BY MARGARET MEAD

The Right to Privacy vs. The Public Need to Be Informed

The furor roused by the prepublication controversy over William Manchester's book *The Death of a President* throws into sharp relief our conflicting beliefs about the individual's right to privacy and the public's right—and need—to be informed. How much privacy and for whom? How much information and of what kind? Do different rules apply to different people? Or at different times?

Striking a balance of some kind on these issues is a problem that must be solved daily in the press and over television, by journalists and writers, and above all, by those on whom the searchlight of publicity is trained. When does disclosure become invasion? When does omission become a kind of censorship? If people do not agree on what the rules are and when they apply, open conflict is always a possibility. That conflict is especially likely to occur when the central event evokes deep emotions, public and private. In the case of Manchester's book, confusion was added to conflict by a variety of contending appeals to "history."

It was claimed by some that history would be distorted, robbed or betrayed if the book was published as Manchester wrote it; others claimed that history would be distorted if it was *not* published in this form. At the same time various mystical statements were made, such as that history once recorded cannot be suppressed. But what is history? Certainly it is not the events themselves, though they are the subject matter of history. In the simplest sense, history is what historians write afterward about events that have occurrred well in the past. And contemporary discussions of recent events are not history, but only part of the whole body of materials, meager or full, on which the interpretations we call history later will be based.

Manchester's book concerns a tragic event with implications for the whole world. But the issues behind the controversy have a much wider application than to this one particular book.

It is important, first, to differentiate between the reasons for preserving a record and publishing it. Documents and papers are preserved so that future historians will have at their disposal as much source material as possible on which to base their assessments of the past. A book or an article is usually published, however, because it is timely, and because its author and publisher are concerned not with history but with influencing events still in the making. The press and other communications media want to catch and hold the attention of large audiences by presenting news vividly and vitally—sometimes sensationally. Moreover, in a democracy the public *needs* to know, for example, how a president or prime minister actually proceeds with a task, how he is carrying the burden of responsibility and making use of the immense power of his office, what his expectations are, whether or not he is engaged in entangling and unacknowledged political or social alliances and whether his actions, public and private, are consistent with his words.

In the world in which we live, this kind of knowledge about every important political figure is an essential part of our insurance against being duped and misled. In our own country, attempts to manage the news or shape opinion through use of official handouts to the mass media, however carefully prepared, are likely to be discredited. Moreover, the sense of having free access to as much information as possible about men and the events they take part in is the only assurance that the American people will be able to make wise and realistic political choices.

For a public figure this results in an almost total lack of personal privacy, since we make no clear distinction between what is personal and what is public in his life. Although we often make heroes of public men, we also have a continuing interest in every possibly shabby detail of their lives. In fact, the mud that attaches to the public image of the politician helps us feel that there is a real person behind the larger-than-life pictures on the billboards, the ghost-written speeches and the eulogistic descriptions. And intimate views of a public man on a holiday or relaxing

DISCOVER AMERICA BY TRAILWAYS

You travel carefree on a Trailways Tour.
All arrangements are pre-planned
before you leave...
including hotel reservations,
sightseeing side trips
and stopovers en route.
There's nothing left for you to do
but enjoy the scenery...
while you travel in air-conditioned comfort
on your luxurious Trailways bus.
Let Trailways plan you
a carefree "Discover America" Tour!

TRAILWAYS®
"Easiest Travel on Earth"

For further information fill out this coupon now!

TRAILWAYS TOUR BUREAU CORP., Dept. RB
200 Trailways Bldg., 1200 Eye St., N.W.,
Washington, D.C.

I am interested in a Trailways Tour with sightseeing en route at____
and____
via ☐ Individual Tour ☐ Escorted Tour ☐ Charterbus Tour
Name____
Address____
City____ State____ Zip____

with his family or recuperating from an illness reassure us that we have a three-dimensional picture of him.

In this sense, what goes on behind the scenes but is not hidden from view is very relevant to public policy. The feeling of knowing the man is an important aspect of knowing what he stands for. This extreme vulnerability to immediate publication of any and all details, however trivial, shameful, amusing or merely ridiculous, is part of the burden that public figures must accept. Though the public may sympathize with this lack of privacy, people still want—and need—to know.

