

THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT

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1963

BY WILLIAM MANCHESTER

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*For all
in whose hearts
he still lives—
a watchman of honor
who never sleeps*

Foreword

On February 5, 1964, Mrs. John F. Kennedy suggested that I write an account of the tragic and historic events in Texas and Washington ten weeks earlier. That is the first breath. The second, which must quickly follow, is that neither Mrs. Kennedy nor anyone else is in any way answerable for my subsequent research or this narrative based upon it. My relationships with all the principal figures were entirely professional. I received no financial assistance from the Kennedy family. I was on no government payroll. No one tried to lead me, and I believe every reader, including those who were closest to the late President, will find much here that is new and some, perhaps, that is disturbing. That is my responsibility. Mrs. Kennedy asked me but one question. Before our first taping session she said, "Are you just going to put down all the facts, who ate what for breakfast and all that, or are you going to put yourself in the book, too?" I replied that I didn't see how I could very well keep myself out of it. "*Good*," she said emphatically. And so I am here, weighing evidence and forming judgments. At times you may find my presence exasperating. You may decide in the end that I have been a poor judge. But you may not conclude that I have served as anyone's amanuensis. If you doubt me you may as well stop at the end of this paragraph.

Actually, I discovered, the Kennedy family had not been eager to have any book written about the President's death. Understandably they needed time to heal. But shortly after the burial in Arlington various writers solicited their cooperation in such a project. It soon became apparent that volumes would appear in spite of their wishes. Under these circumstances Jacqueline Kennedy resolved that there should be one complete, accurate account. I had not been among those who had approached her. (I had been living in the Ruhr, and was writing German history.) At that time I had not even met her. However, her husband had told her about me, and she had read a magazine profile I published about him the year before his death.

Robert Kennedy also remembered my acquaintance with his brother. After consultation other members of the family agreed with Mrs. Kennedy that, in light of the fact that apocryphal versions of those days were already in press, it would be wise to have a book written by an author whom the President had known. It was further decided that the work should be based upon material gathered while memories were still fresh. Hence the invitation to me.

My first two calls were upon Bill Moyers at the White House and Chief Justice Earl Warren. It was essential that the new President, whose confidence Moyers deservedly enjoyed, know what I proposed to do. It was equally imperative that the Presidential Commission which the Chief Justice headed understand the exact nature of my inquiry. The Chief Justice was unfailingly polite to me, and he recognized that while the lines of the two investigations might occasionally intersect, they certainly did not run parallel to one another. The Commission was conducting a criminal probe. I was exploring the full sweep of events during what were, in some respects, the most extraordinary hours in the history of our country. They were focusing upon the assassin of a President, I upon the Presidency itself.

During the next six months we exchanged some confidences, and inevitably we ran across each other's tracks. Sometimes I had been there first; I saw John McCone a month before the Commission did, and I interviewed Mrs. Johnson three weeks before she sent her statement to Earl Warren. On the other hand, I did not begin my Texas trips until the last member of the Commission had left Dallas, and its report to President Johnson was on the bookstore counters long before I scheduled the first of my formal interviews with Secret Service agents. By then I was alone in the field. I was to remain there until early 1966, when the trail began to grow cold. It therefore seems fair to assume that should any new studies of this subject appear in the near future, they must be largely based upon the Commission's work, mine, or both. Had any other major investigator been around, I certainly would have heard the echo of his footsteps.

Because I have been at this task longer than anyone else I have not only felt entitled to record my opinions; I believe that I have an inescapable obligation to do so. Withholding them would be shirking a grave duty, and among other judgments you will find a partial assessment of the Warren Report. An audit of my chief sources of information appears at the end of this volume. Unlike the Commission, however, I shall not publish my files. For one thing, it would be a formidable undertaking. (Mrs. Kennedy's answers to the Commission's questions occupy two and a half pages; my tapes with her run ten hours.) But that is not the chief reason. Throughout this work I was obliged to weigh questions of taste. Indeed, the final manuscript was so sensitive that the author's judgment seemed an inadequate safeguard against possible lapses in taste. Therefore the advice of five men with special qualifications was solicited—two close friends of the Kennedy

family, two Special Assistants to the President who served under both John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, and the editor of *Profiles in Courage*, who also edited this book. The suggestions of each were carefully weighed. This is not to suggest that I am suppressing anything. I am merely retaining, for the time being, material of a personal nature which serves no legitimate purpose. Should there be any who think this means that I intend to dodge prickly issues, they have obvious recourse. To paraphrase President Kennedy's Berlin challenge, *Lass' sie nach das Buch kommen*.

