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Manchester unexpurgated
Edward Jay Epstein

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From "Death of Lancer" to "The Death of a President"

EDWARD JAY EPSTEIN

THROUGHOUT THE protracted controversy surrounding the publication of William Manchester's *The Death of a President*,* the press seemed preoccupied with a single issue: the suppression of history. Did the Kennedys have the right to "censor" a historical chronicle which might prove personally embarrassing or which might jeopardize their political aspirations? Could Manchester be legitimately held to a contract which, in effect, allowed the Kennedy family to decide what he might or might not write? Should Jacqueline Kennedy have had the prerogative to delete from the historical record material which she considered in "poor taste"? In short, could the "public's right to know" be abridged by the people closest to the tragedy of the assassination and most vulnerable to its effects?

In the midst of all this, however, the question which would seem to have had the most direct bearing on the dispute was seldom broached: just what kind of history was the Manchester book? Of course, during the controversy the working press was hardly in a position to cope with this question. Both Manchester's publisher and *Look* (which had purchased the serialization rights for an unprecedented \$655,000) treated the manuscript as if it were a top-secret document. Even if some reporter could have got hold of a copy, the job of evaluating the 1,200-page unfootnoted text would have posed an enormous problem. How could one test the soundness of a work based, according to its author, on over a thousand interviews which he had conducted as well as on confidential materials, such as the classified files of the Warren Commission, which were available to no other journalist?

In any case, there was scant reason to doubt that an authorized historian, working as long and as hard as Manchester had, would produce anything less than a complete and honest account. In terms of sheer quantity—"100 hours a week" for nearly three years, 360,000 words, 18 volumes of transcribed interviews, \$655,000—it all appeared

to add up to the definitive history of the assassination. Even when *Time*, in one of the more perceptive reviews to date, pointed to significant factual errors and other major flaws in the published version of the book, it still concluded that "there is no question that Manchester did an honest and herculean job."

Quite conveniently for Manchester, the issue at hand was not the soundness of the book but the attempted censorship. Thus, *New York Times* reporter John Corry could devote 30,000 words to a memo-by-memo account of the Kennedy efforts to alter Manchester's text, without ever confronting the more substantive question of whether the original book was in fact valid as history.†

What was at stake in his battle with the Kennedys, Manchester proclaimed sententiously in his *Look* apologia,** was "the integrity of a historical document." "No one," he declared, "has the right to distort the past; no fact, however disagreeable, may be expunged from the record." As evidence of the probity and merit of his work, Manchester quoted "encomiums" from three distinguished readers of the early manuscript. Evan Thomas, his editor at Harper & Row, called it "the finest book I've read in twenty years here." Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who read the text at Manchester's own request, stated in a memorandum to the author: "I think this is a remarkable and a potentially great book." And Richard N. Goodwin, an adviser to the Kennedy family, described it, according to Manchester, as "a masterful achievement."

But these "encomiums" were not, as Manchester himself knew only too well, all that the three men had had to say about the manuscript. On May 16, 1966, after having reread it, Evan Thomas wrote to Edwin O. Guthman and John Siegenthaler, who were then acting as Robert Kennedy's representatives, that he was "deeply disturbed by some of this. . . . It's almost as though Manchester had become so deeply involved in this tragic narrative that he could not resist turning it into a magic

* Harper & Row, 647 pp., \$10.00.

† "The Manchester Papers," *Esquire*, June 1967; the book from which the article was adapted will be published by Putnam next month under the title, *The Manchester Affair* (224 pp., \$4.95).

** "Manchester's Own Story," *Look*, April 4, 1967.

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fairy-tale." Schlesinger, in the same memorandum from which Manchester so proudly quoted, had gone on to warn that the portrait of Lyndon Johnson "too often acquires an exaggerated symbolism—so much so that some critics may write that the unconscious argument of the book is that Johnson killed Kennedy (that is, that Johnson is an expression of the forces of violence and irrationality which ran rampant through his native state and were responsible for the tragedy of Dallas)." For his part, Goodwin, in a public statement, commented that the original manuscript contained "horrifying and unjust implications" as well as fictional passages.

