

CHAPTER NINE

"I HAD TO HAVE THAT DOCUMENT"

(Wherein Lifton trips himself up in a serious contradiction about how he obtained the Malcolm Perry news conference transcript)

I obtained a copy of the Perry news conference transcript during the period that I worked for CBS News. Since no audio recording of the event has survived, from a research standpoint I regarded it as an unverified document in that it had no official markings, and I had not received it from an official source. So, I had to authenticate it. I sent copies to Tom Wicker of the New York Times, and Robert MacNeil of public television, both of whom had attended the news conference. Wicker checked his notes and confirmed the transcript's validity. MacNeill did not reply.

I was still unsure. The transcript contained the time notation "3:16 p.m. CST." I decided that this was a simple clerical error, since the press conference is known to have occurred earlier: Both NBC and CBS reported Perry's statements at about 2:35 p.m. (CST) (NBC, op. cit., p. 11). Dr. Clark testified that it occurred at approximately 2:30 p.m. (6H 21). Dr. Perry recalled that it was around 2 o'clock (3H 374). The most likely answer, then, is that the press conference started at 2:16 p.m. (CST).

At the top of each page of the transcript was the number "1327-C", signifying that this was the 1327th news conference of the Kennedy White House. An inquiry to the John F. Kennedy Library in Waltham, Massachusetts brought the reply that the transcript was not part of the Kennedy papers. (Letter to the author from Sylvie Turner, Research Archivist, May 6, 1976) Immediately, I received a copy from the Lyndon B. Johnson Library in Austin, Texas. At the top of the first page of the Austin transcript, the number "1327-C" had been crossed out and replaced by the number "1". The 1327th news conference of the Kennedy White House had been re-designated the first news conference of the Johnson White House. Efforts to learn who authorized the re-designation were unsuccessful. Former White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger, then living and working in Paris, did not respond to my questions. Wayne Hawks was dead. David Lifton completely overlooked this troublesome issue in his book.

The transcript remained on file in the White House Press Office, available to anyone with press or Secret Service credentials, until 1969, when it became part of Johnson's presidential papers.

I gave copies of the document to Harold Weisberg, the late Thomas Stamm, and the late Sylvia Meagher, my closest associates at the time, as well as a handful of other critics. It was Stamm who, through a combination of excitement and a simple misunderstanding of the "ground rules" of our relations, informed Mr. Lifton that I had the Perry transcript.

With an unrestrained desire to impugn my character (as though to do so would answer any of the questions I raised about his book) through endless non-sequiturs, Mr. Lifton picks up the story from his end; he says he telephoned me for a copy of the Perry transcript during the summer of 1976. I choose not to dispute his timing of this call, for it will presently serve to illustrate a point.

Mr. Lifton admits he told me that the transcript was vital to his work and that he had to have that document. I do recall this very clearly. It is also true that I initially refused to make it available to him, and that, at first, I did not explain to him where he could obtain it. Indeed, I did not tell him how I obtained the transcript.

Mr. Lifton also admits that he told me, "I was more than willing to protect a source." In fact, it was only under his assurance of confidentiality that I confirmed to him what was already public knowledge anyway, i.e., that CBS had the transcript and had obtained it from the White House press office. This much is reported by Mr. Lifton in Chapter 3 of *Best Evidence*.

Mr. Lifton says, "After some bickering, Roger revealed that the document was publicly available at the JFK library" The "bickering" that Mr. Lifton mentions consisted of the following: he said to me that, unless I agreed to give him the transcript, he would call the senior management of CBS News and tell them that I was passing a CBS News document to other critics. Now, Mr. Lifton had no way of knowing the source and origin of what I had shared with Weisberg, Meagher, Stamm and others, i.e., whether it came from CBS's files or elsewhere, but the fact remains that CBS did have a transcript, and were Mr. Lifton to have carried out his stated intent, I would most likely have been fired immediately by CBS News

because of its policy against making internal documents available to outsiders. Under the circumstances, I agreed to send him a copy of the LBJ Library transcript.

