

Manchester's Book . . . *By William S. White*

Comment Becomes a Duty

ELEMENTARY and no longer avoidable journalistic duty compels at least a candid examination of the implications of the immense furor raised over a forthcoming Kennedy family-sponsored book dealing with the assassination of the late President.



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Any man who offers himself as a commentator has the obligation to comment upon public matters so manifestly and so inescapably involving high public interest. All the same, never has one columnist approached that obligation with more reluctance—or more sadness. For among the questions raised here is the towering question whether the right and understandable grief of the Kennedy family over the loss of a gallant husband and brother entitles that family to control the writing of the history of an era in which as a great public man he was the central part. The simple truth is that more and more the Kennedy family has treated that history as though it were essentially its own private affair.

Mrs. John F. Kennedy now goes to court to suspend the publication of a book which she herself commissioned through a hand-picked author, William Manchester, after other prospective writers had been warned off. It appears that her primary motive is to bring about the removal of "inaccurate and unfair references" to "other individuals"—meaning President Johnson. The fact that she now moves to do this only illustrates the wrongness of the whole arrangement. For precisely because this has so long and so widely been heralded as a family-authored book, whatever unfair assaults Manchester has made upon Mr. Johnson attain a status they could not conceivably have reached otherwise.

BUT THAT THIS is also a most belated step is surely clear, since the book is already in print and 2 million copies of installments excerpted from it have already been run off by Look magazine. Moreover, since Mrs. Kennedy herself states that Manchester at the very outset—back in 1964—accepted a contractual obligation to write nothing not approved by both Mrs. Kennedy and Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, it is difficult to suppose that such attacks as have been made upon President Johnson were based on nothing more than authorial malice.

For months it has been busily rumored in Washington that the Manchester book was going to "gut Johnson," as the whispers put it. For weeks newspaper leaks quoting anonymous authorities have built up a mounting suspense now climaxed by Mrs. Kennedy's appeal to the courts. The publicity for this book now reaches a worldwide crescendo without known example in the industry.

For months, Manchester's precise position in all this has been equally the subject of leak and rumor. He was, and he was not, hired or commissioned or retained to do the book as a Kennedy family project. Hired or not, the fact remains that he was at any rate positively guaranteed a fortune the moment he was given the go-ahead. It is repeatedly stated in print that from Look, alone, his guarantee of revenue was in the neighborhood of \$600,000.

FOR MONTHS, too, this Washington newspaperman, like many another, has shrunk from going into this affair, not because it was not in the area of legitimate public interest but simply because one who also loved and admired President John F. Kennedy flinched from writing any word that might hurt his widow.

But a point has been reached where it must be remembered that grief and great respect for the dead President must not be al-

lowed forever to deny the most elementary fairness to his successor.

President Johnson has had to bear a frightful burden in the unremitting hostility of the Kennedy cult and its common attitude that the man who now sits in the White House is not simply a constitutional successor to another man slain in memorable tragedy but only a crude usurper.

Every mature newspaperman in Washington knows that this is the plain truth. Every writer in the United States—and every publisher—knows, too, that the smile or the frown of the Kennedy cult has a power over the fortunes of any kind of book that this country has never known before.

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