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In The Nation: William Manchester's Sponsors

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Dec. 26 — The Kennedy family is entitled to exercise its rights but not to avoid its responsibilities in the controversy about the publication and serialization of "Death of a President" by William Manchester.

First, Mrs. John F. Kennedy with the assistance of Senator Robert Kennedy asserted contract rights which stated in part that "the final text shall not be published unless and until approved by them." Under threat of invoking this right in a lawsuit, they succeeded in having *Look* magazine, the serial publisher, change and delete passages that Mrs. Kennedy believed were too personal for publication. It now appears that much the same agreement will be reached with Harper & Row, the book publisher.

Some Inaccuracies

Having won her victory over *Look*, Mrs. Kennedy then issued a statement. "I have been told," she said, "there are inaccuracies and unfair references in this book. That they have been written is unfortunate. However, it was clear before bringing this suit that historical judgments, even if inaccurate, could not properly be suppressed by a court of

law. In time, history will deal fairly and justly with this period."

Since Mrs. Kennedy has insisted that she has not read the Manchester book, it is fair to question the propriety and justice of this statement. Such a denunciation of the integrity of a writer and his work on the basis of hearsay is personally if not legally audacious.

The Book's Credibility

But the more important point is that Mrs. Kennedy's public statement impugning the accuracy and fairness of a book she has not read can hardly be seen in any other way than as an effort to damage the book's credibility and dissociate the Kennedy name from responsibility for its contents.

Mrs. Kennedy's contract reads plainly, and she has been able to assert its validity and her rights in forcing "modifications and deletions" of material she considered too personal. She and Robert Kennedy must approve "the final text" or it "shall not be published."

If "Death of a President" is unfair and inaccurate, as Mrs. Kennedy asserts, why should she not withhold her consent to its publication at all? Are unfairness and inaccuracy smaller sins than the alleged lapses from taste she asserted her con-

tract rights to forbid?

Since it has been widely reported and never denied by anyone in a position to do so that the book is critical of President Johnson, that it makes him appear less than generous and self-possessed on the day of the assassination, Mrs. Kennedy's statement appears in a political light rather than as a concern for history.

The Kennedy family and their closest associates provided Manchester with much of the material in "Death of a President" and refused to provide it to other writers—for instance, Jim Bishop. Thus, any damaging criticism of Mr. Johnson that appears in the book probably will be attributed to the Kennedy or Kennedy-connected sources, and with excellent reason. Mrs. Kennedy herself pointed this out in her legal complaint.

This aspect of "Death of a President" may further impair Mr. Johnson's standing with a public more than faintly idolatrous of the Kennedys. If so, that could damage Robert Kennedy's already tenuous relationship with the President, and perhaps his political prospects, too.

But the Kennedy family is making no attempt to suppress or change this part of the book, perhaps because that would

leave them open to grave questions of political censorship that were not raised by the virtually proprietary rights they already have asserted over "personal" passages.

Instead, Mrs. Kennedy has chosen to cast public doubt, from her position of immense prestige, on a book she and her brother-in-law commissioned but have not read and on an author they chose and gave preference.

Questionable Wisdom

The wisdom of Manchester and the Kennedy family is entering into an agreement to produce an authorized version of history may be questioned. The propriety of opening privileged doors to one writer alone may be doubted. Some of the conclusions reached by Manchester, which cannot properly be weighed against the information available to other writers and historians, may be dubious.

Nevertheless, the agreement was reached and the settlement with *Look* indicates that it must have been binding. The doors were opened to Manchester; he did reach his solitary conclusions, as any writer must. And the Kennedy family cannot now shrug off the facts that "Death of a President," whatever its political effects, could only have been written with their help and can only be published with their consent.