

Manchester--'Obligation to Pursue Absolute Truth' Betrayed

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* William Manchester has perpetrated more than a betrayal of the Kennedy family, it turns out. He has betrayed his obligation to pursue absolute truth by allowing his epic account to become tainted with political and personal prejudices.

His betrayal of the family is an unfolding drama, a tragicomedy in which Manchester seems bent on destroying what he once set out to ennoble. His betrayal of the truth is a definable act of disloyalty to the memory of John Kennedy.

The crux of this disloyalty is Manchester's attempt to put the story of the assassination in a frame which feeds ugly suspicions and demeans men.

Manchester's editor at Harper and Row, Evan Thomas, aptly described the inconsistency of his book in a letter last May 16 to Edwin Guthman and John Siegenthaler, who had volunteered at Robert Kennedy's request to review the manuscript. Thomas wrote that Manchester had written a "fairy tale,

which is gratuitously and tastelessly insulting to President Johnson and for that matter, the late President Kennedy while at the same time being a considerable piece of work."

The court actions prompted by Manchester's refusal to make the changes suggested by Guthman and Siegenthaler accomplished a diminution of the insults to Mr. Johnson. A rough first chapter recounting John Kennedy's earlier visit to the Johnson ranch in terms depicting the Texan as a man of violence was cut sharply.

One key figure in the account, Kenneth O'Donnell, has refuted with a photograph Manchester's assertion that he and other Kennedy people on the plane boycotted the short ceremony in which Mr. Johnson took the oath of office.

O'Donnell was the most intransigent of the Kennedy people after the change of power—he seemed unable to forgive Mr. Johnson for

becoming president. His new attitude reflects the perspective that time has brought to him—it should have done the same for Manchester.

A more important deviation in the serialized Manchester text is his failure to make the point that Lyndon Johnson did not want President Kennedy to come to Texas. He was vigorously against the trip, arguing that the task of reconciling Texas Democrats should be left to Texans.

Mr. Kennedy had urgent reasons to reject the Vice President's advice. He needed to unblock the flow of political funds from Texas and he wanted to settle the party factionalism before the elections drew near. Mr. Johnson learned from Bill Moyers that the visit had been set by the President and Gov. Connally. Manchester was wrong in asserting that the President viewed the trip as an "imposition"—this was the Vice President's attitude.

Manchester makes much of whether Mr. Johnson should have boarded his own plane or the President's after the assassination. This was an issue over which unhappy men could grumble under stress but it cannot be a serious issue in a book written three years later. As President, Mr. Johnson was obliged to fly on the plane containing the best communications facilities.

The iniquity of the book is that Manchester has undertaken to perpetuate transient emotions without doing the rounded job of reporting that would put them in perspective. He did not talk to the Johnson people, except for one-half hour with Moyers. Unlike the people close to Mr. Kennedy, who recouped their balance as the sting of the tragedy receded, Manchester has written like a man anxious to savor the bitterness.

This is a far cry from the spirit of John Kennedy, who believed that political hostilities were cursory inconveniences which should be treated as lightly as possible.