

## WASHINGTON CLOSE-UP

# Let It Be Printed, as Romans Said

By FRANK GETLEIN

I care not who writes a nation's laws as long as I write its history, is a decent enough text for this season of impending explosion within the Democratic party in court and in print.

Robert F. Kennedy, already embroiled in debate with J. Edgar Hoover over whether he, Kennedy, was a knave or merely a fool as attorney general in the matter of bugging, is sailing into seas more perilous still in the efforts to suppress or control William Manchester's account of the assassination of President Kennedy.

It isn't so much that you cannot control history. People have been doing it for millennia. The high French regard for, not to say worship of, Napoleon, the Corsican upstart, tyrant and perverter of the French Revolution, is a fair example of what you can do with history when you put your mind to it. In our own time the techniques of tampering with history have been reduced, in the Soviet Union, first to a science, then to farce, as Stalin's reputation has gone up and down like American chances of victory in Vietnam.

The posthumous fate of Stalin points a lesson to all historians and their masters in these times of massive communication. The father of the motherland, as he used to be called, could keep history in rigid control as long as he was in charge. It was rather like having Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. on your payroll. Stalin was barely taken to that great Comintern in the sky, however, when the revisionists began their work.

As is quite usual in such cases, they overreacted to the

removal of controls and Stalin became, in the Khrushchev epoch, as thoroughly evil as he had formerly been saintly. By now some efforts are being made to restore some kind of balance. Stalin was pretty evil, by our standards, but then most 19th century industrial-capitalists are socially unpresentable in our times, and that's basically what Stalin was and had to be. But the point is that if you keep the lid on history, it boils all over the place when you take the lid off.

The Roman Catholic Church is experiencing precisely that reaction right now. For about 400 years that church had successfully maintained a rigidly controlled version of history that went back to Christ and was kept current year by year. Once John XXIII made honest history OK, the balloon went up and no landing is in sight. Catholic historians are tearing into every aspect of their church's history, revealing most of what used to be official as pious tales told for the edification of the simple.

So it will be, inevitably, with the official Kennedy version of history if it is allowed to come into unchallenged existence. Eventually some copy boy at Look magazine or a departing vice president at Harper & Row will hand over uncensored page proofs to the newspapers and it will all come out. It will be followed, one may predict with absolute confidence, by a round of denunciations of the Kennedys for their attempt to control history. Overreacting historians will reassess the well-known vision of Camelot as the games of perpetual adolescents playing at knights and dragons—with Lyndon John-

son, apparently, cast as a cross between Sir Modred the bad one and Merlin the magician.

The really appalling thing about the current efforts to control the history of the events in Dallas and after is the picayune nature of what are reported to be the points at issue. As far as one can judge from what is said, Mrs. Kennedy and others of her family, having selected Manchester as the "authorized" historian, then told him the truth about their feelings about President Johnson's behavior in Dallas. The behavior, in their view, was gross, it seems. Their reactions were resentment. The participants, it would seem, have since become astounded that Manchester proposes to print these things as he was told.

But all of it is nothing at all. Was Johnson capable of crudity? Is this news? Were the Kennedys capable of spiteful resentment at infringement of their dignity? Is this important?

The miniscule nature of it all leads to the conclusion that the whole tempest is really about Bobby's succession. The effort, in that interpretation, would be to enable the senator, post-publication, to appear as having done everything possible, short of buying out Look and Harper's, to prevent publication. This fits into the established pattern of Bobby's attitude toward his President of having everything both ways.

But why bother? At this stage, what could Bobby do to make his succession more acceptable to Johnson? Nothing. Therefore, as the Roman guardians of history used to say, imprimatur. Let it be printed.