

The Vanity of *Vanity Fair*

By Max Holland

Under the editorship of Graydon Carter, *Vanity Fair* has become the most reliable purveyor of Camelot nostalgia.

Over the last decade, either the glossy magazine or *vanityfair.com* has published 19 articles, book excerpts, or photo spreads about the Kennedys. In the last three years alone, Kennedys (Jack, Bobby, Jackie, or some combination thereof) have three times graced *Vanity Fair's* cover, one of the most sought-after pieces of magazine real estate in the business. Single-handedly, Graydon Carter seems bent on extending what Garry Wills once called “the Kennedy time in our national life.”^[1]

The latest cover story in the October 2009 issue is unlike its predecessors though. It's neither a syrupy excerpt from a fawning book, nor an amply-illustrated puff piece. Instead, Sam Kashner's “[A Clash of Camelots](#)” purports to be a serious, original piece of journalism about the 1966-67 “Manchester affair,” the first episode to tarnish the Kennedys' escutcheon following the 1963 assassination of JFK. As the table of contents states, “[*VF* contributing editor] Sam Kashner unearths the story behind [William Manchester's *The Death of a President*,] a best-seller that captivated the nation, divided the Kennedys, and nearly destroyed the author.”

Far from unearthing the story, or even shedding new light on it, the article mostly recycles what has long been known. Newspapers, especially *The New York Times*, covered the so-called “battle of the book” in agonizing detail for months. Afterwards, the heavily publicized struggle was the subject of three books, two of them authored by *Times*-men. Eventually, even Manchester had his unabridged say, publishing a 60-page chapter about the controversy in a compilation of his essays.^[2]

Still, there wouldn't be much to criticize—and it would be churlish to do so—if this boast were only the issue. The genuine problem is the article's many errors of commission and omission, including Kashner's uncritical acceptance of clichés and untruths in Manchester's own narrative that have been circulating for 42 years. Some of these issues have long been points of dispute, while the truth about others has only become known recently, through the release of such sources as the once-secret Lyndon Johnson tape recordings.

The *VF* editors' note says Kashner's interest in the Manchester story was first aroused in 1984, when John F. Kennedy, Jr. told Kashner that *The Death of a President* was the "only book he would ever read about his father's assassination. This revelation piqued Kashner's obsession with the controversial history . . ." If so, Kashner's obsessiveness is strictly limited to sources that conform to a flattering portrayal of William Manchester and his book, which Kashner considers a "[masterpiece](#)."

Here are some of the outstanding errors of fact, interpretation, and history in "[A Clash of Camelots](#)."

- *And [Manchester] would have one crucial source that the [Warren] Commission did not: Jacqueline Kennedy.*

This assertion reflects one of the themes in Kashner's article: that Manchester's work was superior to that of the supposedly discredited Warren Commission, even though the author and that panel happened to agree on who killed President Kennedy.

It is true that Manchester enjoyed unlimited access to the president's widow. It is definitely untrue, however, that the Warren Commission had no access at all. On June 5, 1964, Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren and the panel's general counsel, J. Lee Rankin, interviewed Mrs. Kennedy at her Georgetown home in the presence of Robert Kennedy.^[3] That the interview lasted only 10 minutes had everything to do with the Warren's desire not to make the former First Lady recount her husband's violent death in any more detail than necessary.

Besides being inaccurate, Kashner's assertion is also misleading. What Mrs. Kennedy had to say was of a widely different value, given that the Warren Commission and Manchester had distinct assignments (which Kashner acknowledges). The Commission's primary task was not to write a history, but to determine insofar as possible who had killed President Kennedy. For that purpose Jacqueline Kennedy's testimony turned out to be wrenching, but of marginal probative value—the Zapruder film of her reactions conveyed more information than her testimony. To anyone writing a narrative account, however, Mrs. Kennedy's recollections were not only vital but indispensable. Her refusal to be interviewed by anyone but Manchester was precisely why (as noted by Kashner) author Jim Bishop, Manchester's arch-rival, complained, "She's trying to copyright the assassination."^[4]

- *With [Jacqueline Kennedy's] style, her youth and beauty, her intelligence, she was one of the president's most formidable assets.*