The moment I began to write I went to the mat with the issue of annotation. I arose with a painful verdict: no page-by-page footnotes, other than those necessary to the immediate sense of a passage. It hurt because I knew that every statement, every fact, every quotation in my manuscript could be followed by a citation. Throughout the text you will, of course, find the names of individuals to whom data are clearly attributed. Chapter notes, however, would require a tag for everything. The protection of sources prohibits such procedure here. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who faced the same problem, reached the same conclusion. He will place a fully annotated manuscript under seal in the Kennedy Library. Similarly, I am considering the deposit there of eighteen volumes of transcribed interviews, which I have indexed as appendices to this book, and twenty-seven portfolios of documents, with the understanding that all these would be made available to qualified scholars after the death of all direct descendants of John F. Kennedy who were living at the time of his assassination.

A word about method. In the course of the inquiry I approached every person who might shed light upon this complex of events. I retraced President Kennedy's last journey from Andrews Field to San Antonio, Kelly Field, Houston, Carswell, Fort Worth, Love Field, Dealey Plaza, Parkland Hospital, back to Love and back to Andrews, over the ambulance route to Bethesda Naval Hospital and then to the White House, the great rotunda, St. Matthew's, and Arlington. I went over every motorcade route, searching for men and women who had been spectators, and in Dallas I walked from Love Field to the overpass, looking for potential sniper's nests as well. Every scene described in the book was visited: the rooms in the executive mansion, Hickory Hill, Brooks Medical Center, the Presidential hotel suites in Houston and Fort Worth, the Houston Coliseum, the Fort Worth parking lot and ballroom, the Paine garage and bedrooms, Marguerite Oswald's house, Oswald's tiny room in Dallas, Parkland's Major Medicine and Minor Medicine areas, Bethesda's seventeenth-floor suite and basement morgue, the pavements of Washington, the pews of St. Matthew's.

Colonel Swindal and his crew patiently led me back and forth through the compartments of the Presidential aircraft. I crawled over the roof of the Texas School Book Depository and sat in Oswald's sixth-floor perch. I rode his Dallas bus, watch in hand. Before taxi driver Bill Whaley died in Dallas he picked me up at the spot where he had picked up Os-

wald, drove me over the same route in the same taxi at the same speed, and dropped me off at the same curb. I stood where Officer J. D. Tippit died. I darted over the last lap of Oswald's flight to the Texas Theater. In Dallas police headquarters I sat where the assassin had sat, rode down in the same elevator accompanied by Dallas patrolmen, and took notes on the underground garage while standing where Oswald was shot. With a Secret Service agent and Dallas eyewitnesses to the assassination as my guides, I went over the stretch of Elm Street where the President laid down his life. In Washington, Hyannis Port, and elsewhere I studied each pertinent office, embassy, and home—over a hundred of them—right down to the attic mentioned on the last page of the epilogue of this volume. I even had the damaged Dallas-to-Bethesda coffin uncased for inspection, and I have visited the hillside below Custis-Lee Mansion in every season.

Research, of course, is no substitute for wisdom. The sum of a million facts is not the truth. Nevertheless all these trips were necessary. I had to immerse myself in this subject until I knew more about it than anyone else. Only then could I move on to the critical stage: the comparison of witnesses' statements. Fortunately for history, virtually every incident was observed by several pairs of eyes and ears. This was even true of telephone conversations between two men; there were usually technicians on the wire or eavesdroppers on either end. By evaluating all recollections and matching them against my own knowledge and circumstantial material I could reconstruct the past with some confidence. Where this proved impossible—where I was faced with two irreconcilable versions from equally reliable sources—I have set down both, indicating possible reasons for the conflict.

