

IN DEFENSE OF MRS.

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John Kenneth Galbraith, an early New Frontier adherent, economic advisor to President John F. Kennedy, ambassador to India, and professor of economics at Harvard, explores the controversy over William Manchester's "Death of a President" in this article written for the Saturday Review—and defends the Kennedys' actions in the light of history.

By JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

MACAULAY once observed that few things were more depressing than the British people in one of their periodic outbursts of morality. A prominent possibility is American journalism in pursuit of a principle with which to justify a compelling story.

The recent explosion over the Manchester book is an excellent example. To warrant the attention which it attracted—an attention sufficiently explained by the prominence of the principals and the event recalled—it has been held to involve a deep conflict between the right of the public to historical knowledge and that of

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Mrs. Kennedy, her family, and, less plausibly, also her brothers-in-law, to privacy.

Newsweek, frequently a sensible journal, had Jacqueline Kennedy on the cover of its issue of December 26 under the caption "Privacy vs. History." Inside, it first reflected rather irrelevantly on her tendency to have friends and to appear in public. Then, with a solemnity that might have seemed a trifle morbid to Time or Richard Nixon, it unleashed the question of principle: "And, most fundamentally, the whole affair raised the most profound questions about the public's right to know and the individual's right to privacy."

This is nonsense. I was early taught never to use such crutches as "fundamentally" and "profound," let alone "most fundamentally" or "most

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profound," to bolster an absent case. They give the show away.

A reasonably detached examination of the circumstances will suggest, I think, that the decisions taken on this matter by Mrs. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy were those that best served the purposes of history. And much of their trouble grew out of precisely this effort.

No alternative courses of action, consistent with the standards of decorum and good taste with which Mrs. Kennedy, by no accident, is identified, would have served as well. It will be asked whether, as one associated with the administration of the late president, I am the right person to display the requisite detachment.

I venture that the case, once stated, stands firmly on its own merits. I might add that I have never discussed William Manchester's book with Mrs. Kennedy or either of the Senators Kennedy. Nor have I read it. Nor, recalling that terrible weekend and the horrible disorientation to which one was subject, do I look forward quite as avidly to reading it as Look, Harper & Row, and sundry overseas entrepreneurs are estimating that all solvent persons are waiting to do. But let me get back to the issue.

THERE IS NO NEED, I believe, to dwell on the agreement that was made between Mr. Manchester and Robert Kennedy. It was clearly designed to accord members of the Kennedy family, or those they might designate, the right to review the manuscript, together with the companion right to make amendments or deletions without which a right of review is meaningless.

Had the conflict come to the courts, there would have been much bickering over the wording of the agreement and whether it had been abrogated by subsequent letters and telegrams from Robert Kennedy. Involved in the latter is the exceedingly difficult matter of delegating the right of such review, a matter with which I have had some experience and to which I will return.

One obvious point seems, nonetheless, worthy of emphasis: Mr. Manchester entered voluntarily into the

agreement. And, although there has been some high-minded opinion to the contrary, it was an arrangement which most journalists and most historians would have welcomed. To write about the events at Dallas without the help of those intimately involved would be to add very little to what is known. To write with this help meant not only a wide audience but a secure position as a major historical source. If the agreement involved an unfair exploitation of a scholar, it must be said that hundreds and even thousands would have been available for the sacrifice.

But the deeper point remains. Is such an agreement proper and did it serve the purposes of history? The answer must be considered in light of the alternatives. The three questions are:

(1) Was it wise to have an authorized history of the events leading up to, and following, the bitter tragedy in Dallas of November 22, 1963?

(2) Was it proper for those authorizing the history to ask for the right of review together with that of deletion and amendment?

(3) Were the changes that were requested reasonable and consistent with historical purpose?

THE ANSWER to the first two questions is strongly affirmative. No evidence is available to the outsider on the last point but there is considerable indication that it was exercised with restraint. Let us examine the three decisions in turn.

The words "authorized history" and "authorized biography" have a dubious sound. They suggest self-serving, and also rather tedious books. One senses that they are something to be avoided. But what were the alternatives to selecting a serious and responsible journalist or historian and granting him access to the private papers and memories of the events of November 22 and before and after?

There were three possibilities and all were inferior or out of the question. The first was for one of the principals to prepare the definitive account. Since she was the one present, this would have had to be Mrs. Kennedy. To suggest it is to eliminate this possibility.

