



The Armed Truce

MURRAY KEMPTON

A peace was signed last night between those great warring sovereign powers, the Kennedy family and Cowles Communications—with kicks, cuffs and gougings.

William Attwood, editor in chief of Look, outlegged Judge Simon Rifkind, Mrs. Kennedy's counsel, to the microphones while that old gentleman was waiting to have his statement Xeroxed, and got the Cowles version of the terms on the record first.

He limited himself to saying that Look had sacrificed 1,600 words out of the 80,000 it had projected and that everyone in the Cowles family was proud that William Manchester's splendid work could now issue forth unmarred.

And then Attwood was gone with what seemed to him later a certain absence of grace under pressure from the Kennedy side.

"Did you see that Rifkind push me out of my seat?" Attwood said to a bystander afterwards, making reference to a venerated graduate of the federal bench. "Do you know what those people would have done to us if we let them get on first? This way Look makes the announcement. They'd have killed us if we'd have let them put us on second."

Tough team, the Kennedys; but you can sometimes beat them on speed. Upstairs Judge Rifkind was saying that we are still No. 1.

Walking down Madison Av., Bill Attwood said.

"We gave up some slush. A little ginger-

bread's off the top but the structure's intact."

He had known on Saturday that the business would be settled.

"I was sure it was over when Jackie left."

Attwood can call Mrs. Kennedy "Jackie" without presumption or affectation. He has known her since she was a debutante. He was President Kennedy's ambassador to Guinea and a source of pride to the Administration, particularly respected because he was one of the few Stevensonians with the requisite dexterity of knee and elbow.

"I surmised that Jackie would go along when she read the manuscript."

"My impression was that she was rather pleased. I don't know who this Jacqueline Kennedy is. She was just Jackie Bouvier that afternoon. You know, Lee Radziwill's sister. She was absolutely charming. When she left after three hours, she patted me on the shoulder and said, 'Bill, I had better leave you some cigarets, because you and Dick Goodwin have a lot of work to do.' I was a little surprised to read in the Times the next day that she'd been crying."

Ever since 7 last night, the journalists rendering uninhabitable the conference room of Judge Rifkind's office sat alerted that a statement of the peace terms would be along in 15 minutes. Nothing issued forth until after 10.

Continued on page 33

The Armed Truce

MURRAY KEMPTON

Continued from Page 3

and then instead, as had been implied, of being issued jointly, it came out as a statement by each party.

Mrs. Kennedy's statement, as read by Judge Rifkind, sounded for the first four paragraphs perfectly suitable for the signature of the two powers. But suddenly there appeared at the end another paragraph which Look's ambassadors could hardly have been expected to sign:

"I have been told there are historical inaccuracies and unfair references in this book. That they have been written is unfortunate. However, it was clear before bringing this suit that historical judgments, even if inaccurate, could not properly be suppressed by a court of law. In time, history will deal fairly and justly with this period."

One doubts very much that future diplomatic historians will think Mrs. Kennedy said that. What that paragraph means is that the Kennedy family, its private outrage with the Cowles family satisfied, had thought it proper to avoid any unnecessary breach in its relations with the Johnson family.

One of Attwood's companions on the walk back to his office asked whether the long delay in the announcement had been one of the penalties of government by Sun Valley.

"I'd say that was about it," Attwood answered. "I know who calls the shots now. As I got it, the theme of the evening was 'He'll be right to the phone; he's waxing his skis.'"

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Back at Judge Rifkind's office, the Kennedys were giving a background briefing, attributable to sources close to the family. Kennedy background briefings on this matter have been unusual for three aspects:

1) Last week's background briefing was given by a distinguished lawyer who had not read the book and who, since he was not assigned to the case, could not discuss the legal problems. He was joined by two other backgrounders who had read the book; one said it was tasteless and distorted; the other said it was absolutely splendid.

This made the critical judgment of "a spokesman of the Kennedy family" somewhat difficult to transmit, since it involved composing a sentence like: "A spokesman for the Kennedy family said today that William Manchester had written a piece of junk that was a remarkable, evocative document."

2) Whenever a legal question arises at a Kennedy background briefing the questioner is informed that Judge Rifkind has just left, taking all the papers with him.

3) When a charge was made against poor Manchester, common ethics demanded that a rebuttal be sought, which could produce sentences like: "A spokesman of the Kennedy family said today that William Manchester had acted shamefully, and a spokesman for William Manchester replied that the spokesman for the Kennedy family had spoken shamefully if he had spoken such a thing."

The syntax of these compositions is quite tormented enough in its natural form without being put through any such wringer. One always departs with his gratitude for a Kennedy backgrounder somewhat diluted by the wish that it hadn't left the foreground so foggy.

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Goodness, I'm glad this is over. For one thing, material which seemed objectionable to the Kennedys was hardly rendered more tasteful by being fed to the papers by an army of volunteer translators led off by Bennett Cerf. For another, the Kennedys talked about a misunderstanding as though it had been a swindle, and thereby defamed a man of honor. We would all be better off if it had never happened; as much as all of us, the Kennedys should be grateful that Manchester's work has come through and that it will, by all accounts, leave our affection for President Kennedy larger even than ever.

As for Sen. Kennedy, let him not think he won this one but rather let him remember that his growth has come not from his successes but from his defeats and his misfortunes. We shall meet him down the road again, looking better, we may be confident, than he did last week.