

Note for the Record

25 August 1970

On my first day at Dallas, 12 August 1970, Mary Ferrell told me that she had had a two-hour phonecall several days earlier from Lifton, at the end of which she was left with the impression that his purpose was to ask her to be very guarded in discussion with me of her knowledge of Lifton's discoveries of evidence, activities, and confidences. She had been surprised at his implicit request to withhold information from me because in her earlier contacts with Lifton he had given her to understand that he had shared his information with me more than with any other person. She had, in fact, suggested that he should join us at Dallas during my visit; but he had told her that he could not come until September.

Mrs. Ferrell and I were both hesitant to even mention the delicate affair of the Lifton/Newcomb contacts with LIFE with a view to the purchase of the original Zapruder film. However, since we each were aware that Lifton and Newcomb had fallen out with each other, we both assumed that we were also in the picture as to the Zapruder film gambit, as was indeed the case. What I did not know, but learned from Mrs. Ferrell, was that she had in fact set the whole gambit into motion, and that it was because of LIFE's desperate financial situation that the attempt to sell the film was bona fide. Lifton had never mentioned Mrs. Ferrell's involvement and subsequently, when I told him that I had learned from her of LIFE's financial position and that I consequently withdrew my suggestion that the offer to sell the original film was not genuine, he pretended not to know that LIFE was in financial trouble and still did not acknowledge Mrs. Ferrell's part in leading to the negotiations.

Mrs. Ferrell sensed from our conversation that I was not aware of what Lifton called the "kernel" of his findings and she therefore felt bound to reticence. She seemed to believe that this "kernel" had to do with the "cabinet plane," and was examining the various versions in the literature of the plane's turnaround in midair upon learning of the assassination. However, it appears that Lifton presented the cabinet-plane-thesis to throw Mrs. Ferrell off the track and that the real crux of his case is a sensational discovery about the JFK autopsy, so crucial that upon disclosure it would clearly lead to a congressional investigation.

Mrs. Ferrell did tell me that Lifton and several other students had carefully cultivated Wesley J. Liebeler and that Liebeler, in his cups and reacting to flattery and manipulation, had revealed that he and several other Warren Commission lawyers had copied and taken away, at the end of their service with the Commission, all of the classified documents which are to be withheld for 75 years. Liebeler kept his set locked in a trunk but in response to provocative comments and questions went so far as to pull particular papers out of the trunk at times and show them to Lifton and his friends.

Lifton and the other students plied Liebeler with drink and introduced him to attractive young women, so as to get him out of the way. Lifton then copied the keys to Liebeler's trunk, broke into his quarters, took all the classified documents and copied them, and then returned them to the trunk. All this seems to have taken place about the middle of 1966, for as Mrs. Ferrell's account proceeded, I realized that it dovetailed with the incident which had caused me in the fall of 1966 to break off all contacts with Lifton, in rage and disgust.

To recapitulate briefly my 1966 clash with Lifton: he had called me several times in succession, first to ask my advice about entering into regular contacts with Liebeler. I had strongly advised against that, pointing out that it would create an appearance of collaboration with our adversaries. Lifton had then assured me, in writing, that he contacts had not involved, did not involve, and would never involve more than innocuous conversation "in the corridors" with Liebeler, with a view to extracting from him bits and pieces of information which would be helpful to the critics' efforts to get at the truth. But only three weeks after his assurance, he called to say that he had made a sensational discovery of overwhelming importance which he said gratuitously he would not confide in me or any other critics. He had gone to Liebeler with his find; Liebeler had been severely jolted and, in Lifton's presence, had immediately called Specter in Philadelphia. Lifton was on an extension phone and heard Specter's shock when the discovery was explained to him. Specter made a comment to the effect that his private parts would be in a vise, if and when the information became public, indicating his intense worry, which in turn suggested that the information concerned the autopsy--Specter's "area".

Because of the gravity of the information, Liebeler wrote a 17-page memorandum (I learned in August 1970) which he sent to a number of Commission members and lawyers and of which Lifton secretly obtained a copy, which Liebeler does not know to this day. There were apparently urgent consultations held in the wake of the Liebeler 17-page memo, with unknown result. (Mrs. Ferrell says that one consequence was a sudden trip by LBJ to his ranch, where he consulted with Hale Boggs and one other high-placed official.)

I was incensed to learn that Lifton had taken to Commission lawyers a discovery of utmost importance which he refused adamantly to share with any critic and told him in writing of my disgust at his treachery, and my desire to have nothing more to do with him. A few months later I was in Los Angeles for two days. Lifton called me repeatedly but I refused to speak to him until the evening of the second day, just before my scheduled departure. At that time, he "admitted" that the sensational discovery he had taken to Liebeler had turned out to be "mistaken" --which I naively believed at that time, but which I now realize was just another

of Lifton's frequent lies and deceptions.