A magic fairy tale? A subliminal *MacBird*? An unreliable fiction? Manchester dismissed these charges as part of a Kennedy conspiracy to discredit his work. "A great many gifted men were staking their careers on an RFK administration," he explained. "Now, the pull of loyalty was irresistible; they flocked to the standard." But that easy explanation fails to resolve all one's doubts. To understand what in fact disturbed these privileged readers so much, one must return to the original manuscript which they had before them in the spring of 1966.

THE TITLE OF that book—which I myself had the opportunity to read many months before the controversy—was not *The Death of a President* but *Death of Lancer*.^{*} Far from being simply a detailed and objective chronicle of the assassination, it was a mythopoeic melodrama organized around the theme of the struggle for power between two men, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. As will be seen, however, the characters bearing these names in *Death of Lancer* have at best a questionable relation to the real persons themselves and at worst no relation at all outside the heated imagination of the author.

The protagonist of *Death of Lancer* is Kennedy ("Lancer" being his Secret Service code name). He is portrayed as a princely young knight, who always "charged forward at full gallop, bugles bugling and lances at full tilt." The antagonist, Johnson, appears as "a different creature" altogether. According to Manchester, "Johnson wouldn't even charge into a bathroom."

Kennedy is everything that Johnson is not. There is "a magical quality" and sense of "high drama" about this "lithe young figure"; Johnson, on the other hand, has "a gaunt, hunted look" about him. Whereas Kennedy is "D'Artagnan," the patrician hero, Johnson is "Richelieu," the "crafty schemer." In fact, Manchester—whose own editor found the manuscript "gratuitously and

^{*} It should be noted that *Death of Lancer* was substantially revised before it was sent to *Look* and other magazines for bidding on serialization rights. The legal battle was concerned only with material offensive to Mrs. Kennedy that remained in *The Death of a President* even after this original editing.

tastelessly insulting to Johnson"—sees Johnson in *Death of Lancer* as a one-man menagerie: "an oyster who patiently converts bits of grit into salable pearls"; a "chameleon, who constantly changes loyalties"; a "six-winged lion"; a "creature of the moment." In short, as one Dallas friend of the Kennedys is represented as warning, "Lyndon is poison."

For all the differences between them, the two men have a common ambition: both want to be President. Manchester points to events at the Democratic party convention in 1960 as the source of the bitter rivalry. In 1960, Johnson had tried to "wrest" the Presidential nomination from Kennedy who, he writes, "had been smitten by Johnsonian partisans." In the original text, Manchester identifies Texas Governor John Connally as the leader of the Johnson forces, who "had spread rumors that Kennedy would not live out his first term because he was 'diseased.'" When this pernicious tactic failed, Johnson had to settle for the role of Vice President and heir-apparent.

On the very first pages of *Death of Lancer*, the duel for power is gruesomely symbolized in a hunting scene in which a reluctant President Kennedy finds himself forced to kill a deer at the LBJ ranch. As an opening scene, this episode (which is less conspicuously placed in *The Death of a President*) has the effect, as Schlesinger noted in his memorandum, "of defining the book as a conflict between New England and Texas, decency and vulgarity, Kennedy and Johnson."

The drama then shifts forward three years in time. The dark prophecy made by "Johnsonian partisans" at the convention—that Kennedy would not live out his first term—now seems remote. Kennedy has become a magnificent President, "the darling of the population." As for Johnson, "three years of relative inactivity had sapped [his] vitality." He now looks "haggard" and "atrophied." Formerly "red-blooded," he is now "anemic." Even as a force in Texas politics, he has become "virtually impotent," and he is no longer an effective figure on Capitol Hill. Expecting him to help with Congress, Manchester observes, is now "like expecting an erection from a paramecium. It couldn't work. The creature had no member." In sum, Johnson is "a capon."

