

Jackie & LBJ: So Near, So Far

By MARY McGRORY
Special Post Correspondent

Newport News, Va.—Under the great twin curves of the prow of the carrier John F. Kennedy, the principals in the great drama were reassembled, if not reconciled.

The launching of the ship was the first time since John Kennedy's funeral that his family and President Johnson have appeared before the public together.

The strain was visible.

Everyone smiled a great deal, but not at each other.

The President, in the middle of a sea of glamorous Kennedys,

looked ill at ease, and chatted with the late President's mother, Mrs. Rose Kennedy, who is the easiest member of the family for him to talk to.

A Carefree John

At the left end of the launching platform sat Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and his wife, Ethel. At the far right sat Sen. Edward Kennedy and his wife, Joan Below him among the invited guests were the old New Frontiersmen: Kenneth O'Donnell, David Powers, Gen. Ted Clifton and Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

One seat away, dazzling in white, Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy

stared straight ahead over the crowds which pressed against the barriers for a glimpse of her. Her son, John Jr. waiving to his cousins in the audience, was the only carefree soul on the scene.

Once she looked for a long moment over the President. He was engaged with her mother-in-law and did not return her glance.

The speeches did not particularly help.

Richard Cardinal Cushing who, as Jack Kennedy's chaplain, spoke of the past and of Jacqueline Kennedy as the "queen of the household where there will always be a vacant chair."

The Viet Issue

Johnson, knowing he can do no right with the Kennedys, used the occasion for a muted reminder that in Vietnam—the issue which, among others, is between him and Bobby Kennedy, he is following the policy of John F. Kennedy.

The crowd was focused on the family and the christening of the ship. The President's appearance was a dividend.

When Caroline Kennedy, with a little girl's self-conscious smile, rose up to approach the prow, the crowd was totally with her.

The band struck up "Anchors Aweigh," the illuminated initials on the prow, "JFK" lit up and Caroline swung. Nothing happened. Her mother gasped. The crowd murmured. She gripped the bottle more firmly, swung again and was rewarded with a sharp crack and a splatter of champagne. The crowd cheered.

He Missed Bobby

The President made the round of the platform in farewell. He somehow missed Bobby Kennedy, whose ravaged expression suggested that while the ship had been lunched, a new era in Kennedy-Johnson relations had not.

A year ago, Bobby put his foot on the first step of a dizzy upward climb. He set out for Africa and a tumultuous welcome. He came home and elected a judge in New York. In the fall he toured the country while people flung themselves on his car and fought to touch his hand.

The big political question became, "Can he keep it up?"

The negative answer came with Mrs. Kennedy's suit over the Manchester book, a chronicle which she instigated and later disclaimed.

Instead of being the perfect memorial to John F. Kennedy, it became the handbook for Kennedy-Johnson feudists.

On publication it turned out to be more patronizing than damaging to the President, but the tension between the two families became almost palpable.

In late February, an explosion between Bobby Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson rocked the White House. Bobby, home from Europe, told the President he was opposed to the Vietnam bombing. The President told Bobby he would end his political career by such a stand.

Bobby made a speech in the Senate on March 4, and the gap became unbridgeable.

As the Manchester book had institutionalized the personality conflict, the speech institutionalized their differences on the war.