

Letters to the Editor

Truth Serum Mail or Roll Call?

Orleans Parish Coroner Nicholas Chetta, in endorsing the use of hypnosis and "truth serum" (sodium pentothal) to enable witness David Russo to recall his meeting with Lee Oswald, states that these procedures "help the individual to recall things, remember things and reveal things he might not care to reveal."

Dr. Chetta is grossly distorting the medical facts. Under the influence of sodium pentothal, subjects may give highly fictional accounts of past events and describe incidents that never happened. The drug is not a "truth serum." Its action on recall is profoundly influenced by the stress of the situation in which it is administered and the relationship between the subject and his questioners. The confabulation is a metaphorical, dramatic representation of some personal wish, fear or guilt quite unrelated to the purported issue. Russo's "memory" of Oswald may well be a personification of his own problems, which could include his relationships with New Orleans authorities. Under these circumstances, Dr Chetta is hardly introducing scientific evidence.

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The House of Representatives' refusal to seat Adam Clayton Powell is doubly suspect because, in addition to its doubtful constitutionality, the votes of some Congressmen against seating Powell were influenced by mail from their constituents. According to a Washington Post staff writer, March 2, several Congressmen admitted that they would have preferred to seat Powell before taking action against him, but felt they couldn't because their mail was running 100 to 1 to kick Powell out.

A case like this can be decided fairly only by following the rules of fact and law, as in a court trial, not by conducting a national popularity poll on the accused. If public sentiment was, indeed, the deciding factor in the House's abortive decision, as seems likely, it is questionable whether the House is competent to decide cases of this type under present procedure.

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- The Washington Post Times Herald A-14
- The Washington Daily News _____
- The Evening Star (Washington) _____
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