

Battle of the Book

No one has ever devised exact formulae to define the lines between history and hysteria, scholarship and sensationalism, censorship and sensibility. The ancient question—what is truth?—still remains the torment of those who deal in words. To some degree all these elusive problems emerge anew in the clash involving author William Manchester and his book and magazine publishers on one side and Mrs. Jackie Kennedy and her family on the other.

Some central facts are clear. Manchester's chronicle of the assassination and its aftermath was written at the request of Mrs. Kennedy; he in turn agreed to submit the work for advance approval by her and Sen. Robert Kennedy or their designated representatives. Any author who accepts such restrictions inevitably risks future complexity; people who have initially authorized his work may take a different view of things with the passage of time—and in exploring so emotion-racked an event as the Dallas disaster, there were special hazards for all the participants.

The situation is complicated now by Mrs. Kennedy's harsh characterization of a book she has said she never read and which has reportedly been revised to meet major objections raised by those she entrusted to read it for her. We hardly propose to pass judgment on the legal merits of the dispute; there is obviously sharp

difference of opinion as to the meaning of some documents.

Certainly, however, no purpose is served by impugning Manchester's integrity or the motives of his publishers. Cass Canfield and Evan Thomas of Harper & Row and Gardner Cowles of Look are men who have long commanded high esteem. They appear to have made a conscientious effort to reconcile the interests of history with the dignity of the survivors and the honor of the author.

Mrs. Kennedy may understandably regret the decision to collaborate in the preparation of any such volume. Perhaps Manchester should not have accepted an agreement that made him an "official" historian, which is almost a contradiction in terms.

But all that is past. It is inconceivable that the book should now be suppressed; indeed, a serious effort to do so would provoke grave issues of press freedom. A decent respect for the sensitivities of all those concerned impels us to suggest that there must be a basis for a reasonable solution without the fury of a courtroom battle preceded by a running public struggle. None of the principals can really win in such an extravaganza, and the memory of John F. Kennedy could only be sullied by the tragically irrelevant ugliness of a long combative litigation.