It is here that we stumble over Mr. Lifton's major, self-defeating error. Mr. Lifton alleges that I directed him to the JFK Library, but that he decided instead to send off to the LBJ Library for his own copy of the transcript. He implies that the LBJ copy I sent him was merely duplicative of what he already obtained as a result of the type of far-reaching deduction that pervades his book.

Mr. Lifton accuses me of attempting to suppress the truth about the Malcolm Perry news conference transcript. Let's consider the iron facts: As Mr. Lifton himself notes, Walter Cronkite referred to the transcript on the air during the June 1967 documentary. As Mr. Lifton is probably aware, a CBS flack mentioned it again in a book based on the series. (White, Stephen. *Should We Now Believe the Warren Report?* Macmillan Company, New York: 1968) Mark Lane discussed CBS's refusal to disclose the transcript in his 1968 book, *A Citizen's Dissent* (Lane, Mark. *A Citizen's Dissent*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York: 1968), as did Harold Weisberg in *Post Mortem* (1975). Numerous magazine articles published before 1978 dealing with the CBS series also mentioned it.

[Note: It should not escape the attention of serious students of the assassination that Macmillan, the company that brought us *Best Evidence* also published Stephen White's equally glib apologia for CBS News and the Warren Report. In many subtle ways, Mr. White's denigration of the critics of the Warren Commission echoes resoundingly through Mr. Lifton's tome.]

I even provided Mr. Lifton with a copy of the transcript, albeit unwillingly. Therefore, what, in Lifton's twisted view, was I trying to suppress? What does he insist I tried to conceal? Here is clear and irrefutable evidence, provided by David Lifton himself, that he finds deeper meanings and hidden motives in nearly everything—the key to his book, *Best Evidence*.

He called me while he was working on the final draft of his book. He said that he wanted to write that I had provided him with a copy of the transcript that I had discovered in the files of CBS News. As previously discussed, this was an erroneous statement. Moreover, in view of certain legal entanglements that I had with CBS at the time, it might also have been prejudicial to my posture. It is simply a wholesale invention on Mr. Lifton's part that I refused to cooperate with him for any competitive reason, neither was there any way that I could prevent him (or anyone else) from writing about a public document.

Mr. Lifton says I wrote a several-page letter, another of his inaccuracies. It was two pages, dated September 22, 1978. I said:

"From time to time during the past two years you have called and expressed an interest in crediting me with the discovery of the transcript, and you have asked me how it would be appropriate to do so. I have told you that you could properly and accurately say that, "Roger Feinman, a researcher (or Roger Feinman, while working at CBS News in 1976), discovered the transcript at the Johnson Library in Austin, Texas."

"But the excerpt of your manuscript which you read to me is totally at variance with my understanding of what you intended to write, and with my recollection of what I told you would be both proper and accurate to write. . . . [Y]ou would be seriously misguided, and also in breach of the privacy of our communications, if you quoted me as the authority for a fact that I cannot attest to, when I have asked you not to so quote me.

"It is very important to all of us who are concerned with the assassination problem that your book reflect the highest standards of investigative reporting. I have learned in my own researches that part of the task is learning how to cope with off-the-record discussions and communications with discretion."

Writing his Compuserve essays for an audience he evidently detests as feeble-minded, Mr. Lifton leaves his readers with a loaded impression that I have something to hide. This is not the style of a scholar who knows his duty to state plainly and not to evade the serious implications of what Lifton will only insinuate. Unlike Mr. Lifton, I do not consider myself free to select when I might divulge the confidence of a source according to situational ethics, exigent need, personal pique or an urge to vengeance. Rather, I have no choice: I cannot divulge the identities of those who afforded me access to information, partly because to do so might inflict great harm upon them, partly because it is my First Amendment right, and partly because it is simply the way I was taught.

There was nothing to prevent Mr. Lifton from giving proper credit for the discovery of the transcript. I never asked him for protection, and I did not ask him to hide anything. I merely asked him to tell the truth. He continually insisted upon writing that I had provided him with internal CBS materials, which was not the case. Instead, he told the story his way, regardless of the facts.

Interestingly, Mr. Lifton contacted me about the passage in his book regarding the Perry transcript several months before he permitted Macmillan Company to see the first 10 chapters of his book (the transcript is discussed in Chapter 3 of *Best Evidence*). Thus, he represented to his publisher that he had independently unearthed the document at the LBJ library rather than that he first received it from me.

