

# Noguchi Withdraws His Resignation as Coroner

## Surprised Supervisors Suspend Him for 30 Days After Hollinger Criticizes Behavior

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LAT  
Appointed Dec 1928

Dr. Thomas T. Noguchi surprised the Board of Supervisors Tuesday by abruptly withdrawing his resignation as county chief medical examiner-coroner.

L. S. Hollinger, county chief administrative officer, promptly accused the coroner of behaving erratically, forcing subordinates to "perform demeaning tasks" and threatening them with "grievous bodily injury."

The supervisors suspended Dr. Noguchi for 30 days, ordered an investigation, declared an emergency exists and appointed Dr. Russell Henry, 58, chief of the Coroner's Department forensic medicine division, as acting coroner.

Dr. Noguchi emphatically denied all the accusations. His wife, Mrs. Hisako Noguchi, charged he is the victim of racial discrimination.

The 42-year-old pathologist, Japanese-born, is a naturalized citizen of the United States.

### Resigned Feb. 25

After serving in the \$31,104-a-year position as coroner 14 months, he submitted a letter of resignation Feb. 25 just 20 minutes after the Board of Supervisors adjourned its main weekly meeting.

He made no mention of racism then but insisted Hollinger threatened to file some charge against him if he didn't resign.

But his wife emphasized the racial differences in lengthy letters to supervisors.

"Don't tell me that this is not a racial issue," she wrote. "Deep down beneath the surface that is exactly what it is, completely camouflaged by all the junk on the surface. . . ."

"This attack on him is nothing but pure political character assassination and is a very black mark for our



**AFTER SUSPENSION**—Dr. Thomas T. Noguchi, left, the county coroner, with his attorney, Davis S. Smith, meeting newsmen after the Board of Supervisors suspended him 30 days and ordered an inquiry.

Times photo by Cal Montney

county government.

"If I went around snooping in the CAO's (chief administrative officer's) department, I could probably pick up enough information from the discontented people in his department and, by distorting and exaggerating, put together more material than he ever got on my husband which would show him up as unfit for his position . . .

"My husband is good enough to

work under a Caucasian but not good enough to work in the position of chief," Mrs. Noguchi continued.

"How much more education and professional status must he have before he will be accorded occupation status as head of a department?

"How many current heads of county departments have professional recognition and attainment in their specialty which even approaches that of my husband? Not one, I'll bet!"

After lengthy detailing of her husband's accomplishments in office and charging Hollinger ordered him to "resign—or else," Mrs. Noguchi concluded:

"My husband is taking this more philosophically and in better spirits than I am. I am bitter, to say the least!

"There is nothing equal about this equal opportunity business if a minority group member has to have 10 times more education to successfully compete against a member of the Caucasian race."

Supervisor Burton W. Chace, who made the motion to suspend Dr. Noguchi, emphasized that final action will be withheld until official charges are presented.

"We hope to have these before you next Tuesday," Hollinger said.

Supervisors Frank G. Bonelli and Kenneth Hahn approved Chace's motion.

#### Support by Bonelli

The other supervisors, Chairman Ernest E. Debs and Warren M. Dorn, were in Washington Tuesday to confer with Secretary Robert H. Finch of the Health, Education and Welfare Department on welfare legislation.

When Dr. Noguchi was appointed coroner in December, 1967, Chace and Dorn opposed him while Bonelli and Hahn supported him. Debs cast the deciding vote to confirm him on condition that within six months Dr. Noguchi "make up" with the USC and UCLA medical schools which opposed his appointment and charged he was too young and

inexperienced.

"I was one of the staunch supporters of Dr. Noguchi when he was originally hired," Bonelli said Tuesday.

"Certain accusations have been made which cast a cloud upon him."

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"All these accusations are going to have to be documented beyond a shadow of doubt. I support the (suspension) motion with a qualification that proof must be provided."

Hahn said the board's vote to suspend the coroner "has nothing to do with any racial, religious or political reason or the ability of Dr. Noguchi as an expert pathologist."

Hahn expressed regret that Dr. Noguchi had not carried through with his resignation as coroner, which was to take effect Tuesday, and transfer to a position as pathologist in the County Hospitals Department at no reduction in pay.

"It looks as though this is going to be a very controversial suspension," Hahn said.

#### Telegrams, Letters

He pointed out that he already was receiving telegrams and letters supporting Dr. Noguchi before the resignation withdrawal was announced.

When the supervisors concluded a 35-minute executive session by voting the suspension, Hahn commented, "His wife charges Oriental-Japanese discrimination, which it isn't."

Hahn stressed that he previously supported Dr. Noguchi and considers him a friend.

"He has been under pressure with inadequate facilities," the supervisor continued.

"He has had two helicopter accidents and two airplane crashes in the ocean as well as the Sen. (Robert F.) Kennedy autopsy. The work load in that office is the greatest in history."

After the meeting, Dr.

with attorneys Smith and Manley Freid, Dr. Noguchi denied threatening bodily harm or violence to departmental employes or anyone else.

He admitted carrying a

Noguchi's attorney, David S. Smith, said, "This is a unilateral action which is not consistent with fairness and justice.

"I cannot construe any urgency or emergency which would justify this conduct.

"Assuming the charges were true, which is certainly not conceded, there is nothing to indicate that there has been a fair hearing with the right to

know what the charges are, to examine witnesses and to be heard, with counsel.

"I have a strong feeling against character assassination and unilateral action merely because authority exists to take it."

When Hollinger was asked to comment on the charges of racial discrimination, he said, "The board has denied those charges."

The supervisors instructed Hollinger to investigate, report and recommend appropriate action within 30 days.

#### Has Appeal Right

If they vote to fire the suspended coroner at that time, he will have the right to request a Civil Service Commission hearing. The commission is required to grant any such request.

Earlier Tuesday, not knowing Dr. Noguchi's week-old resignation would be withdrawn, Supervisor Chace had prepared a motion to appoint Dr. Henry as acting coroner and to initiate a nationwide search for someone to replace Dr. Noguchi permanently in this spot.

The surprise withdrawal of Dr. Noguchi's resignation resulted in cancellation of any recruitment action at this time.

In a press conference

surgical knife in his belt but called this a "tool of the trade."

He said he carries the knife, along with a ruler and a radio "beeper" for messages from his office, purely as "disaster equipment."

Asked why he withdrew his resignation, Dr. Noguchi said:

"I changed my mind after I received tremendous support from friends who know me well—associates, doctors, investigators and employes in my department . . . I have done nothing wrong."

In other actions Tuesday the supervisors:

Authorized collaboration with the city of Torrance in preparing a Torrance Civic Center master plan.

Approved architectural agreements for \$15,330,500 expansion of Harbor General Hospital acute unit and clinic.