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ON

THE TRIALS OF GOVERNMENT-IN-EXILE



The graceless battle between the Kennedy family and William Manchester over "The Death of a President" has provided an arresting study in the politically improbable. An oracle foreseeing the bizarre conflict a year ago would have prophesied with ridiculous ease the outcome of so unequal an encounter—with the revered widow and the respected brother of a murdered President allied against a writer of modest renown, defying the behaved and baring their confidences. Or as the widow herself, by the writer's account, bluntly warned him: the public would view as "a rat" anyone daring to challenge her. And yet—the wholly improbable has come to pass.

The senator and the widow have profited little and suffered much. In strictly political terms, the senator's enemies and critics sound more snappish and suspicious than ever. And in broadly popular terms, the imbroglio has subtly stirred—not just in Dallas or Austin but in Washington and New York—a buzzing chatter of doubt or distaste over the privileged place of the Kennedy family in American political life.

Litigants and Gossipers. How could so unlikely a result have been achieved? A precise answer is difficult. But the *appearances* of events troubled many witnesses in at least three respects.

1. There seemed a steely resolve to accept nothing less than total mastery of a complex situation. Mr. William Manchester, the Kennedys' author-antagonist, was no stray trespasser or wicked eavesdropper. He was the man expressly chosen by the Kennedys to write scrupulous history, and he was known for his ardent devotion to the memory of JFK. Inevitably, the question followed: if he could not record events as the Kennedys would like them remembered, what would satisfy them? Unfortunately, the answer seemed implied in Mrs. John Kennedy's depiction of the author as someone in her "hire"—a notion neither accurate nor generous.

2. There seemed an occasional and depressing lack of candor in the Kennedy public argument. As for Sen. Robert Kennedy, he dismissed Mr. Manchester's whole account of their clash with the summary judgment: "It all finally comes down to the fact that Mr. Manchester gave his word and then broke it." This could impress very few citizens as a meticulously exact description of the fate of a manuscript subjected for six months to the scrutiny of no less than four editors exercising the Kennedys' right of review. As for Mrs. John Kennedy, she decried the book as "tasteless" and "distorted" and "unfair." Yet her affidavit to the courts insisted:

"I have never seen Manchester's manuscript . . . I cannot be said to have approved what I have never seen." And there had to rise a little wonder that a book "never seen" could be judged so fiercely.

3. There seemed—most remarkably—a singular lack of shrewdness in waging the conflict. In the first place, it would have occurred to far less sophisticated litigants that all attempts to censor could only focus popular curiosity on the most offending text. In the second place, it seemed obvious that the senator could honorably have spared himself political embarrassment with one forthright statement: he deeply dissented from the book's political judgments and he firmly refused to try to impose his own.

The bleak result hardly warrants one leading European journal's forecast of "the beginning of the end of the Kennedy legend." But the damage has not been small. For the Kennedys, the legend of their ingenious cunning, at least, has been shaken. Their acknowledged leader has borne popular suspicion of a less than heroic design—to snipe at the President without being caught at it. And all merchants of political gossip have found rich, new fare to market—above all, the haunting question: precisely how—according to Mrs. Kennedy's taped interviews—did the late President and his Attorney General show distrust and practice vigilance over Vice President Lyndon Johnson?

Lovers and Politicians. Beyond a study in the improbable, then, the dismaying episode suggests a fresh reminder of the kind of misjudgments forever afflicting governments-in-exile. These snares have varied little in the 2,500 years since Aeschylus reported: "I know how men in exile feed on dreams."

The Kennedys could not forever have escaped the delusions of such a diet. They are largely attended by advisers and friends not at all famous for reporting unpleasant truths or pressing unwelcome argument. Like all regimes whose highest hopes are suspended between cherished past and coveted future, they can lose sight of the rude present. Alike with lovers and with politicians, there are few myths so bewitching as the notion that what once was beautiful must one day be beautiful again. But the wide world is too faithless and too hurried to share such fancy. As nature abhors a vacuum, so politics abhors an interregnum.

The knowledge of all this can elude no one so intelligent as Robert Kennedy. It might even make him more than ever a formidable political refugee.