

## 'The Death of a President'

# Gripping and Detailed . . .

By MERRIMAN SMITH

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The controversial William Manchester book, "The Death of a President," is much better than the buildup.

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.

### ¶ Hardly Definitive

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

But such are the wages of serialization sin. An author sees a pot of gold at the end of the magazine rainbow and rushes into truncated print before he really is ready. This seems to be the case with Mr. Manchester's magazine installments.

They did serve an important role, however. The condensation brought to light some important errors and Mr. Manchester was able to correct them before hard-cover publication. Not all, but most.

### ¶ Amazing Work

To pick at Mr. Manchester's mistakes 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."

The author told me a few days ago that less than 1 per cent of the original text was excised for one reason or another. There were some changes quite expensive to his publishers, Harper & Row, after

*NOTE: The following review of William Manchester's controversial book on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy was written by Merriman Smith, UPI White House reporter who was covering the late President when he was killed and who later won the Pulitzer Prize for his account of the assassination. He was one of only two reporters who accompanied President Johnson and Mrs. Kennedy back here aboard Air Force One.*



WILLIAM MANCHESTER

the Look serialization.

For a number of complicated reasons, Mr. Manchester 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.

### ¶ Who Said So

He says in his foreword, for example, that he was on "no government payroll" while researching and writing the book. Who said he was?

In his first paragraph, Mr. Manchester mixes pomposity and whining to say to the reader, "If you doubt me you may as well stop at the end of this paragraph." His publishers should hope that not too many bookstall browsers spot this paragraph and decide not to risk \$10, the book's list price, on faith.

The book is expectedly one-sided. After all, he was picked by Mrs. Kennedy as the author of what was to be the definitive

account of the assassination. While the former First Lady later had differences with the author, the 647 pages (plus appendices) provide an incredibly detailed account of a terrible episode of history written from a largely Kennedy viewpoint.

### ¶ **Petulant Requests**

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.

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

Mr. Manchester does tell of a few preachers and some private citizens who berated those in the town called "Big D" who tastelessly expressed pleasure over Mr. Kennedy's slaughter. But I got the impression that Mr. Manchester faulted the community heavily, particularly after the assassination and for the slaying of Oswald by Jack Ruby.

### ¶ **Willing Brutus**

He pictures Dallas law enforcement officers as publicity hounds and many a local leader as a willing Brutus. He speaks more of local out and haters than of those less biased. While he does not present Dallas as entirely representative of a murderous syndrome, he does include a clincher on the subject of tastelessness. He tells of a letter to Mrs. Kennedy immediately after her husband's funeral in which "a committee of businessmen, concerned about their sagging out-of-state trade, wanted her to sign a testimonial to Dallas hospitality."

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

Mr. 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.

### ¶ **Clumsy Usurper**

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. It was Mr. Kennedy's White House and therefore, their White House forever. Any newcomer in those dark, shocked hours of grief who so much as touched a file cabinet or walked in an office hallway was pushy, disrespectful and behaving like anybody from Texas.

Mr. 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 House" which, of course, was ridiculous and untrue.

Mr. 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.

### ¶ **Out of Focus**

The book's picture of Mr. Johnson at the time of Mr. Kennedy's fateful Texas trip also is slightly out of focus. Mr. 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). Mr. 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."

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

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. (Mr. Manchester captures this period splendidly as the funeral was planned as Mrs. Kennedy prepared to face life without her husband). They would have been robots had they behaved much differently. As it was, they were generally magnificent. And human.

### ¶ **Forgive LBJ**

Mr. Johnson faced a difficult task of being deferential and sympathetic to their rubbed-raw feelings and still keeping the Government in operation. He, too, should be forgiven for blundering into areas temporarily sanctified by grief, worrying too much about where he stood or sat, barking complaints over truly unimportant matters and failing at times to delegate authority sufficiently.

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 beyond any chance of redemption in the eyes of the grieving New Frontiersmen.

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