Such epithets, it should be pointed out, are used in *Death of Lancer* purposefully, for they are integral to the larger theme of usurpation which is implicitly developed in the book: the antagonist is impotent until the assassination and only then regains his virility.

AS KENNEDY rises to the height of his glory, Johnson sinks to his nadir. Even such prestige as he now has is "counterfeit"—created, according to Manchester, by "publicity stunts" (notably when he "whooped his way through a blizzard of ticker-tape" meant for astronaut John Glenn, thus offending Kennedy's "austere sense of propriety").

Moreover, Johnson's proneness to "tergiversation" causes further worries in the administration, and at the highest levels "private doubts about Johnson's ability to serve as President" are expressed.

Johnson's "relative insignificance" is "driven home to him every day." For example, he is in the habit of sneaking aboard the President's plane, and on three different occasions when Kennedy aides find him "poking around its cabins alone," they are "obliged to ask the visitor to leave." These and other such incidents (for which, incidentally, I have been able to find no actual evidence) are, of course, "mortifying to a man of his extreme sensitivity."

Even more distressing to Johnson are the rumors that he may be "dumped from the ticket" in 1964. According to *Death of Lancer*, "this was more than newspaper gossip. In Texas representatives of the National Committee were repeatedly cornered by Johnson and Connally men who would talk of nothing else, and in Houston, U.S. attorney Woodrow B. Seals, a Kennedy appointee, had told a confidant that LBJ was too deeply involved in the Bobby Baker scandal and that the Attorney General, who despised corruption, would undoubtedly urge his brother to find another Vice President."* LBJ begins to pick up these "alarming blips" on his "radar screen." He perceives that he is "in real trouble."

But Johnson has no intention of letting himself be purged. "Determined to prove his popularity . . . still strong," he proposes that Kennedy attend "four Texas banquets" (the last to be held in Dallas). Although Manchester never fully explicates all the reasons for the "expedition" to Texas, he leaves no doubt that Johnson's self-interest is to be served by Kennedy's trip to

a phantasmal of fog-shrouded bogs inhabited by outrageous giants who swagger about brandishing spiked cudgels. These improbable monsters were the local panjamdrums. . . . The Jinn lived in a state of constant anarchy, raiding one another's castles and swatting innocent vassals. They were political cannibals, and a naive outsider venturing among them could be eaten alive.

In this "lawless kingdom" to which Kennedy is being brought, there is "a blazing feud between two of the greatest ogres, the roaring flames of which the President must first pass through and then quench." (In other words, Kennedy had to settle an intra-party squabble.)

As both a Catholic and a liberal, the President was "doubly condemned" in Texas. "Under frontier justice, there was only one thing to do with renegades who willfully took the side of the savages. You didn't gab about it, you didn't hedge, you didn't hesitate. You just killed him."

Omens, premonitions, and signs appear as the drama builds to its inevitable climax. A few days before Kennedy's arrival in Dallas, Secret Service

agent Forrest Sorrel rides over the motorcade route. Glancing up at the city's "phallic" skyline, he says to himself, "I've killed deer closer than that." The reader's mind is thus driven round full circle—both by the image and by Manchester's italics—to where the book began, the deer-hunt at the LBJ ranch.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch itself, Lyndon Johnson is completing the preparations for Kennedy's visit. "He had done everything a Vice President can do," Manchester notes with his customary irony of hindsight, "unless, of course, the President dies."

IN THEIR FINAL meeting in the Rice Hotel in Houston, Johnson and Kennedy have a heated argument, apparently having to do with the question of Johnson's veracity. And then Kennedy is murdered. To Manchester, the "shattering fact" in this original version is that "A Texas murder had made a Texan President." Over and over again, Manchester stresses this idea, even having Kenneth O'Donnell exclaim: "They did it. I always knew they'd do it. You couldn't expect anything else from them. They finally made it." Manchester adds: "He didn't specify who they were. It was unnecessary. They were Texans, Johnsonians. . . ."

