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The Kennedy Post-Mortem

The case of the Kennedy-Manchester book is an example of everyone being wrong in some respect, everyone coming out badly, and everyone suffering. Temporarily, one of the victims may well be the truth about the circumstances surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy.

The initial mistake was that of the family in commissioning an account that was to be not only authorized but censored. Whoever orders—and whoever agrees to write—such a book is serving neither history nor truth. As we said editorially last week, “authorized” books are basically a bad idea, and Mrs. Kennedy now cannot escape the consequences of having tried to authorize one. History is no one’s personal property.

Whether or not the case is settled out of court, the full text of the book is almost surely going to be divulged, printed and circulated. There are copies of the work in Britain, France, Germany, Italy and probably other countries. It is unlikely that the text can be suppressed for more than a month or two. Highlights of the book are now being printed every day in American newspapers.

Whatever political repercussions there may be—and they are likely to be unimportant—are going to take place whether the book is published now or not. The apparently decisive extent to which Mrs. Kennedy’s personal objections are responsible for bringing this case into the courts only emphasizes her original mistake in pouring out her emotions on tape to a designated writer, who—whether he is legally at fault or not—has evidently violated an understanding he had with the Kennedy family. His own mistake on making such an arrangement is only too obvious. Yet Mrs. Kennedy’s persistence in making one of the most sensational legal cases in the history of the American Presidency is inexplicable if only because the damage is already done.

The whole sorry affair leads to two conclusions. One is that an authorized account should never have been commissioned—but there is no going back on that. The other is that history, once recorded, can never be suppressed.

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