Kashner looks back at JBK with rose-colored glasses, his view influenced by her dazzling and steely performance after the assassination. In that he is hardly alone. In truth, however, reviews of Jacqueline Kennedy's behavior and value as a political spouse were very mixed before November 22, 1963. Her distaste for retail politics was a poorly

kept secret, if not the subject of venomous gossip.^[5] She was often aloof, like a modern-day Marie Antoinette, and frequently inconsiderate of the needs of other political wives. On the morning of November 22, for example, JBK didn't bother to inform the other political spouses of her wardrobe selection, as any thoughtful First Lady would do, especially one as fashion-conscious as Jackie. Consequently, Nellie Connally was deeply chagrined at breakfast to find that she "had chosen wrong"—she had also donned a pink wool suit.^[6]

While First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy regarded the repetitive dreariness of politicking as beneath her, making her far from a formidable campaigner, though the "charm of her shyness" made her a vivid attraction.^[7] The president's sisters (and sister-in-law, Ethel) were always far more visible on the campaign trail than Jacqueline, and there were rumblings of discontent among many Democrats over her common refusal to participate in party functions.^[8]

- *Manchester later showed [Jacqueline Kennedy] still frames of dress manufacturer Abraham Zapruder's film, which had caught the entire assassination on 8mm Kodachrome.*

The notion that the assassination was captured in full on the Zapruder film is a fallacy, one of the oldest factoids about the Kennedy assassination. Manchester wrongly accepted it and Kashner repeats it without hesitation, even though the film's first few frames reveal Secret Service agents already reacting to the first shot.^[9] That means the film captured the assassination *after* it commenced, as this *New York Times* [oped](#) from 2007 explained, and these [two articles](#) lay out in abundant detail.^[10]

- *[Manchester] discovered deep political enmities that had simmered at the time of the assassination, not just against the Kennedys, but among the Democrats as well. Indeed that's what had compelled Kennedy's trip to Dallas in the first place . . . Kennedy didn't want to lose the state in the upcoming '64 election so he'd agreed to go to Dallas in an attempt to heal the rift.*

The suggestion that Manchester "discovered" the rift among Texas Democrats would be laughable to any self-respecting Texas political reporter from the early '60s. The bitter postwar struggle for the soul of the Democratic Party in Texas (there was no Republican Party, except in name, until the late '60s) had provided fodder for local political journalists for years. Even Manchester, who was quite proud of his extensive research for the book, never claimed to have made such a discovery.

It is true that in the immediate aftermath of the assassination, Kennedy aides put out the cover story that the president went to Texas to "heal" the state Democratic Party—but

that's because the truth, which has been known since at least 1967, was a lot less appealing. President Kennedy had gone to Texas for the same reason Willie Sutton frequented banks: that's where the money was. As Charles Caldwell, a long-time aide to then-Senator Ralph Yarborough (D-Texas), recalled about Kennedy's visit, "Is Texas a place to go for [campaign] money? It sure is! That's what you do. You go to Texas to raise money."[\[11\]](#)

A month before the trip to Texas, the president had kicked off his personal fund-raising efforts with a mammoth, \$100-a-plate dinner at the Commonwealth Armory in Boston that enriched party coffers by as much as \$680,000.[\[12\]](#) The next logical site was Texas because of Lyndon Johnson's place on the ticket, which gave Kennedy entrée to well-heeled Democrats, of whom there were many in Texas. The president had begun prodding Texas's reluctant governor, John Connally, to organize a big fund-raiser since mid-1962. But Connally, acutely aware that the president was not particularly popular in Texas, and that a presidential visit would put a strain on the state's seriously riven Democratic Party, had continually made excuses, until the president finally pinned him down in June 1963.[\[13\]](#)

"If we don't raise funds in another state, I want to do so in Massachusetts and Texas," Kennedy told Connally as they planned the trip in June. "If we don't carry another state next year, I want to carry Texas and Massachusetts." Indeed, President Kennedy's initial impulse was to have fund-raisers in four Texas cities. Connally only fended him off by arguing that Kennedy would be seen as "trying to financially rape the state" after having made few appearances there during his first term.[\[14\]](#)

Once it was decided to hold the fund-raiser in "neutral" Austin—the rivalry between Houston and Dallas being second only to the split in the state's Democratic Party—a three-day tour of the state's four largest cities was added in recognition of Texas's vital electoral role, as well as the general slide in the president's ratings in the South and West.[\[15\]](#) Some of the Confederate states he had relied on in 1960 were undoubtedly going to be lost to him in 1964, making it more vital to hang onto more diversified and growing Southern states like Texas and Florida. Yet the trip's primary purpose remained fund-raising.

