

Post Daily Magazine

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Manchester vs. The Kennedys

ARTICLE II

By WILLIAM H. RUDY

Based on reports by Michael Berlin, Arthur Berman (in Los Angeles), Barry Cunningham (in Washington), Rene English (in London), John Garabedian, Arthur Greenaway (in Middletown, Conn.), William Greaves, Kenneth Gross, Pete Hamill, Joseph Kahn, Edward Katcher, Leonard Katz, Murray Kempton, Anthony Prissendorff and Marvin Smolin.

IN JANUARY and February, 1964, only weeks after the assassination of the President, the Kennedy family, still stunned, became aware that a number of books were planned on the tragedy.

Late in February, Pierre Salinger, in his closing days as White House press secretary, put in a phone call to William Manchester in Middletown, Conn. This call, taken by Manchester's wife, Judy, marked the beginning of an involvement the writer would later describe as "two years of hell."

Salinger's call to Manchester, only a moderately well-known author then, was not made on the spur of the moment. The choice seemed logical enough.

Salinger knew Manchester from the time the writer was working on "Portrait of a President," a most favorable three-part Holiday magazine series on John F. Kennedy, later expanded into a book. When Manchester wrote the portrait, he volunteered the right of review to the White House. Salinger also knew of President Kennedy's respect for Manchester as a researcher and a writer.

Nevertheless, Manchester was only one of several authors considered for the book on the assassination—and not necessarily the first choice.

Robert Kennedy recalls it this way: "What happened was that in 1964 we started hearing that three or four sensational writers were starting to work on books," he told Pete Hamill. "I mean the sort of writer that would sensationalize the story, would dwell on that sort of detail that served no real purpose."

"We just didn't want to go through it all over and over again. I suppose we were naive, because we're going to have to live with this thing the rest of our lives. But in January of '64, we thought we could have one man do it, and have it done with."

"Most of this reasoning came from Pierre, and it was Pierre who suggested Manchester. I had never met Manchester before."

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BEFORE THE CALL TO MIDDLETOWN, HOWEVER, there had been calls to Theodore H. White and Walter Lord. White's masterly reporting on the election campaign of 1960 made him an obvious choice to many.

White said he didn't want to do the book—that too much agony was involved. He had already done a post-assassination piece for Life and it was, he said, a great strain. It was not because of any preconditions that he turned down the job, for none had been set then. But he has since noted that "those of us who write of public affairs would do almost anything rather than sign such a contract."

Lord, whose "A Night to Remember" and "Day of Infamy," reconstructions of the Titanic disaster and Pearl Harbor, were best-sellers, received a call, he thinks, from Edwin O. Guthman, then Robert Kennedy's press secretary. Asked if he was interested, his initial reaction was "No," but he told the caller he would think it over. He was not called again; he says he would not have accepted the task anyway.

Others recall that the project was motivated by the fact that a number of writers, notably Jim Bishop, were planning books.

Says Guthman: "I think Mrs. Kennedy suggested that somebody do a real history, thinking that if publishers knew she was talking to a writer, it would



PIERRE SALINGER

prevent exploitation. I don't know of anyone who cautioned against it."

Manchester had appeal, he adds, because his background was somewhat like the late President's—both New Englanders, about the same age, with wartime experience in the Pacific.

So the call went to Manchester's modest frame house in Middletown. The writer was at his job with American Educational Publications, then a part of Wesleyan University, and the call was transferred there.

Manchester's initial reaction was that he already was deep in a project—his still-unfinished book on the Krupp family—but that he would like to consider the proposal.

Two and half years later, during a heated exchange with Bobby Kennedy, Manchester is recalled as saying: "I didn't come to you, you came to me. I was perfectly happy writing a book I was interested in doing. Arthur Schlesinger talked to me about the book; Salinger talked to me about the book. This book has ruined my life, my family life is not the same. I've been under a doctor's care."

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IN ANY EVENT, ON FEB. 26, AFTER THE SALINGER proposal, Manchester went to Washington and said he had reconsidered.

The result, after a discussion of conditions, rights of review—and money—was a tentative agreement on a "memorandum of understanding" between Manchester and the Kennedys.

Manchester's enthusiasm for the project is indicated by a letter he wrote to Attorney General Robert Kennedy on March 3. The memorandum still had not come through, but the writer was making plans. He had been poring over records of the past three months, he said, and had compiled a list of some 200 sources of material.

