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Today Abroad

The Kennedy Legend

Controversy Over Book Dulled Family Image for Europeans

By FLORA LEWIS

Paris—A taste of the "commercialism" and "sensationalism," which the Kennedy family sought to avert by commissioning a book on the President's death, has now been achieved in Europe — as a result of Jacqueline Kennedy's suit to prevent publication.



The case has made the first stains on Mrs. Kennedy the Kennedy legend on this side of the Atlantic. From the moment of the assassination and the sudden, profound sense of sharing the loss with America, the name had achieved a hallowed, really inhuman purity here.

Europeans were not interested in the political record or the family problems. They had adopted Kennedy as a symbol not of the U. S. but of their own aspirations for revival and youthful renewal. In France, as one long-resident American put it, the late President had "been made a Frenchman and they feel we betrayed him twice, first by murder and then by diminishing the idol."

European Viewpoint

The belief that there had to be a conspiracy behind the assassination spread widely here, and almost from the start. In part, it was temperamental,

the European, and particularly the left-wing European, fondness for preceiving plots. In part it was human, the way people insist the more on reading logic into jumbled events, the further they are from seeing them happen.

And in part it was romantic, the desire to perfect the tragic style with an acceptable explanation.

Argument over the Warren Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone with only madness for a motive had served to enhance the sense of international ownership of the Kennedy symbol. Americans could think what they liked, but Europeans felt they had at least an equal right to decide what happened to their hero.

Bickering Creeps In

The family's silence on the subject seemed to confirm that the entire legacy belonged to all who warmed to the name.

There is no lack of lurid personal journalism among Europeans. Whole papers still exist almost exclusively on smarmy Soraya stories. Jacqueline Kennedy had been spared that treatment as the due in dignity to the widow of the man so loved, the partner of the myth.

Now, the sense of human peevishness and bickering and vanity has begun creeping in.

Le Monde, in a bitter dispatch from its thoughtful Washington correspondent Alain Clement, asked "how people as adult, intelligent as the Ken-

nedys, the very picture of a 'new style' in sensitivity, could behave in such a delicate matter as the respect owed the dead hero with this mixture of flat banality, impulse and inconsistency that has dragged them into the adventure" of the Manchester suit?

Change of Attitude

The idea that the details of the President's death belonged to the family had not been disputed before here, in the tradition of accepting that great public figures have the right to more, not less, privacy than ordinary individuals. But when it dawned, as the case made clear, that the family considered the details a kind of property right to be assigned to a chosen author or withheld according to chosen effect, a kind of revulsion set in.

And then the commercialism that has been going on behind scenes in European publishing houses began to show through. There was a virtual auction in England for serialization rights to the Look magazine extracts from the Manchester book. The same scramble for what has already been widely discussed as an overwhelmingly gripping manuscript, so moving that the toughest editors say it brought tears to their eyes, took place on the continent.

Many have read it. None expressed shock until the word came of the quarrelling, the shrill legalisms about who controls the decision over when and where to publish what the family had commissioned for the public record.

The episode has been demeaning, reminding Europeans with a start of what they had half forgotten—that Kennedy was entirely American and that Americans saw him as a politician as well as the incarnation of a style. For a little while, whatever the outcome of the suit, the shine of idealized history on his monument has been dulled.