To sum up the position, it now seems clear that Lifton did discover among the classified documents which he obtained by illegal means information about the JFK autopsy which would reopen the whole case, and that he has been suppressing this information for some four years. He has constantly postponed the completion of a manuscript in which ostensibly he will reveal this sensational discovery and Mrs. Ferrell and I both feel the most serious doubt that he will ever culminate his work. I had in fact written to him on 19 July 1970 to pose the question of when the time required for legitimate preparation of a manuscript became, in effect, suppression of vital information. His reply had been a postcard saying that he did not have time to reply in a manner commensurate with the issue raised.

To digress for a moment, there are two other matters which were illuminated by my Dallas visit. One related to the Commission documents which Lifton has been obtaining from the Archives and reselling to me and Mrs. Ferrell (and others) at 5¢ a page. Mrs. Ferrell and I were both reaching a stage of inferring that Lifton was systematically withholding any such documents which contained really significant information and sending us only the "garbage," although it sometimes included data whose significance Lifton had overlooked. Our suspicions were unexpectedly confirmed by a joint letter from Fred Newcombe which arrived the day before I left Dallas, addressed to "Mary and Sylvia," copy of which Mary is to send me, in which Newcombe explicitly said that Lifton himself had stated that he was withholding any documents of importance from his shipments to other critics. In the past year or so, I have paid him just under \$300 for sets of documents, from which Lifton cynically, treacherously, and dishonestly had been withholding documents of value. In other words, he has systematically bilked me and others, in the name of cooperation and friendship.

The second matter illuminated is Lifton's systematic, repeated duplicity and penchant for theft and cheating. His account to me of his near-fist-fight with Fred Newcomb carefully dealt only with Fred's attempt to make secret photos of the Zapruder film displayed by LIFE but omitted Lifton's acknowledged (to Newcomb) intention of substituting a print and thus stealing the LIFE copy, on the very same occasion of the altercation with Newcomb. Lifton further noticed in Newcomb's home a letter from Mary Ferrell; when refused permission to read it, he proceeded to filch the letter and to read (and probably copy) it. At the same time, he constantly imposes secrecy on others, about everything under the sun, while playing one individual against the other and creating consternation all around himself.

While I was still in Dallas, Mrs Ferrell and I discussed several times what action, if any, we could take to force Lifton's hand--that is, to ensure that he would finally complete his ms. and disclose his sensational discovery or discoveries. We both rejected the very thought of threat or coercion, although we realized that nothing short of such tactics would move Lifton.

Upon returning home on 20 August 1970, I gave the whole matter additional thought and found myself unable to rest while pivotal information which would reopen the whole case continued to be suppressed by a venal, deceitful, and unprincipled thief and cheat who had exploited the good faith and good will of his colleagues and whose indecency seemed to know no bounds. I called Tom Stamm to report on my visit to Dallas (e.g., the Nix film in slow-motion; the press clip quoting Lt. Day on a bullet found 100 yards from the window; the V-for-Victory bleep; the Kimbrough photo of the TSBD at 12:45 p.m. showing some six or more cartons flush with the window, before the scene was disturbed, rather than the supposed "sniper's nest"; etc.). I also posed to Stamm a hypothetical situation such as the actual dilemma presented by Lifton's sitting for four years on the key which would reopen the case. Stamm's immediate reaction was that I should take the matter to the press, specifically to Sauvage, who was both a critic and a reporter.

After giving thought to such a course of action, it did seem to me that it was likely to produce the desired disclosure while involving no threats or coercion. I had learned the story not from Lifton but from others who knew pieces of it, plus a review of my 1966 correspondence with Lifton, which recorded the fact that during the phonecall in which Lifton told me that he had taken his discovery to Liebler I had immediately told him then that I would not be bound by any confidentiality or secrecy about his outrageous treachery. On Sunday night, 24 August 1970, I therefore phoned Fred Newcomb and Mary Ferrell, to propose that we should take what we knew to the press, in the hope that Lifton would then be compelled by reporters to disclose his "kernel", which would almost certainly lead to the reopening of the case towards which we have been working for as long as seven years, in some cases. Fred wished to think it over for a few days; Mary, on the other hand, felt it was exactly the right course of action, she had no reservations about my going to the press, and felt that it should be done whether or not Fred agreed.

As this is written, I am still waiting to hear from Newcomb, but tentatively planning to proceed unless he has some really cogent, overriding arguments to present.