

An Interview With Author of JFK Book

Part Jan 23, 1967 Manchester Recounts Battle

The following is an exclusive interview, granted by William Manchester, author of "The Death of a President," to Newsweek senior editor James M. Cannon and general editor Edward Kosner.

Q. What has been the lesson for you in this whole episode?

A. I think anyone who undertakes to write contemporary history has to anticipate problems. In this case I found myself pitted against a dozen people who had been good friends. I learned something about the political animal—people who are betting their futures on another Kennedy Administration, who are willing to do anything.

Q. How did the controversy over "The Death of a President" begin?

A. I finished the manuscript and came to New York on March 26, 1966, with one original and four Xerox copies of the book. I gave one copy to Harper and Row [the publishers], one to my agent, and three to Bobby's [Sen. Robert F. Kennedy] secretary, Angie Novello. I went to Jackie's [Jacqueline Kennedy] office that afternoon and turned to [her press secretary] Pam Turnure. I said for the 15th time: "I'm dealing with two principals here, Jackie and Bobby. Am I doing the right thing? Should I give one copy to Jackie?" Pam said: "Work through Bobby."

Bobby and Jackie agreed verbally and in letters that the book would come out before 1968. For almost exactly four months Evan Thomas [Manchester's editor at Harper's] worked



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WILLIAM MANCHESTER

... pitted against his friends

with the two people, designated by Bobby—Ed [Edwin O.] Guthman, [national editor of the Los Angeles Times] and John Seigenthaler [editor of the Nashville Tennessean].

At my request, Arthur Schlesinger and Dick [Richard N.] Goodwin [former White House aides] read the book. I incorporated changes of both

groups because they were good. On July 14 there was a conference call between Bobby, Seigenthaler, Thomas and myself. We resolved one final phrase.

Seigenthaler said: "It's OK with Bobby. Go ahead with submission to the magazines." On July 28, Bobby sent a special delivery letter to Evan Thomas and an identical wire to me. When I saw "members of the Kennedy family will place no obstacle in the way of publication" of the book, I thought it was all over.

Q. But it wasn't?

A. The magazine bidding quickly narrowed to Look and Life. Life bid \$150,000 more than Look on the first round but refused to give me complete editorial control. I was in touch with Bobby twice on the telephone. Bobby also talked to Warren Rogers [Look's Washington correspondent] and expressed the hope that Look would get it. Bobby told me: "If it's Life, check with me; if it's Look, don't bother to call me back." Life was being sticky; they said they wanted to give me the answer on Monday. I was in the marvelous position of saying: "Tell Henry Luce he's got 'till 5 p.m. today." On Saturday I called Bobby on the tennis court in Hyannis Port and said: "It's Look." "Gee, that's great," Bobby said when I told him the price was \$665,000. "That's a record, isn't it?" I said: "I don't know." Bobby said: "I'm glad it's Look because they have been so nice to the family and Luce has been such a —."

The next day Bobby told Jackie, and

See MANCHESTER, A14, Col. 1.

a mushroom cloud appeared over Hyannis Port. She was concerned over the sum of money and what she felt was commercialization. Apparently Jackie didn't know the details of the memorandum of understanding between Bobby and me. She didn't hire me. Later, she explained, in effect: "None of us wanted to think about this — we turned it over to you and let you worry about it. We hadn't thought these things through."

I spent that whole week after the agreement with Look trying to find out what the situation was. Ethel Kennedy [the Senator's wife] assured me there was no problem. I talked with Angie Novello. Angie took a note in to Bobby who was in a meeting. The substance of the reply she quoted to me was: "Tell Manchester I've always kept my word and I will in this case." During the airlines strike in August, Evan Thomas and I chartered a plane and flew to Washington and dealt with Bobby and Seigenthaler for three hours. Bobby was so irrational. He was concerned about the money now.

Q. Do you think the money was the real reason for their distress?

A. It was impossible to ascertain their motives. They were all for the book — but no magazine serialization. On Sept. 7, Dick Goodwin and I flew up to Hyannis Port on the Caroline to see Jackie. She was not hostile. She took the position that I was the St. George who was going to slay the dragon—Look. I couldn't get her to face the reality that I had signed a contract with them.

