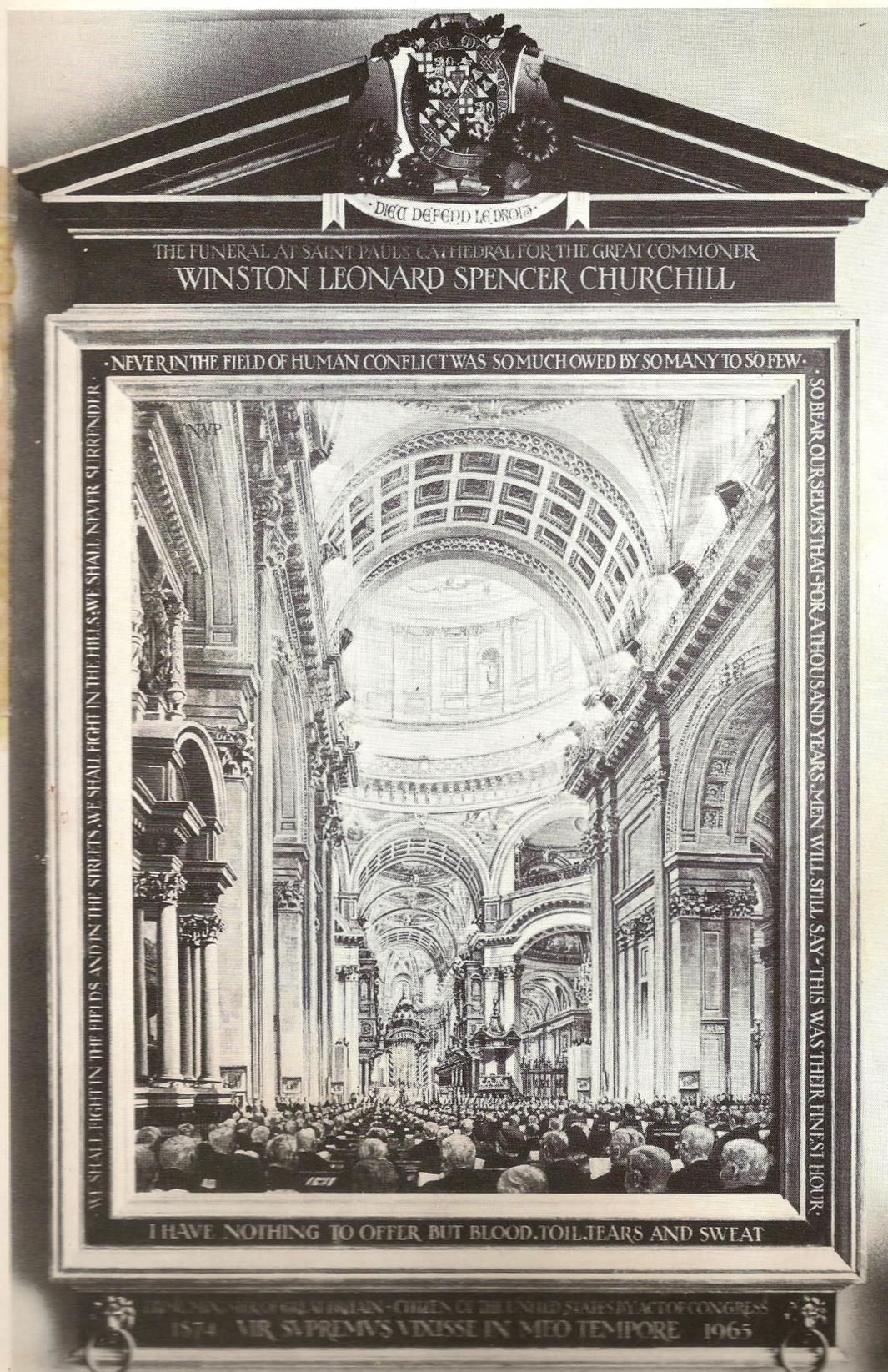


# AMERICAN Funeral Director



The Funeral  
of Sir  
Winston Churchill  
January 1965

A Painting By  
Nowland Van Powell

**MAY**  
1975

The

# Elijah Muhammad Funeral

By Ernest A. Griffin<sup>†</sup>

**M**AYOR Richard J. Daley sent his condolences in a letter to the members of the Nation of Islam:

"Chicago grieves with you as you mourn the passing of your great and distinguished leader.

250,000, with assets of more than \$80 million.

It is ironic that the death of Mr. Muhammad came one day before the opening of the Muslim annual convention, thus accounting for the huge atten-

Hospital. The request was that Mr. Griffin come immediately to the hospital. He was directed to keep the call confidential; he would be met by a security guard.

On arrival, I was ushered up



A silver-plated casket contained the remains of Elijah Muhammad.