Once the searchlight is turned on, no one is shielded from its glare. So the lives of those related to the principals also become public property. We learn how wives run their households, how courtships are progressing and how the escapades of children are treated. This was not always so, but today the families of public men, largely by their own choice, have entered the arena. When mothers and wives and sisters-in-law campaign for candidates and when children are present on every occasion from a political rally to the reception of foreign dignitaries or the take-off for a trip into space, can they still be treated as private individuals? Of course, wives who have assumed responsible public roles inevitably share the same fate as their husbands. The same rules—or lack of rules—apply to their activities, public and private.

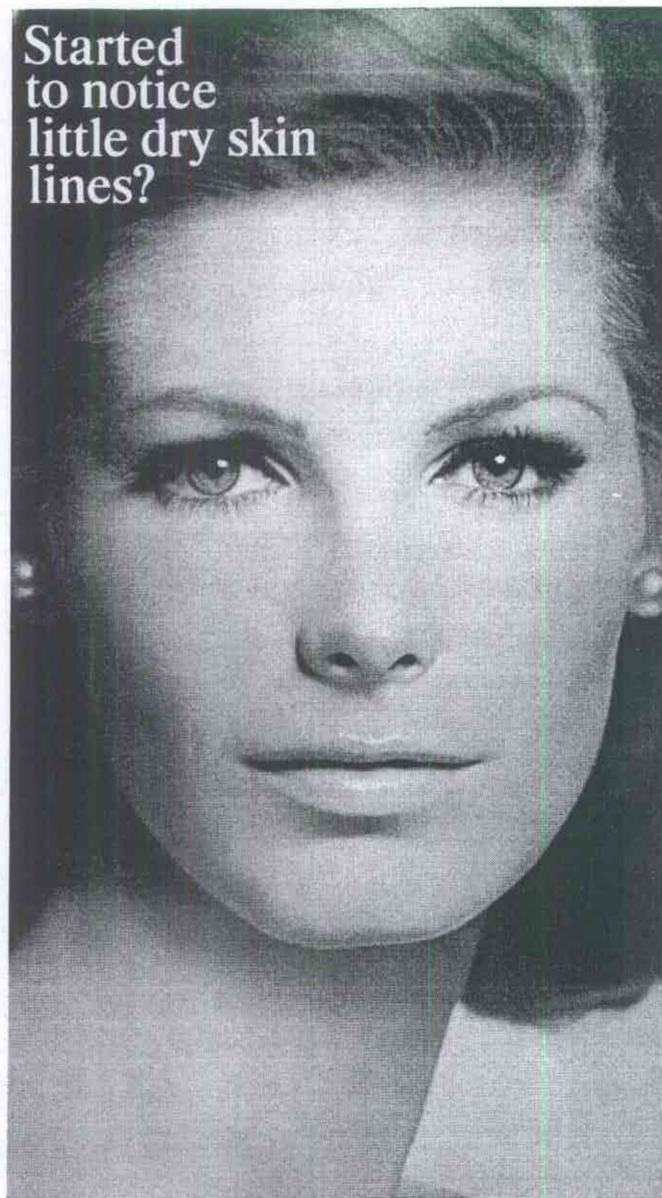
But the whole question of publicity and publication takes on a different meaning after the death of a public figure. For then whatever is published about him, especially when those close to him are involved, has relevance, not only to the past, but also the present in which others have become the central figures. In the handling of these matters, we do have workable conventions. The survivors may seal their private papers or tape-recorded documents for any period they wish to designate, securing the information for posterity but removing it from contemporary discussion. In the same way, public men and women can take the steps necessary to protect those close to them by setting their seal on their private papers, just as they make their wills on any other subject. These are conventions on which there is, or has been, common agreement.

Therefore, in theory reticence is feasible. Publication is not necessary to protect the record. For this purpose it is necessary only that documents should be protected from physical destruction, that they should be kept safe from mice and cockroaches and white ants, from fire and storm, from mildew and mold. It is not even necessary to gather them in one archive or make public their existence.