The second possibility

would have been to open the private recollections and papers of those involved to all comers—and these, considering the commercial possibilities indicated by the interest in the Manchester volume, would have been numerous. How painful this procedure would have been to those involved is patent. Worse would have been the risks of distortion and competitive sensationalism.

The remaining course would have been to maintain a total reticence on the events—to help no one and talk with no one. This would have been a safe and in many ways a sensible decision. It is the one which President Johnson appears to have made. I imagine the Kennedys may now think well of its possibilities. But it is the course that would have made the least conceivable contribution to history.

Thus the decision for an authorized history. Given it, what of the right to review and amendment?

A few weeks ago, while giving some lectures in London, I was invited by Anthony Lewis to participate in a long and detailed interview for use in the New York Times Magazine. We talked all one Saturday afternoon in the presence of a tape recording; the arrangement, which scarcely involved prior discussion, was that I would speak with the utmost informality, candor, and unconcern for syntax and then revise my remarks, as I wished, for publication.

BUT IN THE ABSENCE of an opportunity for revision, the original comment would never have been uttered. For then I would have been more cautious in my response:

Having undertaken to speak with full candor to Mr. Manchester, it was as appropriate as in my case with the Times that Mrs. Kennedy (and others) should be permitted to review and amend their remarks. So, far from denying anything to the historian, this is what makes possible the earlier frankness.

I DO NOT know what changes and deletions Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy sought. According to the newspapers, they consisted mostly of material from Mrs. Kennedy's interview and, possibly, some items that

reflected adversely on President Johnson. The first is readily justified within the framework of my arrangement with the Times and that of oral history.

Considering the disruption of the time, one could imagine that history might be served by a second and more considered view of President Johnson's decisions. Surely he was right, for example, to insist on being sworn in as soon as possible after President Kennedy's murder, however pushing that might have seemed in the emotional atmosphere of the moment. But there are two earlier experiences which cast light on the tendencies of Mrs. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy in these matters, as well as on the depth of our national commitment to historical truth.

Arthur Schlesinger's "A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House" was also an authorized history. It too drew on tape-recorded interviews with Mrs. Kennedy and, indeed, Schlesinger gave over this part of the oral history project to Manchester when the latter's interest became relevant.

Schlesinger included in the first draft of his book some vivid descriptions of the president's private reactions to events, among them his grief in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs. Initially, neither Mrs. Kennedy nor Robert Kennedy suggested deletion of this material; it came into question only after it appeared in Life and was attacked by the press and public as an undue invasion of privacy.

THERE WAS EVEN greater criticism of the author (and indirectly of the Kennedys) for saying that JFK intended to replace Dean Rusk at the end of his first term. So only a year ago the historian and the Kennedys were insufficiently concerned about privacy and insufficiently disposed to protect the position of Mr. Rusk against the claims of history.

My second bit of evidence is more personal. Last winter and spring, at the request of Mrs. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, I looked at two books which made use—I am not clear how much—of privileged or personal materials. One of these was Pierre Salinger's "With Kennedy," the other was a very light-heart-

ed memoir by former Under Secretary of the Navy Paul B. Fay Jr., "The Pleasure of His Company." In neither were there any deletions that could conceivably have been considered of historical consequence.

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THE FAY VOLUME, as I have observed, is an amiable but slight memoir. There were, however, a number of personal references, drawing on conversations with the president or members of the family, that could inflict minor hurt. I took the position that such negligible wounds heal within twenty - four hours; it being a slight book, one should not worry about what it said.

Mrs. Kennedy was a good deal more considerate. Slight materials, she held, should not be so used as to cause pain. The author greatly preferred my interpretation. However, and quite properly, it was Mrs. Kennedy's view, not mine, that was controlling.

In the Manchester book, I

would gather, representatives of Mrs. Kennedy took a rather more relaxed view of what might be published from her tape recording than did she.

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THERE IS a larger problem here. To have custody of the history of anything at once so painful and compelling as the events of the weekend of November 22, 1963, is no light responsibility.

Like all great responsibilities, it causes problems for those who carry it. Neither Mrs. Kennedy nor Robert Kennedy has escaped these problems. Everything would have been simplified by a policy of silence. The papers and memories could have been locked away—as usually they have been. No access and no help to Theodore Sorensen for "Kennedy." None to Schlesinger. None to Manchester. But would we now be as informed on these years? Would later scholars have as much to go on? Would the claims of history have been as well served? Surely not.