

Magazine Quotes Scornful Words

Manchester's 1st Draft Depicts LBJ as 'Octopus'

By Andrew J. Glass
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Lyndon B. Johnson was portrayed as "an octopus, clutching bunches of black bananas," in the original draft of William Manchester's "The Death of a President," the controversial and much revised book about the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Mr. Johnson was also described in the unedited Manchester manuscript as "an oyster who patiently converts bits of grit into salable pearls," a "chameleon who constantly changes loyalties," "a capon" and a "crafty schemer" who has "a gaunt, hunted look" about him.

These and other equally

scornful references by Manchester to Mr. Johnson's character appear in print for the first time in the July issue of Commentary, a magazine published by the American Jewish Committee.

The Commentary article, entitled "Manchester Lined up," was written by Edward Jay Epstein, whose own study of the Kennedy assassination, "Inquest," appeared last year. Epstein said he had read the Manchester draft "many months before" it appeared in the magazine.

Norman Podhoretz, editor
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of Commentary, said in an interview that "there is no question in my mind that the stuff is accurate. I haven't heard from Manchester's lawyers," Podhoretz added.

Manchester said that under the terms of his out-of-court settlement with the Kennedys, he was barred, under the threat of con-

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tempt of court, from commenting on the deleted material in his manuscript.

But, in a telephone interview from his Middletown, Conn., home, Manchester added: "Certain material you read to me I am hearing for the first time."

"I was anxious to be fair," Manchester continued. "The treatment of Mr. Johnson in the original manuscript is almost identical to the treatment in the [final] book."

Manchester said Epstein's article was equivalent to "digging in a reporter's wastebasket." If someone offered to show him the first draft of Epstein's "Inquest," Manchester said, he would refuse because it would be "unethical" and "a violation of Epstein's common law copyright."

"The Death of a President" was published last April by Harper & Row after much of Manchester's original 1200-page text was revised by the author, by Evan Thomas, his editor at Harper & Row, and by representatives of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy (D-N.Y.) and of Mrs. John F. Kennedy.

But Manchester's harsh portrayal of President Johnson was removed from the book, with the author's cooperation, long before the legal battle, which concerned other material offensive to Mrs. Kennedy, erupted. At this time, the book was entitled "Death of Lancer," the Secret Service code name for President Kennedy.

"Carried Away"

In a telephone interview yesterday, Thomas called the Commentary article, which he had not read, "dirty pool." But the editor affirmed the authenticity of the Manchester quotes as related by Epstein.

Thomas said that Manchester's words were first commissioned and then repudiated by the Kennedy family. "I allowed myself to get carried away with some

unfortunate phrases." Then Thomas added:

"He was involved in a tremendous emotional experience where he became so wrapped up in the thing that he allowed himself to write things that he later wanted to change."

Epstein asserted that the unifying theme of the Manchester draft was "the notion that Johnson, the successor, was somehow responsible for the death of his predecessor" and that concept "gave the original melodrama much of its thrust and such structural coherence as it had."

Once this theme was removed, Epstein adds, through the transformation of President Johnson into "an almost sympathetic" figure, "many details came to appear in the final book as free floating absurdities."

Thomas replied that "it's easier to go further than one intends to go" and added: "He (Manchester) had no intention of implying it from the start. The minute I called it to his attention, out it went—bang."

Epstein concludes that the reservations of early readers, such as Thomas, were well founded. (In a private letter, Thomas once called the Manchester book "gratuitously and tastelessly insulting to Johnson.")

The central characters in the "Lancer" version, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, "have at best a questionable relation to the real persons themselves and at worst no relation at all outside the heated imagination of the author," the Epstein article says.

Thus, in "Lancer," "the shattering fact" of the assassination is that "a Texas murder has made a Texan President." At one point, in this version, Kenneth P. O'Donnell, appointments secretary in the Kennedy White House, exclaims:

"They did it. I always knew they'd do it. You couldn't expect anything else from them. They finally made it."

Then Manchester adds: "He didn't specify who they were. It was unnecessary. They were Texans, Johnsonians . . ."

'Red Herring'

In "Lancer," the new President at first throws out the "red herring" of a "Communist conspiracy" and then boards Air Force One, the Presidential jet, to indulge in

a "vegetable soup saturnalia."

Mr. Johnson, no longer "a capon," suddenly becomes "a full fledged hypomanae," "the crafty seducer with six nimble hands" and "one of those gifted seducers who can persuade a woman to surrender her favors in the course of a long conversation confined to obscure words; no woman, even a lady, can discern his intentions until the critical moment."

According to Epstein's "Lancer" version, it was not always so. In the "relative insignificance" of the Vice Presidency, Mr. Johnson's behavior raised "private doubts (in Kennedy's mind) about Johnson's ability to serve as President."

The "Lancer" text has Kennedy aides finding Vice President Johnson aboard Air Force One before the Dallas trip "poking around its cabins alone." They are "obliged to ask the visitor to leave," an experience that, "Lancer" says, must have been "mortifying to a man of his extreme sensitivity."

Epstein wrote that he was unable to find any evidence that this incident occurred. The article also casts doubt on whether Mrs. Kennedy ever opened the bedroom door of Air Force One at Love Field, only to find Mr. Johnson "sprawled" across her husband's bed, dictating to one of his secretaries. (In the final version, Mr. Johnson is described by Manchester as "reclining in the cabin.")