Viewed from a distance in time, events are seen to have interrelationships indiscernible to those living through them. Historians reach out far beyond the formal record in their search for information. Their training leads them to depend not only on organized contemporary accounts, but also on the evidence that can be derived from records that were made for other purposes, such as letters, diaries, ledgers, pictures and all the apparently trivial materials in which men and women express themselves without special concern for the public or the future. The discovery of new documents gives zest and variety to the historian's task of interpretation, and indirect, unintentional records are precious sources on which he can work undisturbed by the passions and conflicts of living witnesses.

But in the modern world it is becoming increasingly difficult to take the long view, the historian's view, of events. The glare of publicity during a man's lifetime and the spate of words published about his every activity and utterance stimulate our desire to know what there is to know almost instantly.

But this is not all. The immense possibilities of modern communications tempt us to believe that we can in



Skin Dew
helps dew away
dry skin lines
24 hours a day.

Those little lines aren't the end of the world. Take the fastest action possible—Skin Dew by Helena Rubinstein.

In the morning, slip into Skin Dew Moisturizing Emulsion. Its precious moisture seeps deep. Works invisibly to help dispel dryness. Leaves the barest silky mist so make-up flows on with ease—stays fresh longer.

At night, re-dew with Skin Dew Moisture Cream with exclusive Collagen Protein (a natural substance comparable to the proteins in young skin). Its rich emollients, moisturizers, softeners help fight wrinkles, keep skin soft, supple, smooth.

Helena Rubinstein®

©1967, Helena Rubinstein, Inc.

some manner control history. During a man's active career he—and his associates—naturally wish to forestall and combat criticism. Since books will be written, why not seek out friendly writers to write friendly books; and if intimate pictures of family life must be part of the public record, isn't it desirable to set the stage and bring in the chosen photographer? But today this desire to show a man from the best vantage point extends also into the future. Far from waiting for the judgment of history—once thought to be beyond control, as God's judgment was beyond human control—men attempt to shape not only the present but also the future's view of the present.

Manchester's book and the controversies it aroused can be seen within all these contexts. The desire of the Kennedy family to have the book written may be interpreted as a way of getting a great deal of research done, for obviously the author would not have done the work without the goal of writing and publishing a book. The documents he has assembled so painstakingly, especially the interviews with living witnesses, the tapes of which are to be deposited in the Kennedy archives, may well be invaluable.

The desire to have the published account *now* must also be seen as part of our complex attitude toward public men. The very fact that the book's publication has caused an uproar indicates its relevance to events now taking place and the men involved in them, not merely its relevance to the past or to the necessity of preserving information for the future. For it is not only members of the Kennedy family and those close to them whose feelings and stature may be damaged by the statements made in a published account. Like every president, John F. Kennedy had successors, rivals, competitors and enemies, and it is they—like others in similar situations—who are most likely to be damaged by the early publication of books in which, without their consent, their earlier actions and views are exposed and judged in relation to the central figure. And we may well ask, should these men be exposed to the kind of emotional calumny characteristic of a partisan book, to which in the nature of the case they cannot reply? Is this not an invasion of their still-ongoing public lives?

But beyond all these issues, there is the question of contemporary attitudes toward history and of contemporary writers as the makers of history. Certainly this book and the controversies about it will provide an immense amount of documentary material for the eventual use of historians, mainly about the climate of opinion in 1967. That is, the conflict over the Manchester book is in itself now part of the material of history. How future historians will interpret this conflict, no one today can predict. What is clear, however, is that the book and the conflict reveal how we are attempting to extend to the future the methods we use to portray, to know about, and in so doing to control, contemporary public figures. But such an attempt to shape the record is in fact an invasion of the future.

When attention is focused on a major public figure, a president of the United States in whom tremendous power and responsibility are centered, it is inevitable that the need to know, the fear of knowing, the intolerance of weakness, the resentment of succession, the desperate desire to preserve a hero figure and the corresponding impulse to scale the lost hero or his successor down to far less than human size, will create immense difficulties in the handling of public communications.

What we must work toward is a set of practices that will assure us of sufficient day-to-day knowledge of the public figures to whom we entrust our political and economic fate. What we need are the facts to help us deal with the present; what we also need is a record that is open to the insights of future generations. THE END