Elijah Muhammad. In this period of mourning, it is my privilege as Mayor of Chicago to extend to the leaders and people of the Nation of Islam the total resources of our city in planning and carrying out ceremonies which will mark the death of your great leader."

Colonel Jack Reilly, special events director for the mayor, said the letter meant that the city would provide a police escort for the funeral, or would block off streets, or would do whatever was required. One of the most important men in the city had died.

The membership of the Nation of Islam is said to be over

dance at the funeral, estimated at 20,000 persons, the largest ever in the City of Chicago.

Death came to the leader of the Nation of Islam Tuesday, Feb. 25, one day before what is known as Saviour's Day, Feb. 26, the day on which the leader would deliver his annual message.

The call to serve came from the oldest son of the deceased. It was received approximately one hour after death at Mercy

to the hospital's intensive care section where I was received by several members of the immediate family.

From my previous experience of removing the remains of the late Mrs. Muhammad from the family residence, I was certain that members of the family would remain to witness the removal. I immediately called the funeral home and gave instructions for the all-level cot to be prepared with the best linen, with the slide-under body lifter to effect the removal. I was then informed that arrangements for removal were being made by the use of a private elevator. When in readiness, my assis-

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<sup>†</sup>Mr. Griffin heads the Griffin Funeral Home, Chicago. The family of Elijah Muhammad gave him permission to publish this report.

tant arrived with the cot and we returned to Mr. Muhammad's private room.

Mr. Muhammad's private nurse of the Muslim faith and a head nurse of the hospital's staff stood by ready to assist. The remains were then covered completely with white linen, and the wand of the slide-under body lifter was passed under the body to secure the nylon web straps, thus avoiding exposing the features or any portion of the remains. With extreme care the head of the subject was cradled in the bend of my elbow as we lifted the remains onto the cot that had been placed beside the bed.

Never before had I made a removal under the eyes of so many watchful hospital personnel. It was as though we were giving a demonstration of how to perform this phase skillfully. Doctors, nurses, technicians, security guards, all watched through the glass partition that separated the patient from the quarters housing the technical apparatus of the intensive care unit. My assistant, Maurice McIntosh, 23 years old, made certain we exercised our utmost professional know-how.

After placing the remains on the cot, they were covered with a second linen sheet. We fastened the sustaining belts and covered all with our green chenille cot cover, which bears the name of Griffin Funeral Home in white letters. We were then escorted to the waiting elevator by the eldest son, a Muslim security guard, and the head of the hospital security division.

Returning to the lower level of the hospital, the remains were placed in our station wagon. This vehicle is frequently used on residential removals rather than a funeral coach, which attracts greater attention.

In this instance it proved to be ideally suitable. We were informed that the family did not want it known at this time that death had come to Mr. Muhammad. The appearance of a funeral coach would have defeated their plan. On leaving the hospital, the eldest son rode in the attendant's seat and directed the route we were to travel. We were requested to drive to the residence of the



Ernest Griffin (hat in hands) conducted the funeral of Elijah Muhammad.

deceased, circle the driveway, and pause briefly in front of the residence, which is a miniature palace of Moorish architectural design, and then to the funeral home.

Implicit instructions were then given that the remains were not to be prepared in any manner for a period of 24 hours from the official hour of pronouncement of death according to hospital records. We were further requested to await word from the family before beginning preparation. I requested permission to place a small amount of massage cream on the lips to prevent dehydration.

Beginning with the arrival at the funeral home, a double guard was stationed 24 hours around the clock outside the funeral home and around the parking lot adjacent to the funeral home building. On the following morning, before preparation was scheduled, a member of the immediate family was designated to make certain that Muslim customs had been adhered to.

On receiving official word, preparation was begun. The subject was of slight physical build, weighing about 150 pounds. On completion of the arterial preparation, a period of 24 hours elapsed before aspiration.

Up to that time, no further contact had been made with the family. Having been advised that word would come regarding further arrangements, we decided to accept no

other service calls, and to refer any incoming calls for service to one of our associate establishments, rather than risk overtaxing our facilities. In the meantime we were besieged with phone calls from the press and the public, inquiring about plans for the formal services.

On the morning of the third day, a call was received again from the eldest son stating that he was ready to select the casket, and that he alone would represent the family in this phase of arrangements.

I must confess that I had an idea of the type of casket the family had in mind. Two years ago, when the casket was chosen for the late Mrs. Clara Muhammad, the sons had observed a solid seamless copper deposit silver-plated unit, and had asked about its features and quality. Fortunately, the Brenner Casket Co., again had such a unit on display. However, it was unlined. After a brief discussion and comparison of other units, a decision was reached and the solid seamless copper deposit unit was selected as being the most appropriate for Mr. Muhammad.

