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Manchester Describes the Book Battle

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Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, D-N.Y., behaved with "sheer insanity" during the controversy over William Manchester's book, "The Death of a President," according to the author.

In an article in Look Magazine, on the news stands tomorrow, Manchester tells his story of the 26 months during which he wrote the book and "the months of tumult that followed."

On Aug. 12, 1966, he says, he spent "three of the most uncomfortable hours of my life" in Kennedy's Washington office and watched, appalled, "while he paced tigerlike between Evan Thomas, John Seigenthaler and me."

By that time, Manchester says, both the President's brother and his widow were "wholly irrational."

"He accused me of raising my voice. He pretended to leave the room, hid in an alcove, and leapt out, pointing an accusing finger at me. Once, he beckoned Evan aside and held a whispered conversation with him, glaring meantime at me," Manchester writes.

Thomas was Manchester's editor at Harper & Row and Seigenthaler, now editor of the Nashville Tennessean, served in the Justice Department when Kennedy was attorney general.

Originally, Manchester says, he and Robert Kennedy agreed in a "memorandum of understanding" that the book would not be published until 1968 and then later realized that that would be in the midst of a presidential election campaign.

On Jan. 12, 1965, he says, he and Kennedy settled on 1966 or 1967 as the publication time.

Earlier, he said, Mrs. Kennedy had written a letter on Oct. 1, 1964 to another author, with a carbon to Manchester, in which she said: "He will present his finished manuscript and it will be published with no censorship from myself or from anyone else. I have too much respect for history to tamper with the results of his research."

In July of last year, he says, the senator sent him a telegram saying the Kennedy family would place no obstacle in the way of publication.

Although Manchester described the telegram in a reply as "superb" and "airtight" its meaning later became a major

issue in the controversy over publication of the book and its serialization by Look.

Mrs. Kennedy, Manchester says, was a heroine during the period immediately after her husband's murder and "in our hour of disgrace and confusion . . . held us all together."

But later, he said, "When I tried to tell her that the integrity of my work was not negotiable, she didn't understand. She simply tuned me out . . . honor was indeed the issue. The difficulty was that her definition differed sharply from mine. I was a writer, not a courtier."

Almost everyone he talked to, Manchester said, assumed that his work would be of value chiefly to historians rather than

becoming what may be the most widely read book of the century.

While he was doing his research, he looked forward to the time he would begin to write. But, "the instant I scrawled 'Prologue' across the top of a ruled yellow pad, I knew I was in for it . . ."

During his research and writing, he says, he had had some difficulties with the Kennedys, but nothing to indicate the trouble that lay ahead. On one occasion, he says, he asked Mrs. Kennedy for a personal letter of introduction. He learned she had had someone else send the letter.

And by the summer of 1964, he says, "I found it almost impossible to establish any satisfactory professional contact with either of the two principals" even though their personal relationship, when they met, continued to be cordial.

But there were flashes of lightning on the horizon.

In the summer of 1965, he says, Theodore Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. were racing to meet publishers' deadlines and get Kennedy family approval on their books.

Manchester says he spent two hours begging Sorensen to hold out against proposed changes in his book, but he went along with the changes. Schlesinger held out and "his July was chilly."

In mid-1966, he says, increasing efforts — "an extraordinary onslaught" — were made to force changes in the manuscript.

But the real break apparently came when Mrs. Kennedy learned that he had signed — with the "unqualified approval" of Robert Kennedy — a contract that would give him \$665,000 in serial rights from Look.

When the senator told her

about it, Manchester says, she denounced it as commercialization and Kennedy, a friend told Manchester, left the house "dismayed, embarrassed and bewildered."

Manchester's bitterness over the resentment on the part of the Kennedys about the amount of money he was to receive shows clearly in his account. Although he doesn't say how much he expects to make, he implies that it will be far less than the \$5 million he expects the book to earn for the Kennedy Library.

It was a time, he said, "in which unbelievable charges were made, unforgivable words spoken and treasured friendships ruptured."

At one point, he said, he could hardly bring himself to believe that a U.S. senator was banging on his hotel door and shouting his name.