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Timing Played Against Manchester

It does not seem surprising that the undisguised emotions of a young widow should prove to be a volatile, evanescent subject for historical research.

After the many sordid intrusions by trashmongers upon Mrs. John F. Kennedy, it is a sad irony that William Manchester should become the victim of this volatility. No author ever approached his tasks in a more idealistic frame of mind.

Thrilled by his opportunity and awed by the dimensions of his theme, Manchester arrived in Washington in the bleak winter of 1964. Few in the Kennedy camp had known him previously but he was given all the trappings of complete family sanction. He was quickly accepted as a confidant by people who felt a need to tell their stories.

But Manchester had come to Washington at the wrong time. Few among the mourners or within the new power structure at the White House had fully recovered their poise. As the new, insecure President worked to gather the reins of power in his hands, the atmosphere crackled with the abrasions which such a process entails.

The people who were surrendering power did not enjoy yielding it up and those who were taking power did not have the confidence or time to be unfailingly gracious. Manchester turned on his tape recorder in a complex, dark, brooding period which bristled with suspicions and misunderstandings. He caught every-

one, including Mrs. Kennedy, at a low ebb.

Time has not dispelled the schismatic preoccupations of those days but it has restored the buoyancy and balance necessary to keep these considerations in rational bounds. By dissolving the bitterness which tinged and shaped the reminiscences that Manchester recorded, time has made his book a mirror of many sentiments to which his key sources no longer attach great importance or belief.

His book is now discussed as the factor that will finish off Lyndon Johnson. This consequence, some say, will be a great convenience to Sen. Robert Kennedy. Actually nothing is further from the truth. The election of a Republican president in 1968 could be a distinct barrier to Kennedy's aspirations in 1972. He needs nothing less than to be pictured as a ruthless spoiler or as the man who tore up the Democratic party.

Three points should be made in regard to Mr. Johnson's conduct in this period. The first is that the assassination occurred during one of the few serious disputes that he and President Kennedy had. This difference, involving an important matter of judgment relating to Texas politics, shadowed the relations between the camps in the days that Manchester describes.

The second point is that the book takes on drama from the conflicts on the presidential plane after Mr. Kennedy was shot. The emotional issue was

whether the plane should take off as soon as the casket was aboard and Mrs. Kennedy was ready or await the federal judge coming to swear in Mr. Johnson.

The stunned Kennedy aides were passionate in holding no cause dearer than concern for the widow. Mr. Johnson's great concern was to convey a sense of continuity to the public and he viewed the oath-taking as essential toward this end. The altercations flowing from this conflict will make good reading and confirm the fact, scarcely news, that practicality runs stronger than sentiment in Mr. Johnson's nature.

But these episodes will not controvert the fact that Mr. Johnson's subsequent conduct toward Mrs. Kennedy during her bereavement was consistently generous and thoughtful. He could not, almost everyone who knows will agree, have done more.

Mrs. Kennedy was bucking a trend in asserting her authority over the manuscript. The last-minute crisis arises in fact from Robert Kennedy's reluctance to be cast as a censor in an age when nothing is censored. Actresses and courtesans tell everything. Priests tell of their nocturnal yearnings. The whirling presses concede no areas of privacy.

But Mrs. Kennedy has a contract and a strong will and her cause will gain support from the great dignity in which she has held herself since that awful day.