After the assassination, Kennedy aides wanted to obscure that the president had gone to Texas for something as crass as raising money. So they invented the notion that he was on a mission to heal the state's Democrats and perform a kind of political triage. That was "pure hogwash," as John Connally put it 1978, and there is plenty of evidence to back him up.[\[16\]](#)

But William Manchester bought into the fable, as does Kashner. Indeed, to this day one can find the story repeated credulously and endlessly in publications ranging from [The Nation](#) to [The Washington Post](#).[\[17\]](#) That doesn't make it true though.

- *Though he would eventually come to share [the Warren Commission's] conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald had been the sole gunman in the assassination . . . [Manchester] was not overly impressed by the men on the Commission, especially as much of their research fell to junior staff. ("I have more investigative experience than any of them," he felt.) And Robert Kennedy remained skeptical of [the Warren Commission's] findings for the rest of his life, which would be ended by another assassin's bullet five years later.*

Perhaps Kashner is merely trying to be sophisticated here, since it isn't fashionable to admit the Warren Commission did a good (though not perfect) job. The findings of the "junior staff," to which Manchester allegedly felt superior, have withstood the most important test of all, the test of time. On the most critical forensic issue—the shooting sequence in Dealey Plaza—the Commission's junior staffers realized that the FBI's initial analysis was impossible, and correctly found that one shot fired by Oswald had actually struck both President Kennedy and Governor John Connally.[\[18\]](#)

Meanwhile, Manchester—the supposedly more experienced investigator who "watched the Zapruder film close to 100 times," according to Kashner—both relied heavily on the Commission's work, and also offered his own scenario that made even less sense than the admittedly confused explanation offered in the Warren Report.[\[19\]](#) The majority of reliable witnesses heard three shots, and three expended cartridges were found in the assassin's nest. Manchester's own bias, however, led him to believe that only two shots were probably fired.

As a fellow ex-Marine, and because of the distances involved, Manchester decided that three shots were unlikely because Oswald "could scarcely have missed." Consequently, Manchester alone suggested that Oswald was such a bungler that he might have started out with an expended cartridge in the rifle's breech, thus accounting for the three cartridges on the floor.[\[20\]](#) Simultaneously, and to mollify critics who might note that most witnesses heard three shots, Manchester suggested that Oswald could have fired his rifle three times in less than six seconds, and still have managed his feat of arms of hitting the president in the back (and then Connally) with one shot, and then mortally wounding JFK in the head with another, while missing with a third. But three shots in that time-span and with that degree of accuracy are all but impossible to achieve in real life.

In short, while the Warren Commission's explanation was less than ideal, Manchester, who had the luxury of almost two more years to research the assassination, did even worse.

Kashner's assertion that Robert Kennedy "remained skeptical" is also an exaggeration, or at very least, woefully misleading. While many critics of the Warren Commission, ranging from Kennedy hagiographer Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. to the shyster [Mark Lane](#), have alleged that RFK privately harbored deep reservations about the panel's verdict, the one and only time Robert Kennedy spoke publicly about the Commission he endorsed it

without qualification. After declaring for the presidency in 1968, Kennedy stated that he was against reopening the investigation into his brother's assassination and "stands by the [Warren] Report."^[21] If Kennedy harbored any private doubts, they undoubtedly stemmed from his [own complicity](#) in the CIA's attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro, and from the constraints on the Commission's investigation of possible Cuban involvement. The Commission did not state that there was no foreign complicity—only that it had been unable to find evidence of a foreign-directed (Soviet or Cuban) conspiracy.^[22]