We have not recovered from the catastrophe of late November 1963. I cannot pretend to be aloof, though I have certainly tried to be objective. Nor do I offer this study as a definitive work. In time I myself shall merely become a source for future historians as yet unborn. Yet it was imperative that this chronicle be laid before the generation of Americans who suffered through those days. I believe President Kennedy would have wanted them to know precisely what happened. That is why I wrote this. Nearly everyone agreed with me, and I should like to pay tribute to the host of people who relived the most dreadful hours of their lives with me. Of all I approached only one, the assassin's widow, failed to respond to my request for cooperation. None of the interviews was easy. No one had expected that they would be. I could not dilute my questions and still be faithful to my task, and over half the subjects experienced moments of emotional difficulty. Sometimes it was necessary to knock on the same door again and again. Often I found that after the state funeral of November 25, 1963, a principal figure had thrust his memories of that weekend into a remote corner of his mind. Unless summoned by the Commission, he had not discussed them with anyone until I called. Bringing them out was agonizing, almost unendurable. Lyndon Johnson is a supreme example of this. Twice,

in May of 1964 and April of 1965, the President agreed to receive me and go through everything. In the end he found he could not bear to do it. I explained that he was a vital witness, he agreed, and we ultimately solved the dilemma by written questions and written answers. Some of the replies were detailed; to other inquiries he had no comment. It should be added that he has not seen the book in any form.

While no author can share responsibility for his work, I am greatly indebted to an extraordinary number of individuals for their cooperation, time, and advice. Indeed, there are so many of them that there simply is not room to list them here, and rather than omit some I shall name none, trusting they will understand. However, I must make one exception to this rule—an expression of deepest gratitude to my wife, who alone knows the cost.

W.M.

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Glossary

The following are key U.S. Secret Service (SS)–White House Communications Agency (WHCA) code terms which were in use in November 1963:

The First Family

Lancer	The President
Lace	The First Lady
Lyric	Caroline Kennedy
Lark	John F. Kennedy, Jr.

Vice Presidential Group

Volunteer	The Vice President
Victoria	Mrs. Johnson
Velvet	Lynda Bird Johnson
Venus	Lucy Baines Johnson
Vigilant	Walter Jenkins

Places

Castle	The White House—Executive Mansion plus the two office wings (WHCA)
Crown	The Executive Mansion (WHCA)
Angel	Aircraft 26000 (Air Force One)
Charcoal	Temporary Residence of President (sometimes “Base”)
SS 100 X	Presidential automobile
Halfback	Presidential follow-up car (SS)
Varsity	Vice Presidential follow-up car (SS)
Cabin	Hyannis Port, Massachusetts
Hamlet	Auchincloss home on O Street

Château	Glen Ora, Presidential retreat
Crossroads	Middleburg, Virginia
Acrobat	Andrews Field
Calico	Pentagon
Carpet	White House garage
Cork	FBI headquarters, Washington
Central	Executive Office Building (EOB)
Volcano	LBJ Ranch, Texas

Official Family

Wand	Kenneth O'Donnell
Willow	Evelyn Lincoln
Wayside	Pierre Salinger
Market	Dr. George Burkley
Watchman	General Chester Clifton
Warrior	Malcolm Kilduff
Wing	General Godfrey McHugh
Witness	Captain Tazewell Shepard
Tiger	Colonel James Swindal
Freedom	Secretary Dean Rusk

Secret Service Agents

Domino	James Rowley
Duplex	Gerald Behn
Deacon	Floyd Boring
Dazzle	Clint Hill
Dandy	Lem Johns
Digest	Roy Kellerman
Daylight	Jerry Kivett
Debut	Paul Landis
Dusty	Emory Roberts

Secret Service Agents (Continued)

Dagger	Rufus Youngblood
Dasher	Tom Wells
Dresser	Bob Foster
Drummer	Lynn Meredith

White House Communications Agency

Star	Colonel George McNally
Satchel	The Bagman
Sturdy	Art Bales
Shadow	Ira Gearhart

O powerful, western, fallen star!
O shades of night! O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappear'd! O the black murk
that hides the star!
O cruel hands that hold me powerless!
O helpless soul of me!
O harsh surrounding cloud, that will not
free my soul!

—WALT WHITMAN

When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd

ὦ ξείν', ἄγγελον Λακεδαιμονίοις, ὅτι τῇδε
κείμεθα τοῖς κείνων ῥήμασι πειθόμενοι.

