

Strange Attacks

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By William S. White

Johnson Victim of Leaks

THE GREAT CONTROVERSY over whether the once family-sponsored book on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy is or is not to be published is an empty one so far as its widely heralded personal attacks upon President Johnson are concerned.



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Among other things it is precisely these "inaccurate and unfair" references to Mr. Johnson, as Mrs. John F. Kennedy herself honorably describes them, which she now seeks belatedly to have removed from the manuscript.

The simple fact, however, is that the very existence of this controversy is giving them a world-wide circulation that could hardly have been made bigger by any number of formal publications. The difference is that passages are being leaked out selectively by various informants, always unidentified, in a process of cumulative innuendo without example in American politics.

Always the circumstances are the same. Some anonymous person "who has read the book" gives the press a tidbit. What emerges is a picture of President Johnson's conduct in the aftermath of the tragedy in Dallas so totally removed from truth as to shock some eyewitnesses who may be critical today of Mr. Johnson's conduct of public affairs but nevertheless cannot stand still for this kind of history.

It is leaked out, by someone, that Mr. Johnson "insisted" after his swearing-in upon taking the presidential and not the vice-presidential plane back to Washington and that this "shocked and infuriated" unnamed persons among the Kennedy entourage. The implication is of a man who has reached the Presidency through the death of another and is urgently demanding in his attitudes. The fact is that Mr. Johnson knew that a terrible responsibility lay upon him to keep the continuity of the Presidency visibly going without halt in a shocked and desolated Nation. It was because he was President that he had to take the presidential plane.

ANOTHER LEAK puts it this way: "When flying back (from Dallas) the Kennedy people did not want to be associated with the Johnson people in the plane. A high Kennedy aide went up to a reporter: 'Make sure you report that we rode in the back with our President and not with him'".

Yet another leak is in this fashion: "There was this feeling among them

(some of the Kennedy people) that this was Johnson's State—Texas. They didn't think he had anything to do with it but he had brought them there. They remembered that it was in Dallas that Adlai Stevenson had been spat upon. The Kennedys felt that Johnson was part of this thing, this conservatism, and there was nothing he could have done to change their minds."

This feeling, of course, overlooked the fact that the assassin was Communist-oriented and surely not "conservative" and that in

all his political life Dallas had been hostile to Lyndon Johnson.

What in truth all these leaks unconsciously establish is the frightful and hopeless burden that was placed upon the new President. In all the early hours while he was frantically trying to keep the Government going to avoid a sense of national rudderlessness he was continuously and deeply concerned with the understandable grief of the Kennedy followers and made every effort to show to them sympathy and understanding.

Those who happened to be close to him in those frightful hours know that this is the truth. This columnist, if a personal reference may be excused, knows this as an eye and ear witness. There is, moreover, the current testimony of Charles Roberts, Newsweek's White House correspondent and one of the two reporters present on the flight from Dallas to Washington.

ROBERTS says that he saw no show of insensitivity by LBJ on the plane. "Indeed," Newsweek adds, "to Roberts and others the new President's behavior seemed a matter of restraint and solicitousness."

The truth is that Mr. Johnson, in a desperate attempt to avoid any hurt to the Kennedy people, as his first

act as President resolved to keep on every Kennedy White House aide, not excluding some who had shown contemptuous hostility to his as Vice President during a time in Washington when some of the extremists among the Kennedy cultists amused themselves by sticking pins into a figure labeled "Lyndon."

The truth, too, is that for three years President Johnson unceasingly sought to placate the more emotional among those Kennedy followers who against all reason have never been able to forgive him that he became President through a national tragedy. No President in this columnist's knowledge has ever tolerated so much so long from men whose animosity was both absolutely implacable and absolutely irrational.

The night after President Johnson returned here from Dallas he was still occupying a private house as President and was personally telephoning every member of the Kennedy Cabinet—every one of whom, also, he kept on.

In the middle of all this tears were in his eyes at every mention of the name of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

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