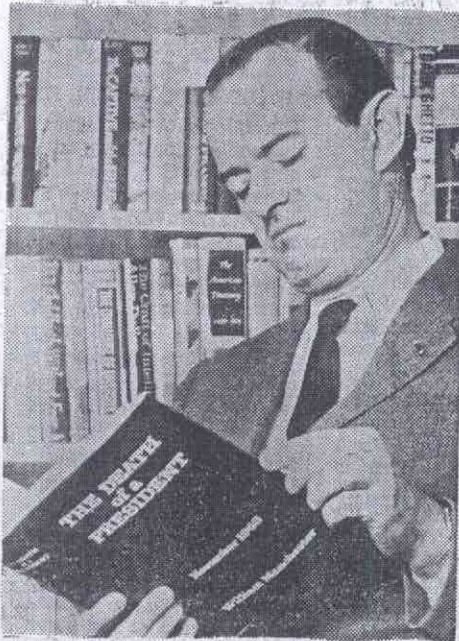
The JFK staff regarded Mr. Johnson as a clumsy, heavy-handed usurper. They would have regarded only one man in creation any differently—and that would have been their slain leader.

Manchester captures the Kennedy staff bitterness vividly. He is on solid ground here, for I heard red-eyed stenographers call Mr. Johnson the vilest sort of names simply because he had succeeded their fallen idol. I heard some of Mr. Kennedy's ranking assistants imitate Mr. Johnson's Texas drawl acidly and accuse him of "trying to push Jackie out of the

a President'

Despite the Errors

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William Manchester
"If you doubt me . . ."

house" which, of course, was ridiculous and untrue.

Manchester notes that Mr. Johnson did not deserve this sort of treatment, but he did not balance this judgment with easily available excerpts from earlier history.

When Harry S Truman succeeded Franklin D. Roosevelt who died suddenly in his fourth term, the FDR staff too was quite resentful of the plain people from Missouri. The Truman staff complained with much derogation about the time Mrs. Roosevelt took to move out of

the White House and spoke darkly of her "cleaning out the place."

The book's picture of Mr. Johnson at the time of President Kennedy's fateful Texas trip also is slightly out of focus. Manchester makes the then Vice President a pitiable figure. ("He was entitled to only one White House extension" at home, as if to say Mr. Johnson needed many more government telephones.)

Manchester also says that in 1963 "his real difficulty was that there was so little for him to do . . . three years of relative inactivity seemed to have sapped his vitality."

President Kennedy certainly would not have shared this view. Mr. Johnson would hoot at it for he was about as active, perhaps more so, as any Vice President in history.

Those Confused Days

Mr. Kennedy's family and those closest to him should be pardoned for almost any sort of behavior in those confused, tearful four days of November. (Manchester captures this period splendidly as the funeral was planned and Mrs. Kennedy prepared to face life without her husband.)

On the other hand, the new President could not have possibly conducted himself to the satisfaction of the Kennedy clan. Unfortunately this does not come across too strongly in the Manchester account.

The mere fact that Mr. Johnson had been Vice President and came from Texas was enough to condemn him in the eyes of the grieving New Frontiersmen.

Never before has there been such an intimate picture of grief as that painted by Manchester of Mrs. Kennedy and her two puzzled children, Caroline and John. Perhaps Mrs. Kennedy will regard some of this as outrageous.

If so, it should be remembered that the entire matter was thrust into the public domain by an act by Oswald that was even more outrageous.