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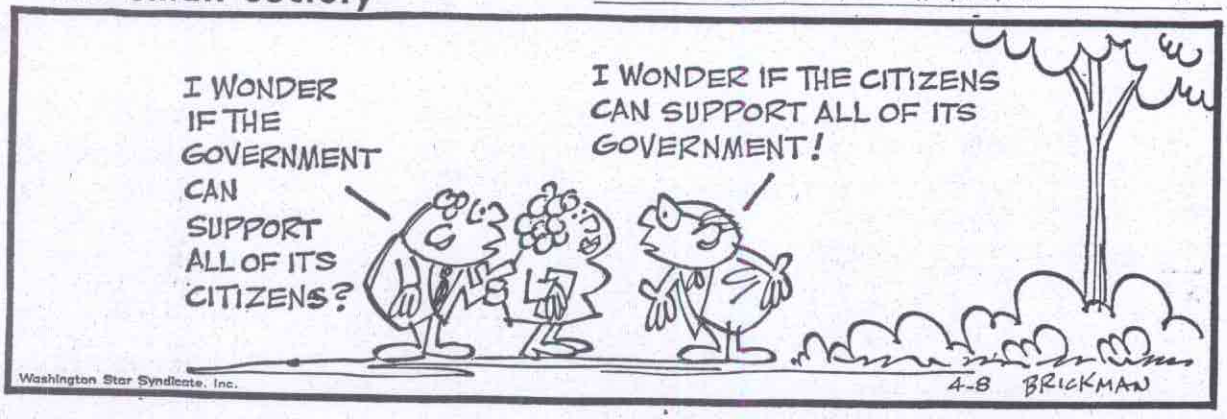

MAX LERNER

Manchester's Lack of Humility Troubling

NEW ORLEANS — Bill Manchester said, "Let the book speak for itself." It does — a whopper of a book, fact-crammed, precise, sweeping, theatrical, poetic, exhaustive, and exhausting. Even its obvious faults — the overwriting, the surfeit of detail that tells us more than we want to know, the dragging-in of marginal material, the flights of mawkishness — even these faults are tolerable because they leave the book a source book for others that may remain to be written.

One can understand why Manchester was so unrelenting in "The Death of a President" (Harper). Living for several years with Kennedy's death, obsessed with its every aspect, filled with its terror, he had the need of purging himself of that terror, and the only way he could do it was to put in everything, leave nothing out. This presumably is how it actually happened, every blasted detail of it. One reader was almost carried along by its torrential flow. Almost. I found myself saying, "This then is how it was" — and adding, "but was it?"

How did my doubts crop up? Mostly when I began to question Manchester's depiction of character and his calculation of motive. I don't want to be misunderstood here. I am not troubled by his inclusion of the subjective, which after all is also part of history. You can't truly write history unless you bring together event and character, deed and motive, the word and what it flows from, what these people did but also by what springs of action and passion they were moved.

No, I don't fault Manchester for giving us evaluations. What troubles me is the erosion of my sense of confidence in them.

Partly this is a result of the pre-publication battle of the book. You read now in the book with what coolness and courage and total self-discipline Robert Kennedy behaved in the greatest testing of his life. Then you read again the interviews Manchester gave during the battle, and his last, long, bitter article in Look after the serialization. You find a different Bobby, one who shouts and raves when his will is crossed, then hides in an alcove and pounces out at you. Hamlet-like you find yourself saying, "Look at this portrait—and at this one." Can they be the same man? And what shall we say of the judgment of an author who was either naive in the first place or vindictive later.

What goes for Bobby goes for Jacqueline Kennedy, too. In fact, since she was even more intolerably perfect in the book, her later fall from grace is all the more shattering. And if Manchester was so wrong about these two, what shall we think of the book's judgment of John Kennedy himself or of Lyndon Johnson or of Lee Oswald?

This brings me to the central act of the whole tragic enactment — that of the killing itself. Can we be as sure as Manchester is that Oswald was the man who shot Kennedy, or that he was alone in his act? And whether alone or with others, do we so confidently know why?

There is an aggressive cockiness about Manchester's telling of this part of the tragedy that puts me off. As it happens I am writing this from New Orleans, where I have been trying to dig into the case that District Attorney Jim Garrison has—or thinks he has—against Oswald, Ferrie, Shaw and perhaps several others in a presumably linked group. We won't know for some time how much of this will stand up in court, and it will take longer to see how much will stand up in history.

Manchester couldn't have known that the New Orleans story would break just as his book was published. But it is not his lack of clairvoyance that troubles me, only his lack of humility. His portraits of Oswald and Ruby are brilliantly done—once you accept the premise. But undercut the premise, as Garrison is trying to do, and the brilliance of the portraits is not only dimmed but becomes cruelly irrelevant.

Manchester is dead-sure not only about Oswald's firing the shots alone, but even why, and what went on in his mind. The next six months in New Orleans may make the Manchester book as archaic as a dodo bird. The perils of writing history are great enough without increasing them by pretending you have a pipeline to truth because a royal family gave you the franchise on their memories.