Left Unsaid

Kashner's errors of commission are compounded by several errors of omission. One would not know from reading the article that many of the poignant, heart-tugging episodes rendered in *The Death of a President* were simply not true, as the tape recordings from the Johnson presidency underscore. One of the most infamous smears, of course, was the "deer-hunting incident." According to Manchester, Lyndon Johnson had shamed a reluctant President-elect Kennedy into going deer-hunting on the LBJ Ranch in November 1960, and then later, pestered an "inwardly appalled" JFK until the president finally displayed a mounted deer head in the White House. The "memory of the creature's death had been haunting" to JFK, wrote Manchester, "and afterward he had relived it with his wife . . . to heal the inner scar."^[23] Manchester actually opened his book with this episode until wiser heads prevailed. Supposedly, it was a graphic illustration of Texans' penchant for violence, the same propensity that would later stoke Lee Harvey Oswald into action. It mattered not that the incident didn't happen, at least not the way Manchester depicted it.^[24]

Manchester's description of the hunt was not an isolated mistake, but one of many inaccuracies and apocryphal tales. And in every significant instance, the errors ran in only one direction—against Lyndon Johnson. They all tended to cast him in the worst possible light, almost as if he embodied the forces of violence and irrationality that allegedly incited Oswald. And when Johnson wasn't the personification of Texas blood lust, he was the boorish and impatient usurper, so anxious to get his hands on the levers of power that he could not bear to wait to be sworn in.

In essence, *The Death of a President* attempted to reverse what was rightly seen as Lyndon Johnson's finest hour, and recast it to the Kennedys' perceived advantage. Nor was Manchester shy, at least before the controversy erupted, about admitting what he had done. As he wrote Mrs. Kennedy in July 1966, "though I tried desperately to suppress my bias against a certain eminent statesman who always reminds me of somebody in a Grade D movie on the late show, the prejudice showed through."^[25] Little wonder why Garry Wills, writing in 1994, called William Manchester "the [Parson Weems](#) of the Kennedy cult."^[26]

Near the end of Kashner's article, he openly regrets that Manchester's masterpiece is out of print and hints at something untoward. This claim, too, is misleading because it is

hardly unusual for a book published in 1967 to be out of print. Indeed, a majority (12) of Manchester's 18 titles are out of print, and with one exception, the ones in print were all published in 1978 or later.

If there is something to lament, it's that Manchester's powerful, but romantic and at times malignant mytho-drama, in print or not, still defines how many Americans remember the assassination.

[1] Garry Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power* (Boston, MA: Back Bay Books, 1994), 7.

[2] Arnold Bennett, *Jackie, Bobby & Manchester* (New York: Bee-Line Books, 1967); Lawrence Van Gelder, *Why the Kennedys Lost the Book Battle* (New York: Award Books, 1967); John Corry, *The Manchester Affair* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967); William Manchester, *Controversy and Other Essays in Journalism, 1950-1975* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1976).

[3] 5 Warren Commission Volume, [178-181](#).

[4] Corry, *The Manchester Affair*, 59.

[5] J.F. terHorst, "Jackie to Hit Campaign Trail," *Detroit News*, 10 November 1963.

[6] Nellie Connally and Mickey Herskowitz, *From Love Field: Our Final Hours with President John F. Kennedy* (New York: Rugged Land, 2003), 83.

[7] Joseph A. Loftus, "[President's Wife to Campaign in '64](#)," *New York Times*, 15 November 1963.

[8] Robert E. Thompson, "[Kennedy Tests Power in Two Southern States](#)," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 November 1963.

[9] William Manchester, *The Death of a President: November 20-November 25, 1963* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 533. Manchester did not explicitly assert that Zapruder filmed the entire assassination, but he did presume it.

[10] Max Holland and Johann Rush, "[JFK's Death, Re-Framed](#)," *New York Times*, 22 November 2007; Max Holland and Johann W. Rush, "[11 Seconds in Dallas, Not Six](#)," *Washington Decoded*, 11 March 2007; Max Holland and Kenneth R. Scarce, "[11 Seconds in Dallas Redux: Filmed Evidence](#)," *Washington Decoded*, November 2008.

[11] [Caldwell Oral History](#), 26 March 1996, US Senate Historian's Office, 107.