Lyndon Johnson's reaction to the assassination in *Death of Lancer* is to throw out the "red herring" of a "Communist conspiracy," hoping by this gambit to divert attention from his native state's responsibility for the atrocity. "If he could have charged that the shots had been fired from an orbiting satellite, he might have done so." But the inescapable fact, Manchester obsessively reiterates, is "that the reign of one ended and the other began in the head of a Texas marksman."†

As Manchester tells it in *Death of Lancer*, Johnson rushes to the airport to take possession of Air Force One, a long-coveted symbol of dominion. On board, in one of the most bizarre episodes in the book, the new President and his party engage in a "vegetable soup saturnalia." In Manchester's mythopoeics, the death of Lancer brings the enforced impotence of the tanist to an end: "Now he was alive again." Having been "a capon," he is now suddenly "a fullfledged hypomaniac at the height of his vitality." He becomes "an octopus, clutching bunches of black bananas," "the shrewd manipulator," "the crafty seducer with six nimble hands," "one of those gifted seducers who can persuade a woman to surrender her favors in

* Woodrow B. Seals was not in fact interviewed by Manchester. At best, then, Manchester reported a secondhand rumor. In any case, the depth of this political analysis seems reminiscent of *Current Events* or the other junior high school publications that Manchester was editing just before being given the Kennedy assignment.

† Lee Harvey Oswald was not a native Texan. He was born and raised in New Orleans, resided in New York City and Minsk, and had moved to Dallas from New Orleans less than two months before the assassination.

the course of a long conversation confined to obscure words; no woman, even a lady, can discern his intentions until the critical moment."

To understand fully what Manchester is implying in those passages, one must turn to two other passages. The first concerns Kennedy's apprehensions about his Vice President:

To grasp what the possibility of succession means to an occupant of the White House it is necessary to ponder the meaning of the Presidency itself—the legacy the second man stands to inherit. A husband can take out a fortune in life insurance without flinching. His attitude would alter sharply if he were told that the man next door would, in the event of his death, become father to his children and husband to his wife.

The other relevant passage is the last chapter, "Legend," where Manchester discusses the "King Must Die" myth (*vide* Sir James Frazer, Mary Renault, and Robert Graves). The crux of this myth is that the king is ritualistically murdered and the appointed successor takes his place not only as ruler but as the queen's consort as well. And, indeed, in pursuit of this theme, Manchester goes so far as to invent an encounter on the airplane between Mrs. Kennedy and the new President. She becomes "the first member of the Presidential party to discover that Air Force One had a new commander" when she opens her bedroom door in the plane and sees Lyndon Johnson "sprawled" across her husband's bed.* Manchester even suggests that Johnson had "carefully laid out" Mrs. Kennedy's "white Austin clothes" because "[The] new President wanted her to look immaculate in the inaugural picture so that the public's memory of the maculate scene on Elm Street would be blurred."

After this strange flight back to Washington, the original manuscript is not very different from the published version. There is the funeral, the catharsis, and the apotheosis in which John Kennedy takes his place with King Arthur, Roland, Balder the beautiful, and Jeanne d'Arc.

TO BE SURE, the foregoing précis is taken from a 1,200-page manuscript, and certain prominent themes may seem less mythopoeic when viewed as part of the entire tapestry rather than as isolated threads. Nevertheless, these threads do indicate, I think, that the criticisms of Messrs.

* That this episode is fiction we know from virtually all the other evidence. For example, Lawrence O'Brien, who accompanied Mrs. Kennedy and the coffin to the airport, clearly specified the sequence of events. First, the coffin was brought onto the plane. "Then," O'Brien testified, "I looked up, and the President and Mrs. Johnson were at the corridor . . . (on the plane)." Next, "Mrs. Kennedy came aboard and was seated in the rear compartment, and Mrs. Johnson and the President went over to her" (Warren Commission testimony, Volume VII, p. 470). Thus, Mrs. Kennedy did *not* first encounter Johnson in her bedroom—a fact which is supported by the testimony of Kenneth O'Donnell, President Johnson, Secret Service agent Kivett, and others.