By now the whole four months of editing and approval by designated representatives was forgotten about by the Kennedys. Goodwin was made responsible by Jackie for everything that would be in the manuscript. Dick tried to emasculate the Look galleys. His editing of the Look galleys was fantastic. At one point nearly 50 per cent of the third installment was edited. It would have been unprintable. He was editing largely for political reasons — material about Bobby and Johnson. My position was that political material was vital for the historical record and was not negotiable. Personal changes were something else.

After my meeting with

Goodwin Disputes Manchester View

NEW YORK, Jan. 22 (AP)—Here is the text of a statement by Richard Goodwin, adviser to Mrs. John F. Kennedy about the book "The Death of a President," commenting on an interview author William Manchester gave Newsweek magazine:

Mr. Manchester's account bears no relationship to the actual course of discussion and controversy surrounding his book. Reading it, one is struck by the enormous difficulty of answering statements made in complete disregard of the truth.

The truth is that from July to December, Mrs. John F. Kennedy asked that certain changes relating solely to her personal life and the lives of her children be deleted. She had personally read these passages. She told Mr. Manchester the changes represented her personal judgment and wishes.

Despite his continual assurances and promises, these changes in a small portion of an enormous narration were never made. These changes were such that they could not conceivably affect the political future of anyone.

Mr. Manchester's statement, however, makes it necessary to mention other aspects of his manuscript.

When he delivered it in March 1965, the publishers wrote representatives of the Kennedy family that the book is "in part tasteless and gratuitously insulting to President Johnson and, for that matter, to the memory of the late President Kennedy."

"Mr. Manchester," the publishers wrote, had turned "the tragedy into a magic fairy tale."

In an effort to make the book both accurate and fair, to remove the sometimes horrifying and unjust implications about several individuals, the publishers and representatives of the Kennedy family recom-

mended many changes. As a result, almost one third of the book was modified.

Almost all the first chapter was discarded or rewritten.

However, many substantial recommended changes were never made and others that were agreed upon were later restored by the author without informing either the publishers or the Kennedy representatives.

It is true that we did not oppose serialization; nor did we oppose ultimate publication of the book, but publication was to be of approved manuscript and, in fact, no manuscript was ever approved; although we were constantly assured, both orally and in writing, that the requested changes would be made, not only were they not made, but material which had previously been deleted was restored.

Even after Mr. Manchester refused to make changes in the interest of accuracy, he continually promised to make changes requested by Mrs. Kennedy.

At one point the publishers said they would not publish the book unless these changes were made.

It was the failure to make these changes, and for that reason only, that legal action was finally brought.

Almost every incident as described by Mr. Manchester in his Newsweek interview is as fictional as some of the most objectionable passages in his original manuscript."

Sen. Kennedy's Statement

Sen. Robert F. Kennedy issued the following statement last night in reply to the Manchester interview:

"It all finally comes down to the fact that Mr. Manchester gave his word and then broke it. No statement or interview or description of events, however dramatic, can alter that plain fact. For that reason, I shall have no further comment."

Jackie, there was another meeting later in the fall with Bobby at Hickory Hill [the Senator's home]. It was my last meeting with Bobby. It was chilly, but Bobby being Bobby, he had to put on bathing trunks and go swimming. He would ask me a question, then duck under water and I would wait for him to surface in the pool before answering. His head was under water most of the time. Bobby told me Ted Sorensen [a former White House aide, now a New York lawyer] had advised him to file suit because of his own political future. But putting Jackie on the stand would be intolerable and he himself could only lose politically. So would I consider the personal changes which Dick Goodwin was then making in Look and I said I would. This was a very

friendly meeting. I had supper with Ethel, Bobby and the children and we watched television.

In early September, Evan Thomas and I told Goodwin he should expect galleys of the book in late October and would be given two weeks to make suggestions. When the galleys came in I took them over and personally handed them to Dick's secretary (he was away) with a covering letter that pointed out that "Time is of the essence. I must have the galleys in the mail by Nov. 10." I gave him 15 days. Nothing happened, no word. I called — Goodwin was traveling in Europe. "In the absence of suggestions, I assume you have none," I wrote Goodwin in a letter and I mailed the galleys off to meet the Harper production deadline.

