

Reston Reports

The Futility of Blocking Book

By James Reston
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Washington

The capital is sad about Jacqueline Kennedy's law suit to stop publication of William Manchester's book on the assassination on her husband.

No personal or political controversy about the Kennedys—and there have been many—has produced such unanimity in Washington. Everybody understands and sympathizes with Mrs. Kennedy's objection to certain parts of this ghastly story. But even people who love her the most and are now rallying to her support—including Bobby Kennedy—are sorry that she has insisted on taking this controversy to the courts. They deny

this, of course, but it is true.

There are a number of reasons for this, the first of which is very practical. There are simply too many copies of Manchester's transcript of "The Death of a President" in circulation to be suppressed, no matter what the courts say.

Twenty-five copies of his typescript were sent to magazine and other editors to see whether they wanted to pay between \$500,000 and \$1 million for the right to publish excerpts of the book.

These have been read by hundreds, maybe even by thousands of editors, who are a competitive and gabby crew. How many more copies have been reproduced at night by junior editors and even office boys in this Xerox generation is beyond calculation.

DISTRIBUTION

Mike Cowles and Bill Atwood at Look magazine, Cass Canfield at Harper & Row and all the other principals in the controversy will play it straight, no matter how irritated they are with each other at the moment or how much the publishers have to lose — which could run into millions — but what is going on in other publishing houses which had copies of the original manuscript.

The world is full of bootleg book publishing companies,

which pay no attention to the copyright laws of the West.

In Formosa and Eastern Europe, publishers with cheap labor and materials think nothing of printing "In Cold Blood" or any other best-seller by the millions and selling it for a fraction of the cost in the United States, without permission from, or compensation to, the author.

It is not hard to imagine the temptation and profits involved in reproducing "the original manuscript unedited by the Kennedys" of the Manchester book by such companies.

Millions of dollars are involved. One American company alone offered a million dollars for the American paperback rights.

Thus, Mrs. Kennedy could easily win her case in the American courts and lose it in the world. And if she is worried about Manchester's frank disclosures about what the Kennedys thought about President Johnson during the assassination crisis, she can forget it, because Bill D. Moyers, the President's press secretary, has already read the offending passages, and no doubt the President has been told what he already knew or suspected before Manchester ever got involved in this unhappy incident.

MYTH

So much for the practical reasons of not trying to stop the unstoppable. The personal aspects are even more interesting. Mrs. Kennedy naturally wants to emphasize everything that perpetuates the good and minimize the bad in the Kennedy story. She has a contract that says she can compel this with Manchester.

The legend of Kennedy is more wonderful than the political history of Kennedy, and her contract with Manchester has deceived her into thinking she can make history conform to legend. No good wife would do otherwise, but she is holding up her hand to the avalanche.

Kennedy was not only a husband but a President, not only a personal figure but an historical figure, and while

the courts can interpret contracts, they cannot command history.

UNDERSTANDABLE

It is not difficult to understand Jacqueline Kennedy's desires. No President's family has ever approved its biographers. She can do nothing now about the death of the President. What she is faced with is the death of Camelot, the killing of the myth. It is intolerable but also inevitable, and the lawsuit is only going to make the inevitable even more intolerable, especially for such a private person.

This is really the difference between Jacqueline Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy — and it has been a much more savage difference than the presentations to the court suggest.

Bobby would like to preserve the Kennedy legend, too — he is riding it to the presidency — but he is primarily interested in the future and she in the past, and therefore he accepts the reality which she quite naturally rejects.

Both are right in their own terms, but the Kennedys are now too important in the political life of the country to put legend ahead of history. They cannot rely on legal contracts. It is time to get down to reality.

Manchester shows them at last not as a united clan, but as a human family with all the differences and yearnings and weaknesses of most families, and in the end, that may be even better than the Kennedy myth.