Thomas, Schlesinger, and Goodwin were provoked by something more substantial than Manchester was later willing to concede. It is one thing to bandy about high-sounding phrases like "the integrity of a historical document" and the "public's right to know," as Manchester did in *Look*. But to infuse a narrative with mythopoeic elements (e.g., the usurpation theme, complete with ritual hunts, saturnalias, ogres, and omens); to transform the participants in the event into grotesque caricatures (e.g., the successive portraits of President Johnson as a feckless capon, a mendacious chameleon, and a crafty seducer); to create fictitious episodes for the purpose of heightening the melodrama (e.g., the first meeting between Johnson and Mrs. Kennedy on the plane)—is to forfeit the claim to be compiling a "historical document," let alone one with "integrity." The early readers of *Death of Lancer* all evinced concern over the same point: the author's uncertain grip on reality. Clearly, they were justified in that concern. For as Evan Thomas later said in explaining why Manchester had turned the story of John Kennedy's death into a "magic fairy tale," Manchester had "become so emotionally involved that he had no choice but to give way to his emotions."

The potentially explosive nature of *Death of Lancer* derived, however, not from its embarrassing excesses—strident attacks on Lyndon Johnson are as commonplace nowadays as they are ineffectual—but from the ineluctable fact that it had been commissioned by Robert Kennedy and would appear under the auspices of the Kennedy name. Once *Death of Lancer* had been read by Robert Kennedy's representatives, publication understandably became contingent on the deletion of the offensive and fictional parts of the book.

Manchester—the same Manchester who subsequently identified himself in *Look* as "I, the zealous defender of the public's right to know" and declared that "no fact, however disagreeable, may be expunged from the record"—readily agreed to such deletions in his eagerness to get "an approved text." Indeed, he wrote Guthman and Seigenthaler, the Kennedy liaisons, that all the anti-Johnson material and other passages detrimental to the "national interest" and the "Presidency" (including factual material) should be cut.

With the author's full consent, then, the more unseemly sub-themes were filtered out of the book. The denigrating portrait of Lyndon Johnson was transfigured into an almost sympathetic one. The blackest villains (Johnson's partisans) enjoyed a last-minute reprieve and were finally tinted gray. *Death of Lancer* became *The Death of a President*.

Much of what was cut out, however, had formed the unifying principle of the book, so that the revisions had the effect of weakening its literary impact. The notion that Johnson, the successor, was somehow responsible for the death of his predecessor is what gave the original melodrama

much of its thrust and such structural coherence as it had. The omens, premonitions, mysterious deaths, and thanatopsis pageantry all contributed to a developing myth which began with a "ritual" stag hunt and ended with a solitary stranger standing spellbound as he unfolds the blood-stained garments worn by Jacqueline Kennedy on the day of the assassination. Without the mythic overview, many details appear in the final book as freefloating absurdities.

Thus, with Johnson exonerated, certain key episodes—the moments of confrontation between "loyalists" and "realists," Johnson's usurpation of Air Force One, the boycott of the new President's oath by Kennedy aides, the first cabinet meeting with its oppressive tension—are reduced to little more than a disconcerting play of manners; the final text at times reads like a courtesy book for the Presidential company, prescribing proper etiquette in the aftermath of an assassination. The revisions also worked to obscure the motivation of certain principal actors in the drama Manchester originally constructed. The "loyalists," for example—O'Donnell, Powers, McHugh, Mrs. Kennedy—whose behavior toward Johnson in *Death of Lancer* makes sense in terms of the myth, appear curiously irrational and foolish in their gestures of opposition to the well-meaning Lyndon Johnson of *The Death of a President*.

But tempering the book's inordinately anti-Johnson tone did not enhance its claims to accuracy, for Manchester seems to have been as willing to reverse facts as he was to make the requested thematic revisions. For instance, to absolve Johnson of responsibility for the tragedy, it was convenient to overlook his participation in the planning of the trip to Texas. The final version states only that Connally met with Kennedy at the Cortez Hotel in El Paso the previous spring and gave his consent; a few pages later, Manchester says that Johnson "had not been consulted about the desirability of the expedition." The truth is, however, that Johnson also attended the meeting at the Cortez Hotel where, according to Clifton Carter, a participant in the conference, "the original conversation concerning President Kennedy's trip to Texas occurred."* Manchester was indeed, as he wrote Mrs. Kennedy, "becoming an expert with the eraser."