Mr. Lifton then asks our credence for the statement that he called again to ask if he could say that I gave him a copy of the CBS transcript. This allegation is both highly unlikely and contrary to my recollection. He did call me again during his preparation of the later chapters of his book to request one last time that I show him a manuscript. As Mr. Lifton himself recounts, he would not permit me to conclude the conversation. It is fair to conclude, therefore, that he was desperate for competent assistance as he struggled to find a conclusion to his book.

While thinking about our very limited personal dealings and my relationship with Sylvia Meagher and other first-generation critics of the Warren Commission, Mr. Lifton has surely wondered, "Why did they trust this guy from CBS?" The answer apparently having eluded him, Mr. Lifton has clearly focused his hostility on one who played no part in his ostracism. But it is simply this: I was forthright and honest and withheld nothing from those few with whom I chose to associate, sharing whatever I knew and striving to earn their trust and friendship, which they returned in kind. Ultimately, I knew that I could not maintain two different relationships with hostile camps and remain true to my principles. Mr. Lifton seems to have had difficulty balancing his own priorities.

A few words about Lifton's comments on my article for *The Third Decade*, "The Greatest Secret I Ever Learned About The Kennedy Assassination." It had to do with the publication of material that I submitted to the House Select Committee on Assassinations. Mr. Lifton read the article. He purports to analyze it, mangling quotes as is his wont, but even after he finished writing his essays for Compuserve, Lifton had still not seen the *Village Voice* piece to which my article referred. Somewhat like a child trying to conceal its folly, after he posted his essay on Compuserve and sent copies through the mail to various critics, he frantically called researcher and writer Jerry Policoff (whom he had tried in vain to plumb for derogatory information about me) and asked for a copy of the *Voice* article.

My *Third Decade* essay is available from its publisher, Professor Jerry Rose, Department of Sociology, State University College at Fredonia, New York. I wrote it because I believed that a friend of mine made an uncharacteristically serious mistake in judgment during the haste and excitement of answering the news media's attacks on Oliver Stone's film, and in the process jeopardized the reputation and privacy of a party innocent of any personal wrongdoing by making use of the documents that I had submitted to the House Select Committee on Assassinations for investigation. My name was on some of those documents. Knowing beforehand what the *Voice* planned to print (the galleys were read to me) and what they did print, and being unsuccessful in my attempts to reason with the *Voice*'s principal reporter, and its editor (who, according to a source close to the development of the article, was blinded by a rabid urge to get even with his father, a former *LIFE* Magazine official), I could not permit a woman to be needlessly hurt by something that I had set into motion years earlier in the expectation that discretion would be used. So, I warned those involved of what was about to happen. This is something I guess Lifton will never understand. He stands in pompous judgment, but the co-author of the *Village Voice* piece and I are still friends.

Finally, Lifton hides from his readers his rich hypocrisy about the subject of the news media's treatment of the assassination controversy. What is Lifton's take on the news media? Lifton has been reported as telling his college audiences that the news media were "duped" into believing official reports and the Warren Commission's ruling that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone when he shot Kennedy. ("Media 'Blew It' On Assassination, *Columbus Dispatch*, November 22, 1988, p. 05B.) Only in his recent Compuserve essays does he deride this writer for modifying his views on the nature of CBS's role. When will Mr. Lifton admit to his true views about the Warren Commission? Even if he were to do so now, who could believe him?

Lifton's exoneration of the news media for any responsibility in allowing the Kennedy assassination cover-up to perpetuate may be due in no small measure to the unusual reception his book received from one of the most stalwart defenders of the official line, Time Inc. After years of lambasting assassination researchers and writers, *Time Magazine* greeted the publication of Lifton's book with a slightly wary but highly respectful two-page spread, calling the book

"meticulously researched" and "both grim and fascinating as a mystery story." Jerry Policoff, a leading expert on the news media's coverage of the assassination controversy, says: "In the thirty years since the assassination, it's the only conspiracy treatise that Time, Inc. regarded as serious and credible. In my opinion, that's probably because it was the least credible." (Author's interview with Jerry Policoff, June 14, 1993)

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