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'Authorized' History

The unfortunate controversy between the Kennedy family and William Manchester over the publication of his book "Death of a President" makes clear what all the parties to the conflict should have recognized from the start—that "authorized" books are basically a bad idea.

It is natural for the major figures in so historic an event as the death of President Kennedy to wish that there be "one complete, accurate account." But, in selecting an author and giving him privileged access to people and information, they incur a public obligation that they cannot discharge.

History belongs to everyone, not just to the participants. Moreover, a writer's highest obligation is not to his patrons but to truth as he sees it. On that basis those who "authorize" a book in effect sign a blank check. Too late it becomes apparent to them—as it has in this instance—that they may be regarded as endorsing what they consider in Mrs. Kennedy's words, "inaccurate and unfair references to other individuals."

Presumably, President Johnson is the man most likely to be aggrieved by such references—a circumstance unlikely to sweeten his relations with Senator Robert F. Kennedy. The predicament is understandable but it should also have been foreseeable.

In retrospect, Mrs. Kennedy would have spared herself unnecessary anguish—and done history no lasting disservice—if, instead of choosing a single writer to tell her authorized version, she had dictated her recollections to a trained researcher with no view to publication and sealed them until such time as she and her children would feel no serious embarrassment.

But having made her original decision, she cannot now escape its consequences. As a practical matter, even if the courts were now to ban publication, enough copies of the manuscript or fragments of it are in existence in enough different hands to make its complete suppression impossible.

The public interest is best served by the truth. The truth is sometimes embarrassing, but books such as Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s "A Thousand Days" and Theodore Sorensen's "Kennedy" have value to this generation and to future historians that far outweigh any transient embarrassment they cause. The same is likely to be true of Mr. Manchester's book. If it contains mistakes and distortions of emphasis, other volumes by other writers will correct them. History is a work of many hands; it requires many volumes, sympathetic and unsympathetic, before a definitive account becomes possible.