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A Word to Doubters

A reviewer describes the tone of the Manchester book as "offensively defensive" and notes that the author begins by warning the reader: "If you doubt me you may as well stop at the end of this paragraph."

Not many readers are likely to be deterred, however, which is fortunate for Manchester and his publisher—because premature release of the book has bared more of its contents, kicked up more controversy and engendered more doubt about Manchester's accuracy.

As the major "for instance," Manchester indicates that a nuclear attack on the United States immediately after President Kennedy's assassination could have meant total disaster because, he contends, Lyndon Johnson was not versed in the ways of nuclear retaliation.

That is categorically denied by the Defense Department, which says Mr. Johnson was "fully aware of the procedures." Officials in charge of security during the Kennedy administration agree, saying Mr. Johnson had been thoroughly briefed at President Kennedy's insistence.

We find that version entirely credible. It sounds characteristic of John Kennedy. The opposite does not.

Other rebuttals from the Pentagon suggest that, at best, Manchester exaggerated heavily in describing a worldwide U.S. military alert after the assassination. Ditto for Manchester's depiction of a virtual paralysis of telephone service in the Capital—affecting even the White House and Signal Corps.

Inasmuch as war didn't break out on that fateful day, the latest points of controversy are somewhat academic—except as they bear on national security conditions at the time, and on the competence of officials responsible for maintaining that security. However inadvertently, Manchester's account carries the implication that the official most responsible—President Kennedy—lacked the sense or foresight to prepare for the contingency of a sudden transition.

Since Manchester and his judgments are not infallible, it is rather gratuitous of him to ask that the reader suspend all doubt before starting the first chapter.

It is not only gratuitous but meaningless. The book is significant and will be read by millions more, one may be sure, as a matter of curiosity and interest than as a pre-cast vote of confidence in Manchester.