I was going to England

the morning of Nov. 16 and I did. While I was in England there had been another meeting. RFK and [Gardner] Cowles [editor in chief of Look] made more changes. Cass Canfield [of Harper's] and Evan Thomas flew over to England with the other changes — I did not approve all of them. I made changes in about 50 per cent of the galleys submitted. Cass Canfield handed me a letter from Jackie saying there were personal changes involving her and her children — but the first six that I encountered in the galleys involved LBJ and had nothing to do with her or her children. My recollection is that 17 of the 27 changes she asked for were made.

I got sick. On Dec. 13 I landed in New York and read in the New York Times about a spokesman saying

Mrs. Kennedy was contemplating litigation. Bobby had told me there would be no law suit. I learned from the Times there would be. But I didn't believe it until it was actually filed.

Q. How do you feel about Mrs. Kennedy now?

A. The wisest thing would have been if she had read the book at the beginning. But everybody felt it would be too painful for her. Finally, after she filed suit, Jackie did sit down and read the whole book. She sat up with Goodwin one night until 5:30 a.m. She had read the Look excerpts first at a meeting at the offices of the Look lawyers on Wall Street. She read every word of Look with growing interest and surprise. She left the meeting smiling. But when she saw the reporters and photographers waiting outside, her eyes filled with tears — and that's how the stories that the book made her cry got started.

Regardless of what has happened, for four crucial days [after the President's assassination] this woman behaved superbly. She was virtually the government of this country and held it together. Nobody can ever take that away from her. I feel a deep well of sorrow that what began as a noble project should have descended to a law suit. I am distressed by the extent of the reaction against Jackie because I think that as a symbol she is important. Maybe it's an illusion, but maybe people need illusions. If they don't have a President who reigns, they need something else.

Q. What was the precise extent of the editing prompted by the litigation?

A. The Look people came up with a figure of 1600 words deleted, and 2000 more were deleted from the book version. That's 3600 words out of 360,000—1 per cent. Changes were made in about 250 places. A word here, a phrase there—some of Jackie's changes were baffling—but not a single incident is omitted.

Q. What was your attitude toward Lyndon Johnson when you began the research for the book, and did it change?

A. I don't know people like Johnson. I had had no con-

tact with him before. I felt as I think most people did—that he was a strong and effective Senate Majority Leader. I never tried harder for an interview. I felt it would be ghastly to have to say in the book that everyone agreed to see me except the President and the assassin's widow. Twice LBJ agreed to see me, once with [McGeorge] Bundy and once with a member of the Kennedy family, and I even had a rehearsal session in the White House with one of

his staff people for the interview, but he never granted it. The President has never discussed the intimate details of [Nov. 22, 1963] with [a reporter]. I believe it was impossible for him to do it.

The book is not pathologically anti-LBJ. I think Johnson acted in incredibly difficult circumstances. I think he behaved well. We were all slobs that afternoon. He was trying. He was strong, effective. I am distressed that there have been so many anti-Johnson stories attributed to the book. They are not true and not in the book at all. But I couldn't avoid reporting what he actually did.

Q. Are you convinced that Oswald was the assassin?

A. The evidence is utterly overwhelming that he assassinated the President.

Q. When you started you said publicly that you didn't want to make any money on this project. But somewhere along the way it became obvious that you were going to make a great deal. Would you explain the evolution of your thinking on the question of money?

A. The first time I talked to Bobby before we signed the agreement, he said: "I don't want anybody to make a killing out of my brother's death." I said: "I'm not going to negotiate about your brother's death—you dictate your terms." I put into the memorandum of understanding everything Bobby wanted. . . .

Yes, I'm going to make a lot of money. But in the light of my three years' agony, it's not excessive. In the publishing world, the professional estimates are that the Kennedy [Memorial] Library will make \$5 million from the book. My agent has predicted that my share may gross somewhere in the area of \$1.5 million, but that will be substantially reduced by taxes and legal expenses and I may come out with something in the range of \$500,000. At the time I wrote the memo I was not thinking in terms of money—this wasn't why I was doing it—and I refused to worry about it. I live quietly and rather frugally on the edge of a college campus and I don't intend to change my way of living now.