Yet there were also certain points having nothing to do with "the integrity of a historical document" or "the public's right to know" on which Manchester refused to yield an inch. An example is his private joke about Brig. Gen. Godfrey McHugh. Apparently because McHugh served as Kennedy's personal weather forecaster, Manchester decided to truncate the General's first name and refer to him as "God." If the Presidential party encountered inclement weather, after McHugh had promised blue skies, Manchester could wryly note that "God had blundered badly. It wasn't the first time, either." No one begrudges

an author a warranted *jeu d'esprit*. But as Schlesinger specifically pointed out in his memorandum to Manchester, McHugh was never called "God." Even so, Manchester insisted on retaining the joke.†

STRANGELY ENOUGH, Manchester seems to have been most intransigent in dealing with details palpably irrelevant to the history of the assassination. One of these was a scene in which the Kennedy children are told of their father's death while being bathed by their nanny. When the editors attempted to remove this scene on the ground that it appeared to be spurious and was, moreover, tasteless, Manchester protested vigorously that it was "the most important" episode in the book. "It simply cannot be omitted, and I cannot imagine altering it in any way. I cannot exaggerate my conviction on this. Of course it is upsetting. I don't have to be reminded of that. For personal reasons it was the most difficult passage I have ever written, and I still have not recovered from it. But it cannot go. I will take anything but that."** It was his inexplicable obstinacy on irrelevant points like this, and not so much anything pertaining to the political history of his subject, which apparently led in the end to Manchester's legal skirmish with the Kennedy family.

But a more critical test of a historian's probity than his ability to discriminate between the relevant and the irrelevant is his way of coping with material which tends to conflict with his major theses. Does he take such material into proper account, even if that might entail revising or reconstructing his prime argument, or does he simply omit it or disingenuously attempt to discount its significance? In trying to answer such questions, the usual stumbling block is that one does not know just what material an author has considered but rejected in arriving at the final product. By comparing the successive versions of Manchester's book, however, it is possible to cast some light on his methods of handling these problems of conflict.

One such problem arose for Manchester in May of 1966 (after *Death of Lancer* had been completed), when it was revealed that there was a salient contradiction between the FBI Summary Report and the Warren Report concerning the results of the autopsy performed on President Kennedy. The only evidence capable of resolving this

* Warren Commission Hearings, Vol. VIII, p. 475 (Carter affidavit).

† Nor did Manchester defer to Professor Schlesinger's counsel in matters of historical scholarship. Part of the tendentious theory that the whole city of Dallas shared responsibility for the assassination rested on the author's flat assertion that "Pioneer society demands total conformity." Schlesinger suggested that any such premise was seriously challenged by Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis that the frontier bred individualism and advised that "the matter is too complicated to be solved here." But the "Manchester thesis" won out in the published book.

** Letter to Evan Thomas, May 13, 1963.

contradiction, the unexamined X-rays and photographs of the autopsy, were at that time "unavailable." Until these pictures could be scrutinized, crucial questions about the assassination would remain moot.

Manchester's original text contained no mention of these photographs, but as soon as he became aware of their importance, he requested permission from Robert Kennedy's office to look at them. Subsequently, in August, he added the following note to a revised version of his book:

The issue is resolved by the X-rays and photographs which were taken from every conceivable angle during the autopsy on the President's body. This material is widely believed to be in the hands of the Secret Service. In fact, it is the property of Robert Kennedy, who decided that it was too unsightly to be shown to the public, or even to members of the Warren Commission staff. However, this writer is in a position to comment upon it. The X-rays show no entry wound "below the shoulder," as argued by the graduate student.* Admittedly X-rays of active projectiles passing through soft tissue are difficult to read. However, the photographs support them in this case—and clearly reveal that the wound was in the neck.