Next came the matter of deciding upon material for the lining, color, and style of the interior. Not until this hour was information given as to the family's intentions concerning the date, place and hour for the services. At this time we were informed that services were to take place within their temple in strict

Muslim tradition at 11 a.m. the next day without a public visitation.

Consequently, an immediate decision was reached on the lining of the casket. The interior was totally custom-designed of the finest milano velvet. Considering that the exterior was silver-plated, and that the predominant Muslim color is scarlet, it was decided that the full back panel, pillows and overlay and bed would be of hand-tufted scarlet milano velvet, with the inner panels and shrine of white milano velvet. Thus the combined scarlet and white velvet made a handsome contrast against the silver-plated casket.

A Wilbert Triune vault was selected, the color score being gold and white highlighted with royal red. The customary name plate of gold carried the name, Elijah Muhammad, 1899-1975. The Muslim insignia—a crescent centered with a star—also was of royal red color.

The casket was delivered to the funeral home late Thursday afternoon. Eight employees of the Brenner Casket Co. accompanied the delivery and assisted in placing the unit on our master bier because of its extreme weight. The weight of the casket was estimated to be 1,500 pounds.

Later that evening the eldest son arrived to prepare the remains for burial in keeping with Muslim customs, by first bathing the remains three times with bare hands from head to foot with soap and water. For this, we provided a germicidal and septic soap. The remains were then again bathed three times with bare hands from head to foot with a perfume selected personally by the son.

A pure white linen breech cloth was placed on the remains, and then they were wrapped from head to foot with 16 yards of 54-inch-wide white linen, allowing enough material to expose the face yet making it possible to cover the features after viewing the remains.

The features were viewed only by members of the immediate family. Other than that, the inner panels of the casket were closed except to a few other persons such as Mayor Daley, Judge Turner,

Walter Turner, the public relations representative for the Nation of Islam, and official representatives of the Brenner Casket Co.

I am pleased to state that the members of the immediate family were most praiseworthy and genuinely pleased when they viewed Mr. Muhammad's remains. The thought behind the fact that the casket was closed to the general public is that, in accordance with Muslim custom, no one outside the immediate family is permitted to look down on the features of the deceased leader.

On the following morning, the fourth day after death, the remains were escorted by a contingent of Muslim security guards and assigned representatives of the Chicago Police Department, bearing the ranks of first deputy superintendent, deputy chief, and lieutenants, to the official residence of the Muslim leader. The Coupe-de-Fleur containing the casket, with only eight floral pieces on the floral deck, stopped in the driveway in front of the main entrance for 10 minutes.

During this time members of the immediate family and household personnel joined the funeral procession, occupying 15 limousines. The procession then proceeded to the Muslim Temple, some 35 blocks away. At every major intersection along the route there were one or more police squad cars to assure that no vehicles would break into the procession.

On arrival at the Temple at the appointed time, 10:15 a.m., the procession was met by the Muslim elite guard, which immediately flanked the first limousine carrying their new leader and his sisters and brothers. The casket was taken up the steps into the Temple without delay on the shoulders of 10 bearers in a dignified manner, placed on the casket carriage, and moved into the chancel with the head to the east.

The huge main sanctuary, with a seating capacity of 2,000, by this time was filled with the exception of the area reserved for those persons arriving with the procession. At no time was there an outcry or a show of individual emotion. Fully the next 35 minutes were spent with the principal mourners filing into their reserved seats.

All of the women wore floor-length spotless white cape-type garments, with a bouquet-type cap bearing various rank and order identifications. With the exception of the principal mourners, all of the women occupied the main floor, with the men filling the balcony areas. To stand in the area of the chancel and look out into a sea of brown faces capped by white headdresses, above white habits, is truly an awe-inspiring sight.

Customarily, Muslim services are not held in their Temple. The ministers in charge opened the service which lasted only 25 minutes by giving a brief description of the ritual. The minister spoke first in English and then in Arabic, the ritual provided for audience participation. Trays of mint candy were passed among the mourners, symbolic of sweetening the grief of sorrow.

A life-sized bust picture of Mr. Muhammad was placed at the left of the chancel. On conclusion of the religious ritual the total assembly in single file passed the altar, viewing the portrait, giving a personal salute, viewing the closed casket, bowing politely as they passed the family, then going rapidly and quietly and directly to their personal cars as directed. This consumed two hours.

Members of the family then followed the bearers, who again raised the casket to their shoulders and carried it out of the temple, placing it into the Coupe-de-Fleur. No flowers had been taken into the main sanctuary.

The police escorts, the honorary bearers, including a representative of President Ford, dignitaries from around the world, and state and city officials preceded the leader's car, which was followed by the Coupe-de-Fleur bearing the remains, and by the line of family limousines. The cortege moved in the direction of Mount Glenwood Cemetery, some 17 miles away.

