Book & Family

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The lawsuit is over but the propaganda battle goes on, and William Manchester seems determined to rake the Kennedy family over the hot coals of controversy in continued defense of his beloved book. There was a time when book and family were fused in his mind, and each gave an added glow of glory to the other. But today the only good Kennedy he recalls is the dead one, while the two remaining dominant figures seem to him an oppressive kingly family, the Queen screened from the workaday world by courtiers, the reigning brother mired in a hungry plot for base political advantage.

As told to reporters on the New York Times and the New York Post and Newsweek, Manchester's account of dealing with the family and its retainers contains hot scorching memories, sometimes cruelly rendered with a wicked eye for comic detail, as with the dialogue between Manchester and Bobby at the pool in Hickory Hill conducted in the intervals between the Senator's dolphin-like plunges and emergings. Manchester is likely to continue his narrative in further installments of his own reminiscences, including one on television.

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Stripping away the bitterness and the comic exaggerations, what usable core remains in Manchester's public testimony of his private ordeal? It is best at weakening the two main theses the family and its supporters have advanced against his behavior. One was that he had given his word about submitting everything for approval, and had broken it. To which Manchester answers that it isn't so simple, and cites a succession of approving and sometimes enthusiastic comments from Mrs. Kennedy's intermediaries, ending with the Senator's own historic telegram which Manchester interpreted as one of final clearance.

The second charge was that of Manchester's betrayal of the private memories of a woman with a delicate sense of privacy. To which Manchester answers that the decisive reason for the family's objection to his text was not the invasion of Mrs. Kennedy's privacy but the Senator's second thoughts about what the book's clear hostility to Lyndon Johnson might do to his own very public political career.

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I find Manchester's testimony disturbing in a double sense —both in what it tells of the family and in what it shows about the trauma which the writing of the book left on the mind of the author. My own position about the dispute does not depend upon sitting in judgment on all the statements and counter-statements: it turns on the simple question of the unhealthiness of any attempt at censorship, whether by a public authority or a powerful family.

Whether true or false, Manchester's depiction of the family, with its erratic shifts of mood between warmth and anger, its use of pressures, its assumptions of infallibility, is not an attractive one. It has already hurt the public attitude toward Mrs. Kennedy and toward the Senator, and the inevitable repeated flare-ups of controversy with each new serial installment of the book, with each new statement by Manchester, and with the publication and reviews that lie ahead, will do the family little good.

No one in the whole controversy, including Manchester, has covered himself with any glory. Everyone comes out of it more than a little soiled and mauled.

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But the important victim may prove to be Sen. Kennedy's own career, which was going so well until this happened. Everyone knew that he was aiming very high, for the Presidency

itself, and many thought that nothing and no one could stop him. His strength lay not only in his own very real abilities and in the shrewdly conceived and executed positions he took on a whole array of public issues. It lay in two other elements which seemed to have a life of their own.

One was the legend of his brother's death and martyrdom, and the deep impulse among many Americans to expiate their inevitable sense of complicity in the event by making it up somehow to the surviving members of the family. The second was the legend of Bobby's own skill and invincibility, and the irresistible quality of his march to power.

Both supporting drives in Bobby's career have been hurt by the controversy over the book, although no one can tell whether they have been hurt irretrievably. Even the purity of the memories about President Kennedy has been blurred, since the public mind has been confused by all the feuding hatreds swirling about the book, by Manchester's own confessed streak of "meanness" toward Lyndon Johnson, and by Bobby's present ambivalence on the question of running with him.

Much of all this is bound to be cleared up in time, and when the book itself appears as a whole its final impact may do much to restore both legends. For the moment, however, what hurts Bobby most is the widespread questioning about how well he handled the issue of the book and the negotiations over it. For if he ever becomes President there would be far more fateful issues and negotiations to handle.