

'Siberia' Quote a Joke, Debs Tells Noguchi Hearing

Jesting When Discussing Fate of Any Who Cross Hollinger, He Testifies

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BY RICHARD WEST

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Supervisor Ernest Debs told a Civil Service Commission hearing Thursday he was only joking when he once remarked that anyone in county service who crossed Chief Administrative Officer L. S. Hollinger would be "sent to Siberia."

Debs, chairman of the Board of Supervisors, at first was unable to recall making such a statement when asked about it by attorney Godfrey Isaac, who is representing dismissed Coroner Thomas T. Noguchi in his appeal for reinstatement.

When Isaac pointed the remark out to him in an official county transcript, Debs said: "It's in the transcript. I said it."

But the supervisor added that he said it "in jest" and accused Isaac of "taking it out of context."

"I wouldn't send my dog to Siberia," Debs declared.

"Do you have any idea," Isaac asked, "how many statements attributed to Dr. Noguchi in the autopsy room were taken out of context?"

"That's something that will have to come out of the hearings here today," Debs replied.

Asks if Proof Was Sought

Isaac asked Debs at the hearing in the Hall of Administration if he had taken any steps to prove the allegations made by Hollinger which led to Noguchi's firing by the Board of Supervisors.

"No, I'm not an investigator—I'm a supervisor," Debs said.

Asked if Hollinger had produced any sworn statements, Debs said no but that the chief administrative officer "said he had a number of people willing to make sworn statements" regarding Noguchi.

Isaac wanted to know whether Hollinger ever told Debs that Noguchi was mentally ill.

"I think that was one of the

charges he stated would come out in the trial here," Debs replied.

The supervisor said Noguchi had been "threatening to kill other colleagues in government," and Isaac asked Debs how he knew this.

"I took Mr. Hollinger's word for it," the witness said. "I think he is a fine, outstanding administrator of this county."

Debs said he also believed Noguchi to be a "fine, outstanding pathologist" but that he was "not administering the (coroner's) office if the charges were true."

"The issue," the supervisor went on, "is whether he's a good administrator—not whether he's a good pathologist."

Debs noted that in December of 1967, just before Noguchi was appointed coroner, he was on vacation when the board deadlocked 2 to 2 to appoint Noguchi. He said he cast the deciding vote in Noguchi's favor when he returned.

Questioned on Satisfaction

Isaac asked Debs if he was satisfied with Noguchi when he completed his probationary period.

"Not particularly," the supervisor said, "but we went along hoping things would work out."

The lawyer asked Debs if he believed Hollinger was not above "retaliating" against Noguchi because the coroner got more investigators for his office from the Board of Supervisors despite Hollinger's opposition.

Debs replied that Hollinger "could retire tomorrow at 75% of his salary" if he wanted to and that he is "not the kind of man to carry malice in his heart."

Long before November, when Noguchi got the additional investigators, Hollinger said the coroner's office was in a "chaotic condition" and needed "beefing up," Debs said.

Isaac inquired who told Debs, besides Hollinger, that things were not going well in the coroner's office.

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The president of the Los Angeles County Medical Assn., the heads of the two (medical) schools and individual doctors," the supervisor said. "My concern was mainly the schools."

Debs said that on at least two occasions "I urged him (Noguchi) to renew his efforts to get together with the schools."

Did not Noguchi, Isaac

went on, stress that the coroner's office should be "autonomous"?

Debs said that co-operation between the office and the schools was still required.

The supervisor said he agreed to the proposal to shift Noguchi out of the coroner's job into another pathologist post because he believed it would "take some of the pressure off him."

Wanted Anywhere

"He's a fine pathologist—he'd be wanted anywhere in the United States," Debs said.

Most doctors, the supervisor added, are poor administrators who "have people running their offices" for them.

On cross-examination, Dep. County Counsel Martin Weekes asked Debs if it were not true that every county department head is dissatisfied with his budget allocations and tries to get more money.

"Every department head tries to go over the head of Mr. Hollinger and get more money . . . sometimes successfully and sometimes not successfully," Debs said.

Negro Aide

Earlier, Isaac asked another witness, George H. Green Jr., a Negro coroner's investigator, whether he had ever seen Noguchi discriminate against anyone because of race.

"Definitely not," Green said. "He was against discrimination in all forms."

Weekes asked Green if at the time of an airliner crash in the Pacific Ocean Noguchi had not gone up to a "badly mutilated" body brought ashore and said, "Let's go in front of the television cameras (which were shooting the scene) with it."

"I don't recall him saying anything like that," Green said.

"Did you take such a body before the television cameras?" Weekes pressed.

"I may have," the wit-

ness said, explaining that coroner's workers had to carry the bodies up a ramp, not far from the TV cameras, to reach a temporary morgue.

"Do you recall Dr. Noguchi walking with fragments of bodies before the cameras?" the deputy county counsel went on.

Green said he did.

Another witness, Dr. Clinton Thienes, a physician specializing in pharma-

cology and toxicology, said that an overdose of the "pep" drug Dexamyl would be "somewhat quieting" to most people.

He added that a person addicted to Dexamyl would not be able to stop taking it immediately without showing some effects.

The county accuses Noguchi of taking Dexamyl in excessive amounts, but Weekes told the hearing the county did not contend that Noguchi was an addict.

Dr. Mitsunobu Toyama, a pathologist who once served under Noguchi in the coroner's office, said Noguchi only told him "he hated losing me" when Toyama informed him he was leaving to become chief clinical pathologist at Riverside County General Hospital.

The county alleges that Noguchi once boasted he had planted Dr. Toyama in Riverside in a "forensic mafia" scheme to expand the authority of his office into that county.

"I have nothing to do with the coroner's office there," Toyama said.

The hearing will resume at 9:30 a.m. today.