

In thinking about the controversy over the publication of William Manchester's book on President Kennedy's last days, it is important to get clearly in mind what is not at stake.

In this respect, it is useful to have the statement of Gardner Cowles, the publisher of Look magazine which is planning to serialize the book. For nothing could be further from the mark.

"The public," Mr. Cowles has said of the book, "should have the opportunity to read it. We feel strongly that it would be improper to withhold this significant document from the American people; to do so would amount to censorship of history."

But Mr. Manchester's book is not history with a capital H. On the contrary, it is, as he himself says in the foreword of the book, only a "source for future historians."

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History's interest in the book could easily be preserved without publication of material objectionable to Mrs. Kennedy. It would be sufficient to hold the objectionable material aside for publication at some stipulated future date.

As to the public's right to know, it is obviously a good deal less than absolute in this instance. Indeed, by their own actions, the author and would-be publishers have already compromised repeatedly the public's right to know.

For a starter, they themselves entered into restrictive arrangements with Mrs. Kennedy that effectively denied to other authors and publishers the right to serve the public's right to know. They have already assented to changes in the text. In the case of Look, publication date has been moved from Nov. 22, the anniversary of the death, to Jan. 10, when an increase in the price of the magazine goes into effect.

The last detail, it seems to me, brings us close to what is involved

on one side of the controversy. From the point of view of the magazine publisher and the author, there is a major stake in publicity and money.

On their side, in other words, the issue is not chiefly a matter of the public interest and of censorship and suppression of information. It is chiefly a matter of private interest connected with commercial advantage.

But this is far from saying that Mrs. Kennedy has behaved with perfect wisdom. On the contrary, it seems to me that she has badly confused her private and public roles.

Acting in her public role as the President's widow, she commissioned



Mrs. Kennedy

Mr. Manchester to write what would, in effect, be an authorized version of the last days. Then, in her private role, she apparently gave Mr. Manchester a great many personal details.

Acting in her public role, she had the manuscript read by some designated representatives who, over a period of time, worked out with the author and publishers what they regarded to be an acceptable text. But then, still later Mrs. Kennedy reasserted her private role to indicate that she did not want publication of some of the personal material given to Mr. Manchester.

In view of Mrs. Kennedy's confusion about her public and private roles, it is understandable that the author and publishers might come to feel that there would be no end to the editorial process unless they went ahead with publication plans. Even to say that, however, is to point to the true public interest.

The true public interest is for an agreement on publication that will spare us all further agony over what is already tragedy enough.

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