



Jim Bishop SF Examiner 28 Dec 1966

LBJ's Side of the Story

Time magazine phoned. The question was as innocent as a rattlesnake in a bassinet. "Knowing that the Manchester book is anti-Johnson, has the President asked you to write a book presenting his side of the story?" The answer is no. Still, it's an insulting question.

I do not know that the William Manchester book, "The Death of a President," is anti-Johnson. He is a professional writer and, to do a professional work, he must be as cautious with his words as a lumberjack is with his feet crossing a log jam at night. One misstep and he is immersed in raging critics. Few writers survive.

Almost two years ago, I was on the phone with President Johnson's confidant, Jack Valenti. We weren't talking about books, but I said: "How about me writing 'A Day in the Life of President Johnson?'"

To get one solid factual day, I spent eight days in the Executive Mansion and three at the LBJ ranch.

IN ALL the time I spent with Mr. and Mrs. Johnson — and there were plenty of relaxed conversations — they never mentioned the Kennedys except with words of admiration. It would make a much better column if I could say that Lyndon Johnson sniped and clawed.

To the contrary. Once, out of my presence, he was standing with the First Lady studying a clear night sky. "I wish," he said softly, "that I could reach up and grab a handful of stars and give them to that woman." That woman was Jacqueline Kennedy.

The President is a brilliant and hard-headed politician. But he is also the only President who ever witnessed an assassination. The event is still so sharply in his mind that he avoids discussing it.

His affection and respect for Mrs. Kennedy have not been altered by time, in spite of her refusals to accept invitations to Washington.

MR. JOHNSON — and Mrs. Johnson too — say that they can understand this, because the mansion has dark memories for the former First Lady. All the overtures of the Johnsons toward the Kennedys have echoed in polite silence. Mrs. Johnson defied tradition in naming a beautiful White House garden for Jacqueline Kennedy.

The President resists the easy opportunity to counter Bobby Kennedy's blunders — like inviting the Viet Com-

munists to participate in the governing of Vietnam. Nor, when his friends advise him of Kennedy attacks is it possible to get Mr. Johnson to rebut. This is restraint in a man who can become irritated when a doorknob doesn't function.

Lastly, in thumbing through the Johnson notebooks, I am certain that he does not feel that there is a "Johnson side of the story." There is truth, and the special pleaders can't seem to find it.

When John F. Kennedy expired, Vice President Johnson was urged to get the hell out of the hospital, get sworn in, and grab the reins of government to steady the nation. He did it, and it was the Kennedy group that begged him not to hesitate.

Perhaps he cannot be forgiven for doing what was right.