

Noguchi Charged With Kennedy 'Death Dance'

Coroner Quoted as Saying 'I Hope He Dies', and as 'Praying' for Airline Crash Into Hotel

BY RICHARD WEST
Times Staff Writer

A smiling Coroner Thomas T. Noguchi danced in his office while waiting for Sen. Robert F. Kennedy to die from an assassin's bullets last June, it was charged at the opening of Noguchi's dismissal hearing Monday.

"I am going to be famous," Dep. County Counsel Martin Weekes quoted Noguchi as telling associates who were present. "I hope he dies, because if he dies then my international reputation will be established."

And after the second of two helicopter crashes with a heavy loss of life during this time, Weekes told the County Civil Service Commission, Noguchi did another "dance in the flames," a "reincarnation of Dante's Inferno," and said, "Isn't it nice . . . isn't it nice."

Then two big airliners went down in the ocean off International Airport, Weekes said, "and the number of bodies was growing larger and larger."

But all this work for the coroner's office still did not satisfy Noguchi, who had by this time fixed in his mind the "magic number" of 14,000 deaths to have been processed since he became coroner in December, 1967, the deputy county counsel said.

Air Crash Wish Told

"As sickness ravaged" Noguchi, Weekes continued, the coroner confided to associates, "We need another air crash . . . I hope we have another air crash . . . I pray, I pray that there is another air crash."

According to Weekes, Noguchi said he hoped two Boeing 727s would collide in midair or that a 727 "loaded to capacity" would crash

into International Hotel near the airport.

The "final evidence" of Noguchi's "sickness" came, Weekes said, when the coroner told associates:

"I had a vision . . . that a 727 loaded to capacity crashed into a hotel. And amid the flames, I, Thomas T. Noguchi, stood, and the press was there. . ."

Weekes said that Noguchi was not always this way, that when he first joined the coroner's office as a medical examiner he once revived a heart attack victim.

As Noguchi left the place where the man was stricken, a coroner's aide jokingly said to him, "You don't look too happy . . . When do we get the body?"

"Never, never, Joe," Weekes quoted Noguchi as replying. "He is all right. He is on the way to the hospital. We were able to save him."

But this was "before Noguchi's sickness set in," Weekes said.

Weekes described Noguchi as a

"complex collage" and said he intended during the hearing, expected to take as long as two weeks, "to tell the metamorphosis that is Noguchi himself."

"There is a little bit of Thomas Noguchi in each of us," Weekes said.

Weekes said that Noguchi once told Lewis Sawyer, a black coroner's aide whom he used as a chauffeur, that he would work Sawyer "until he dropped."

"And drop he did," Weekes said, noting that Sawyer's funeral was being conducted Monday "on the other side of town."

Weekes said Noguchi worked Sawyer for a total of 486 hours' overtime in 1968 and for 103 hours' overtime in January and February of this year.

The very day Sawyer gave evidence against Noguchi's alleged erratic behavior in office, the speaker said, he collapsed, and never recovered.

"That's one story we'll tell," Weekes said in his opening statement. "I had hoped we would be able to tell it through him. That's impossible now."

Weekes said Noguchi's offenses in office were mostly against little people, such as "a Japanese secretary, a black secretary and a young kid."

Counsel said that persons listening to the witnesses he will present will detect three types of emotion regarding Noguchi:

"Love," by those who knew Noguchi before his "sickness"; "animosity," by those who knew Noguchi during his troubles, and "remorse," by those who knew him afterwards.

Charges Called Untrue

Attorney Godfrey Isaac, representing Noguchi in his fight for reinstatement to the coroner's job, replied in his opening statement that the charges put forth by Weekes were "not true" and "cannot be proved."

He said they were a "smoke-screen."

Lewis Sawyer died of a terminal illness having "nothing to do with this hearing," he said. Dr. Noguchi, he added, burst into tears when he learned of Sawyer's death.

Isaac said Orientals traditionally suffer in silence when persecuted.

"There comes a time," the lawyer went on, "when silence is betrayal, and silence here by Dr. Noguchi would be betrayal. . ."

"Justice is the bread of this nation. The nation should be hungry for it."