Washington Decoded

[12] Manchester, *The Death of a President*, 23; Tom Wicker, "[Kennedy Focuses Upon Goldwater](#)," *New York Times*, 20 October 1963. In 2009 dollars, the dinner was about \$700 a plate and altogether raised around \$4.7 million.

[13] John Connally with Mickey Herskowitz, *In History's Shadow: An American Odyssey* (New York: Hyperion, 1993), 170, 178.

[14] John Connally, "Why Kennedy Went to Texas," *Life*, 24 November 1967; Connally, *In History's Shadow*, 171.

[15] As Connally later explained, a Dallas fund-raiser would not be supported by Houston or Fort Worth money, and vice versa. "And none of them will go to San Antonio, but all of them will go to Austin." 1 House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) [25](#).

[16] 1 HSCA [18](#); Connally, *In History's Shadow*, 181; Ben Barnes with Lisa Dickey, *Barn Burning, Barn Building: Tales of a Political Life from LBJ through George W. Bush and Beyond* (Albany, TX: Bright Sky Press, 2006), 66.

[17] John Nichols, "[Lone Star Legacy](#)," *The Nation*, 19 October 2009; Joe Holley, "[Don Yarborough, 83: His Challenge to Party Brought Kennedy to Texas in '63](#)," *Washington Post*, 24 September 2009.

[18] The FBI, influenced by Governor Connally's recollection, initially suggested in December 1963 that the first shot fired had wounded President Kennedy, and the second shot fired hit Connally in the back. But Oswald's Mannlicher-Carcano rifle could not be operated in less than about 2.3 seconds, and there was only about a one second interval between the shot that first hit the president and Connally being wounded; nor did the FBI's explanation make sense because it did not account for the bullet that exited the president's throat.

[19] Pressed for time, and concentrating its efforts on the shots that hit someone, the Commission was caught short when it came time to summarize the entire shooting sequence. The panel was not absolutely certain that the first shot was the one that missed, and so it also entertained the possibility that the second or third shots fired were errant. The result was a muddled explanation that only a logician could truly appreciate. *Warren Report*, [19](#), [110-117](#).

[20] Manchester, *The Death of a President*, 95, 155. Although the Warren Commission mentioned this possibility too, ultimately it was discounted. *Warren Report*, [110-111](#).

[21] "[5000 Greet Kennedy in Watts Area](#)," *Washington Post*, 26 March 1968; Associated Press, "[Questions to Kennedy on Assassin](#)," *The Times* (London), 26 March 1968. Prior to announcing his candidacy for the 1968 Democratic nomination, RFK had managed to dodge all efforts to get him to answer questions about the increasingly controversial federal investigation into JFK's assassination. But once he joined the unscripted campaign trail, Kennedy could not duck the controversy any longer.

[22] Warren Report, [21-22](#).

[23] Manchester, *The Death of a President*, 118-119.

[24] LBJ's recollection of the hunt was quite different. As he sarcastically recounted in January 1968, "Poor little deer, [JFK] saw it in his eye and he just couldn't shoot it. Well, hell . . . he wasn't within 250 yards of it. He shot it, and he jumped up and *hurrah!* [It went] right on the fender of the car, so he could kill another one. And we had to stay out there an hour or two later 'til he killed a second one." Johnson also maintained that he never once said anything to Kennedy about displaying a mounted deer head from the hunt in the White House. Max Holland, *The Kennedy Assassination Tapes: The White House Conversations of Lyndon B. Johnson Regarding the Assassination, the Warren Commission, and the Aftermath* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 325, 387-388.

Another example was Manchester's claim that an unidentified man absconded with the Bible used to administer the oath of office to Lyndon Johnson aboard *Air Force One*. According to Manchester, the Bible was Kennedy's "most cherished personal possession." In fact, the book was not a Bible but a Catholic missal or prayer book that had never been opened, and Lady Bird Johnson had kept it safe as a memento. Manchester, *The Death of a President*, 328; Holland, *The Kennedy Assassination Tapes*, 310, 336.

[25] Corry, *The Manchester Affair*, 87.

[26] Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment*, xii.