When asked about this footnote by Richard N. Goodwin, who was then acting as a consultant on the book, Manchester let it be understood that he had personally studied both the X-rays and the photographs of the autopsy. Yet, as Goodwin later learned to his dismay, permission had never been granted Manchester to examine the photographs. When presented with this fact, Manchester admitted that he had actually never seen either the X-rays or photographs, but was reluctant to change the text which was then being rushed to publication by *Look*.

Finally, under editorial pressure, he inserted a statement in the final version to the effect that he had not personally seen the autopsy pictures, but had discussed them with three men, each a stranger to the others, who carried "special professional qualification" and who had examined the evidence. Each gave, according to Manchester, accounts "identical" to the one he had reported in his August footnote. Manchester did not name the mysterious strangers, explain their special qualifications, or give details of their accounts (such as the exact location of the wound in the neck and whether or not the X-rays indicated a path for the missile). It would seem, then, that Manchester attempted to resolve a difficult and perplexing historical problem, first, by the device of a misleading statement implying an authority for himself he did not in fact possess, and then, when checked in the subterfuge, by inserting a re-

* The "graduate student" referred to is myself. Although it is not directly pertinent to the point in question, I might add that I never argued, or presumed to know, what either the X-rays or photographs would in fact show.

vision which was itself needlessly vague and mystifying. Even so, he had imperiously asserted in behalf of his own interpretation of the assassination that "the account in the text is correct, and any version which contradicts it is inaccurate and insupportable."

THIS sleight-of-hand technique is further evident in Manchester's handling of material that demonstrably contradicted other cherished assumptions. In the *Look* serialization, Manchester erroneously said that the photographs taken of Johnson's swearing-in aboard Air Force One did not show "the presence of a single male Kennedy aide"; and that during the ceremony Kenneth O'Donnell was "pacing the corridor like a caged tiger, his hands clapped over his ears as though to block the oath." Both these assertions were promptly refuted. The *Boston Globe* published one of the photographs of the ceremony showing O'Donnell standing next to Mrs. Kennedy while Johnson was being inaugurated. And *Time* identified six Kennedy aides—O'Donnell, Powers, O'Brien, Clifton, Dr. Burkely, and Colonel Swindal—in the same series of photographs which the author had claimed showed not a single male Kennedy aide.

Much of the drama Manchester extracted from the alleged feud between the Kennedy and Johnson camps was based on this supposed boycott of Johnson's "anointment"; it became especially prominent after other dubious sources of conflict described in *Death of a Lancer* had been edited out of the final text. In the Harper & Row edition, which was published about a month after the errors were discovered in the *Look* serialization, the word "major" was added to "male Kennedy aides." But this change hardly rectified the mistake: all the "major" aides on the plane were present, except perhaps for Godfrey McHugh.

It is, of course, possible that Manchester simply lacked the time to make the necessary emendations before the book went to press. However, in the changes Manchester submitted for the second edition of *The Death of a President*, he proposed to add only that O'Donnell was "cropped out" of "the official photograph" because he had a "ghastly" look on his face as Johnson took the oath. But this planned revision compounded, rather than corrected, the original error. For one thing, there was no single official photograph, and for another, O'Donnell was cropped out of some pictures because they were, of course, photographs of Johnson, and O'Donnell was standing at the extreme edge of the crowd. Moreover, although his proposed revision appears to take care of the erroneous placement of O'Donnell, Manchester persists in leaving the impression of a boycott of Kennedy aides at Johnson's inauguration. Thus, even when Manchester was aware of substantial mistakes in his report, he preferred to sidestep rather than correct them

and possibly jeopardize the cogency of a pet thesis which they supported.*

Manchester's cavalier manner of resolving other more perplexing problems manifests itself in his treatment of the vexing question of whether Oswald had enough time to fire all the shots. In a footnote, he dismisses this question as "a trick," glibly arguing that the contention that it was impossible for Oswald to have fired three times in the 5.6 seconds which elapsed between the first and last shots rested on the assumption that at least 6.9 seconds were necessary to accomplish the feat (i.e., 2.3 seconds were needed to operate the bolt on the murder weapon). But this, he points out, is a fallacious calculation. To fire three shots, Oswald only had to operate the bolt twice; thus he would have needed only 4.6 seconds, one second less than the required time; ergo, the feat *was* possible.

