

JFK Book Better Than

By MERRIMAN SMITH

WASHINGTON, March 29 (UPI)—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 will 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."

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.

READER WARNED

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 bookstall browsers decide not to risk \$10, the book's list price, on faith.

The book predictably is one-sided. After all, he 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

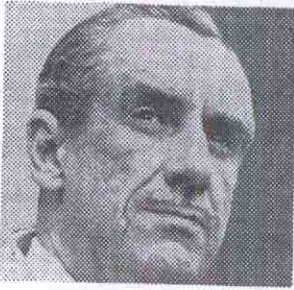
a terrible episode of history written from a largely Kennedy viewpoint.

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.

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

Buildup



This review was written by Merriman Smith, UPI White House reporter who won the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the assassination of President Kennedy. Smith was one of only two reporters who accompanied President Johnson back to Washington aboard Air Force One.

JFK BOOK PRICE WAR

Book sellers across the country are already busily engaged in a price war over William Manchester's "The Death of a President." The controversial book, which was not supposed to go on sale until April 6 at the list price of \$10 per copy, is available now on most book shelves at a discount.

Two large city stores have reported heavy orders for the book at their price of \$7.99. Most dealers have broken the embargo date because of a review of the 647-page book which appeared in Women's Wear Daily yesterday.

Meanwhile, in Pittsburgh, Kaufmann's department store, which began selling the book Monday, halted its sale until the official publication date of April 7. Women's Wear Daily bought its review copy at Kaufmann's.

that 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 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 Johnson the vilest sort of names simply because he had succeeded their fallen idol. I heard some of Kennedy's ranking assistants imitate Johnson's Texas

drawl acidly and accuse him of "trying to push Jackie out of the house" which, of course, was ridiculous and untrue.

Manchester notes that 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 of the place."

The book's picture of Johnson at the time of 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 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."

Kennedy certainly would not have shared this view. Johnson would howl at it.

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.

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.

Author Refuted

WASHINGTON, March 29 (UPI)—The Defense Department says that as vice president, Lyndon Johnson was

"fully aware of the procedures used to authorize the release of nuclear weapons" when he took over minutes after John F. Kennedy's assassination.

informed on the nuclear procedures to be taken in the event of enemy attack.

The statement was issued in response to press reviews of William Manchester's book, "The Death of a President," which said that Johnson at the time was not

William Manchester's "The Death of a President" will be reviewed by author-critics Gore Vidal and Alastair Cooke in the April 9 issue of the World Journal Tribune's Book Week.