Go, stranger, and in Lakēdaimōn tell
That here, obedient to their laws, we fell.
—Simonides at Thermopylae

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PROLOGUE



LANCER

Despite obvious differences in temperament and style John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson shared one grand passion—politics—and in the tranquil autumn of 1963 a political issue was about to take the President and his Vice President a thousand miles from Washington, into deepest Texas. They had to go, because the state's Democratic party was riven by factionalism. Governor John Connally and Senator Ralph Yarborough were stalking one another with shivs. In 1960 the Kennedy-Johnson team had carried Texas by just 46,233 votes, an eyelash. If the Governor and the Senator didn't agree to a truce soon, the national ticket wouldn't stand a chance there next fall. No party writes off twenty-five electoral votes, so both Kennedy and Johnson were going down to patch things up. They had to make a major production of the trip, with Connally and Yarborough, apparently reconciled, appearing by their sides in the state's five major cities. As a climax there would be a call at the LBJ Ranch, where the Vice President would invite the President to feast upon the culinary specialties of his house.

Long afterward Johnson would guardedly recall that there had been "some discussion of the Texas political situation" between the Chief Executive and himself. There was more to it than that. Although Kennedy enjoyed campaigning, this came at an awkward time, and at first the necessity for political intervention had eluded him. The Lone Star State was, after all, the Vice President's fief. In 1960 he had stumped it brilliantly. As a professional Kennedy coolly assessed the present crisis and concluded that he must go after all. But he reached the decision grudgingly. It appeared to him that Johnson ought to be able to resolve this petty dispute himself; the trip seemed to be an imposition.

How do you explain to a President, who has all the power, that his Vice President has become virtually impotent in his home state? You don't explain it. He wouldn't understand; he would suspect you of evasion. Johnson had been running a broken field since birth, but his current problems

were authentic. They arose in part from his stance as a public figure. Like Kennedy in New England he had burst upon the national scene as a maverick, a vote-getter who made no secret of his lack of sympathy for the advocates of doctrinaire solutions to complex issues. That moderation was the secret of his strength at the polls. Yet he paid a price for it in the councils of his party. Because he clung to the middle of the road he had failed to inspire any deep loyalty from either the Democrats' liberal or conservative wings—and was therefore regarded by both as an outsider.

In larger part, however, his dilemma that week before what would be the third Thanksgiving of the Kennedy administration was an ironic consequence of the party's national victory over Richard Nixon and Henry Cabot Lodge. Kennedy, who had been the junior Senator from Massachusetts, had stepped up to the Presidency. Johnson, formerly the mighty Majority Leader of the Senate, had become Vice President—which was also a step, but not up. The office he had inherited was but poorly understood. In the 174 years since the first inaugural the American people had displayed a monumental lack of interest in the Chief Executive's backup; perhaps one in a million, for example, knew that between 1845 and 1849 the Vice President of the United States had been named Dallas. Everyone agreed that the second greatest gift the electorate could bestow was an empty honor, yet only those who had held it knew how hollow it really was. "A pitcher of warm spit," John Nance Garner had called it, and an earlier wit had written, "Being Vice President isn't exactly a crime, but it's kind of a disgrace, like writing anonymous letters."

Anonymity was uncomfortably close to the truth. Johnson had found that he was a stand-by without a script. Politically he was nearly a cipher because he lacked a power base. Some Congressmen had more influence. Men with sole claim to constituencies have a few plums to distribute, but the only fruits a Vice President can grant are those the President grants *him*. The right to reward loyalty with jobs is an officeholder's lifeblood. Johnson, formerly red-blooded, was now anemic. To pry loose a federal judgeship for one of his most faithful Texas supporters, Sarah T. Hughes, he had been obliged to wage a major battle against objections inside and outside the government—Sarah, having passed the age for judicial appointments, had been listed as unqualified by the American Bar Association. The Vice President had filed a claim for half of Ralph Yarborough's Senatorial patronage, advancing the argument that his former constituents in Texas continued to regard Lyndon Johnson as their senior Senator. Kennedy had been understanding. Johnson had been told that he could pick up half the state's patronage, naming Texas' judges, customs offices, and border guards—subject to Yarborough's veto. But Connally, his former protégé, was unimpressed. And Yarborough, of course, was furious.

Thus the Vice President's problems were not of his making. They were