Isaac urged the three-man commission, which is hearing the case in the Hall of Administration, to "rise above political aspects" of the case.

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NOGUCHI LISTENS—Martin Weekes, left, deputy county counsel, makes statement at dismissal hearing for Dr. Thomas Noguchi, listening, right. Times photo by Jack Carrick

NOGUCHI CASE

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"If one man is not fairly treated, then all are in danger," he said.

Dr. Noguchi revered Robert F. Kennedy, Isaac said, and "if he could have given part of his life for Kennedy to live, he would have."

Noguchi's talk about disasters was at budget talks in his office and he was only saying what he feared might happen, the lawyer said.

Isaac blamed many "lies" about Dr. Noguchi on one man—Herbert McRoy, administrative deputy in the coroner's office and the coroner's No. 1 assistant.

McRoy, the attorney asserted, "turned on Dr. Noguchi as Judas did 2,000 years ago on his leader."

Isaac also was highly critical of Michael Wood, an administrative assis-

tant in the coroner's office.

Request Refused

When Robert F. Kennedy was shot, he said, Dr. Noguchi telephoned Wood's home at 1 a.m. and told Wood's wife that he must speak to him about the matter. But she refused to awaken her husband.

"This 28-year-old junior clerk refused to get out from between the sheets and talk to his chief," Isaac said.

If Wood was employed in private industry, he would have been fired, the lawyer said.

Isaac said that one month after Dr. Noguchi was fired from his job, Wood was given a \$100-a-month raise and promoted to a job in the county counsel's office.

Isaac said Noguchi treated all employees in the coroner's office with kindness, seeing that the secretaries all had fresh flowers

on their desks every Monday, taking many of the workers to lunch with him and financing an office Christmas party out of his own pocket.

No Discrimination

Noguchi never discriminated against anyone because of race or creed, Isaac said. His office was "a delight in Americanism."

"They (the employees) don't like this man—they love him," the lawyer declared.

Isaac noted that Noguchi was accused of having a backlog of 500 coroner's cases as of last Jan. 1. This, the lawyer said, was "not an unusual amount when you are dealing with 1,000 cases a month."

And when Noguchi left office in March, Isaac said, the backlog was down to only 270 cases.

Isaac asked why, after county officials accused Noguchi of being mentally ill, they offered him a job as chief pathologist at the county's Rancho Los Amigos Hospital in Downey.

The first witness called by Weekes was McRoy, who testified he saw Noguchi take capsules and pills at times and that the coroner appeared intoxicated on occasion.

On cross-examination, Isaac asked the witness what led him to believe Dr. Noguchi was intoxicated.

McRoy replied that Noguchi sometimes would jump up from his desk, run across the room, slap a wall map and cry, "This is my jurisdiction."

The next witness, Mrs. Ethel T. Field, a Japanese-American like Noguchi, testified that while acting as his secretary he once told her "he hated all niggers, he hated all Japs and he hated all Jews."

Tells of Speeches

She said that whenever Noguchi addressed a group in public, she was instructed to have a mobile phone company activate a radio "beeper" device he carried on his belt during

the talk.

Noguchi said he wanted this done, Mrs. Field said, so that he could say he was "wanted back at the office."

"He said he wanted to make himself look important," she said.

Most of the nearly 150 persons who attended the opening session of the hearing were Japanese-Americans. They applauded politely whenever Isaac appeared to make a point in his defense of Dr. Noguchi.

Fired March 18

Dr. Noguchi, 42, was fired by the Board of Supervisors last March 18 after L. S. Hollinger, county chief administrative officer, filed a long report critical of Noguchi's conduct in office.

He accused Noguchi of taking drugs in excessive amounts, exhibiting symptoms that indicated a need for psychiatric care, administering his office badly and bullying employees.

The hearing will be in recess today while the Civil Service Commission, made up of President O. Richard Capen, Mrs. Thelma T. Mahoney and Harry Albert, holds its weekly meeting.

Sessions on the Noguchi matter will resume Wednesday at 9:30 a.m. at another location, Room 740 of the New Hall of Records. It is expected to take two weeks to hear all witnesses in the case.

The commission will then take all evidence under submission before deciding on whether to reinstate Dr. Noguchi to the \$31,104-a-year job.