He had gone so far as to think in terms of a prologue—a White House dinner the night before President Kennedy left on his Texas trip—followed by the events of Nov. 21-23, and then an epilogue.

"But you may have some thought about that," he added to Robert Kennedy.

After giving assurance that he was ready "to

leave Wesleyan on a few hours notice," he referred to the proposed memorandum and said "we are in absolute accord."

"I agree that it is important that Mrs. Kennedy and you should review the manuscript," Manchester wrote. "If you had not suggested this, I would have."

The writer said he did have one suggestion—that the memo stipulate that the book may appear within three years—or before Nov. 22, 1966—but "if you prefer five years, then five years it shall be."

"I have complete faith in your good judgment," he added in one of the last touches of euphoria to mark the negotiations.

On March 26, 1964, the memorandum signed by Robert Kennedy and Manchester was issued. It consisted of 11 points, the third of which said: "The completed manuscript shall be reviewed by Mrs. John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy, and the final text shall not be published unless and until approved by them."

The memo also provided that "other rights may be disposed of by William Manchester with the approval of [the Kennedys] though it is not the intention to prevent the sale of serial option rights to a responsible publisher."

Other points provided the book not be published before Nov. 22, 1968—the fifth anniversary of the assassination—unless Mrs. Kennedy approved; that if Mrs. Manchester would have the exclusive right to the book, she would be free to sell it; that Robert Kennedy would see that doors were open to him alone, with the author undertaking to treat the material he got "with discretion," and that if Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy were unable to give final approval to the text, "such approval shall be given by Sen. Edward F. Kennedy or someone he designates."

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TO A LAYMAN, THE AGREEMENT MIGHT APPEAR sufficiently airtight but Irwin Karp, counsel to the Authors League of America, has pointed out in the Saturday Review that courts have sometimes held that authors and publishers may not in "right-of-approval" contracts sign away the public's Constitutional rights to know.

One who was involved in the negotiations says now that the memo was drawn up without lawyers or persons skilled in the publishing field because "the Kennedys didn't want a formal contract."

"They didn't want to be accused of trying to steer the course of history," he said. "They only wanted an honest account. They were offering the guy everything. In return for that, they wanted some control. There was no evil involved in the story, except for the assassination. They didn't think it should reflect badly on anybody."

One provision of the memorandum said that at the request of the Kennedys, Harper & Row would be the publisher.

Much of Manchester's earlier writing had been at the suggestion of an editor for Holiday magazine who had moved on to Little, Brown & Co., of Boston. Manchester had moved to Little, Brown, too, and was writing the Krupp book for them. He was able to obtain a written release from them, and this was presented, all wrapped up in a neat package, to Harper.

Evan Thomas became Manchester's new editor at Harper.

Salinger told Thomas that the family had selected an author. "He's a Little, Brown author, and you better get after him," Salinger said.

Thomas said he had no interest—no wish to make a commercial thing out of the murder of the President. Within hours he was invited to the Attorney General's office, where he met Manchester for the first time. He insisted Harper & Row would publish the book only under non-commercial circumstances.

The Kennedys had a predilection for Harper & Row—and Thomas—because they had edited and published John F. Kennedy's "Profiles in Courage," as well as two Robert Kennedy books, and relations had always been friendly.

Thomas was thus in a sense the Kennedys' publisher and now he became Manchester's publisher. As a result he found himself, three years later, in an awkward position.

The Kennedys were happy because they had reached agreement with an author who was a devout admirer of the late President as well as a prodigious and skilled researcher, and with a publisher of long and close association.

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SALINGER, WHO HAS SPOKEN OF MANCHESTER'S "sensitivity" and reporting ability, considers him both a very bright young writer and a very talented one.

"The Death of a President" is an "extraordinarily fascinating" book, he says, but three years have changed his evaluation of Manchester on other grounds.

"He is purely and simply a wetcher who wretched on his contract. He sought \$695,000—and ratted on his contract," Salinger says. "This [the dispute] has nothing to do with changing history, no matter what some poor misguided author up in Connecticut may think or say. And you can quote me on that!"

The road had come a long way since Manchester went to work so earnestly in April, 1964.

Continued Tomorrow.