Again, throughout the total distance to the cemetery, at every major intersection and through the adjoining suburban area, traffic was controlled in cooperation with the Chicago Police Department. A Chicago Police Department

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# Muhammad

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helicopter hovered overhead, maintaining control with the escort units monitoring the flow of traffic to make certain that there was no interruption at any point.

There were about 2,500 cars in the cortege. According to police reports, it required approximately two and a half hours for the cortege to pass a given point.

On arrival at the grave site, because the location was on a sloping area and because of the extreme weight of the casket, estimated to be 1,500 pounds, the Wilbert Vault Co. provided a unit on which the casket was placed, known as a Hill Joy, this unit being a battery-powered mechanized dolly capable of carrying a tremendous weight to a grave.

When the casket was finally placed on the lowering device, a brief committal service was recited in Arabic. The remains were then lowered into the Triune vault. I then spoke to the assemblage over the public address system, expressing the gratitude of the family to all who attended and shared in the service of memory to a departed great leader, and then dismissing the huge throng.

On Monday, three days later, Mrs. Griffin and I made a courtesy call on the new leader of the Nation of Islam, the fourth son of the late Elijah Muhammad, at the official residence. We were warmly received, experiencing the customary personal search of all callers on entering the residence. We were then ushered into a small waiting room by a security guard.

Within a few minutes, the First Minister, as he is referred to, entered, accompanied by two aides. He extended a warm cordial greeting, saying, "Speaking for the entire Nation of Islam, and my family, we were deeply impressed with the presentation of the Messenger's remains and the dignity with which the services were conducted."

It was on this occasion that I first learned of the family's wishes to have the remains disinterred as soon as arrange-

ments could be made, and to have them placed within Muhammad's Temple Number 2. Never having experienced such a request, I immediately checked state statutes and the city code. I then promptly completed the prescribed application for disinterment and disposition permits.

One week to the day of the interment in Mount Glenwood Cemetery, the remains were disinterred. Again a monumental task was to be performed. The combined weight of the casket and the vault was approximately 3,900 pounds. This was a tremendous task because during the night before there had been a very heavy rainfall.

The vault, coated with heavy mud, was covered with a tarpaulin to conceal the identity. It was placed on a truck and returned to the Wilbert plant where it was washed, repainted, dried, placed back on the truck, and delivered to the Muslim Temple.

On arrival at the temple, the Hill Joy dolly was again employed to move the heavy vault and its highly valued contents into the narthex of the temple and partially down the nave to a point where the position of the seats created an impasse. It then became necessary to raise the vault with four hydraulic jacks and place it on a specially constructed steel-framed truck with 10-inch swivel wheels to continue down the nave, up past the main altar, and into an anteroom.

This room, with only a small window, was carpeted with a heavy deep royal red plush carpet with matching drapes trimmed with a deep hem of bright gold. It is in this room where the vault now rests to await further plans.

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## Fear Transmission of Virus in Transplants

Some years ago a man died in New York City and his eyes were donated for cornea transplantation. An autopsy later revealed the cause of death as an extremely rare brain disease known as Creutzfeld-Jakob disease.

About two years later, the woman who had received the dead man's corneas died of the

same rare brain disease.

Creutzfeld-Jakob disease is so very unusual that only about 200 cases of it exist in all medical literature, although undoubtedly there were many other cases that went undiagnosed. It is hard to imagine that the deaths of the eye donor and the recipient were linked only by coincidence.

A brief note published in the New England Journal of Medicine read: "Proof of a cause-and-effect relation, of course, requires other studies, but the present case may be the first evidence for the transmission of this disease from one human being to another."

## Funeral Insurance Firms Fail in Alabama

A statewide combination of 11 funeral insurance companies in Alabama has gone bankrupt. This means that there are some 30,000 Alabama residents whose \$35,000,000 in burial policies are now worthless.

Modern Home, the bankrupt insurance combine, is now caught up in a tangled legal web in which state investigators are looking into the possibility that some of the combine's officers siphoned off much of its assets to pay phony debts.

A typical victim is Blanche Burge of Birmingham, who paid a weekly premium of 11¢ for years until her policy was paid up. Now it is worthless. She said:

"It was a terrible shock, because burial is one of the main things that most people I know worry about. If you've got your funeral paid for, you feel as though you can go dignified-like and not be a burden to your survivors."

Another Alabama insurer—Vulcan Life—has agreed to help the courts in return for a portion of the remaining assets and the right to drum up trade among the jilted policyholders. Vulcan is honoring the policies of Modern Home clients who died in the weeks immediately following the combine's failure. At the same time, Vulcan is offering the 30,000 Modern Home policyholders still living a special policy that will pay \$300 in funeral expenses for an annual premium of \$7.75, or about 15¢ a week.