The argument that Manchester undertook to refute, however, is one that he himself invented. To my knowledge, no one, not even Mark Lane, has claimed that 6.9 seconds were needed for three shots to have been fired. The problem of time which *has* occupied critics of the Warren Report derives from the fact that the Warren Commission's own analysis of the Zapruder film of the assassination indicated that both President Kennedy and Governor Connally were first struck within an interval of 1.8 seconds. Because the weapon in question could not be fired twice within this time span, it seemed that either both men were hit by the same bullet or that there were two assassins.† Instead of grappling with this problem, Manchester created his own straw man, which he then effortlessly toppled by exposing the fallacy he himself had built into it.

In another misleading footnote, Manchester summarily resolves all doubts concerning Oswald's competence as a marksman by citing himself as an "expert witness." On the basis of his own Marine Corps experience, he asserts that "At that distance, with his training, he [Oswald] could scarcely have missed." But what had disturbed members of the Warren Commission staff was the fact that Oswald's riflesight was defective. During the writing of the Warren Report, Wesley J. Liebeler, a Commission lawyer, stated in a memorandum: "It is simply dishonest leaving out the problem with the sight." The problem was finally acknowledged in the Warren Report, but it is not even mentioned in Manchester's book.

Solving problems by fiat, a method which allows a historian to subject the past to his own

conception of it, inevitably leads to factual errors. In Manchester's case, a surfeit of mistakes—some major and most minor—has already been discovered by some of the participants in the events he describes. For instance, Charles Roberts, one of the four journalists who witnessed the swearing-in of President Johnson, points to more than a dozen errors in Manchester's account of it. A great many other persons—including Lawrence O'Brien, Walter Lippmann, Generals McHugh and Clifton, J. Edgar Hoover, Congressman Henry Gonzales, the Duke of Norfolk, Kenneth O'Donnell, Governor John Connally, Richard N. Goodwin, Jacqueline Hirsch, Robert McNamara, Mayor Earle Cabell, Dr. Earl Rose—have also found Manchester's description of events in which they were directly involved to be erroneous in one detail or another.

HERE IS, however, little point in cataloguing Manchester's errors. Even critics who found *The Death of a President* seriously flawed by the author's lack of historical detachment assumed that the errors they themselves discovered were merely isolated examples in a vast reservoir of accurate facts; and they held forth the hope that Manchester's research and diligence had at least produced a valuable source book for later historians. But one commentator, Walter Lippmann, cut straight to the core of the matter: ". . . in the mistakes I know about there is the same pattern: always the mistake is a fiction which intensifies the drama of the story." If this is so, then far too many of Manchester's facts must remain suspect. Unless the arduous process of sorting out his facts from his dramatic fictions—a process only begun with the revisions of *Death of Lancer*—is completed soon, passing his work on to future historians as a primary source would be to cheat posterity of its "right to know."

* Another example of this tendency can be seen in Manchester's treatment of J. Edgar Hoover. In his final version, he chides Hoover for his failure to extend condolences to the Kennedy family, and for remaining "sphinxlike." Yet Hoover had in fact written letters of sympathy to Robert Kennedy and other members of the family. To take care of this error, Manchester proposed adding that *although* Hoover had written a letter of sympathy, he remained "sphinxlike." The conclusion persisted even when the facts it was based on had vanished.

† Professor Alexander Bickel (COMMENTARY, October 1966) has argued that the Commission's analysis of the problem was based on a possibly incorrect calculation of the time of the first shot, and that a single assassin could have fired all the shots *even if* both men were hit by separate bullets.