

RECIPE FOR PARANOIA - PRESS REACTION TO "THE TRIAL OF LEE HARVEY OSWALD"

[From "Recipe for Paranoia," by Harry F. Walters; Newsweek, 3 Oct 77, p. 64-5:]

But a phone call from none other than "President Johnson" advises him [the prosecutor] not to try to look for a conspiracy because "there's no water in that well ... and it wouldn't be good for the country." Sighs Gazzara: "I've just been told what to think." So have the viewers. There is not a shred of evidence that Johnson ever intruded in the assassination investigation.

[From "'Oswald' as Imagined by ABC-TV," by John J. O'Connor; NY Times, 30 Sep 77, p. C26:

There is no evidence that Lyndon B. Johnson interfered in any way with investigations of the assassination.

[From "Fact, Fabrication and Docu-Drama," Editorial; NY Times, 3 Oct 77, p. 28:]

[ABC] claimed that a researcher made sure that every piece of information could be documented. (How, we wonder, did he document the telephone call in which President Johnson warns the prosecutor to lay off?)

[From an internal Warren Commission memo by Melvin A. Eisenberg, dated 17 Feb 64, entitled "First Staff Conference (January 20, 1964)":]

At this point, however, [that is, after Warren initially declined the chairmanship of the Commission] President Johnson called him. The President stated that rumors of the most exaggerated [sic] kind were circulating in this country and overseas. Some rumors went as far as attributing the assassination to a faction within the Government wishing to see the Presidency assumed by President Johnson. Others, if not quenched, could conceivably lead the country into a war which could cost 40 million lives. No one could refuse to do something which might help to prevent such a possibility. The President convinced him that this was an occasion on which actual conditions had to override general principles.

The Chief Justice then discussed the role of the Commission. He placed emphasis on the importance of quenching rumors, and precluding future speculation such as that which has surrounded the death of Lincoln. He emphasized that the Commission had to determine the truth, whatever that might be.

[[Presumably the last sentence set out one of the general principles previously referred to!]]

[From an internal Warren Commission memo by Howard P. Willens, dated 21 Jan 64, describing the same staff meeting:]

He [Warren] stated that the President was very concerned regarding the international repercussions of the assassination and called upon the Chief Justice to help.

[From "The Vantage Point," by Lyndon Johnson, pp. 26-27; reprinted in "The Assassinations, by Scott, Hoch and Stetler, pp. 10-13:]

With that single shot [the murder of Oswald] the outrage of a nation turned to skepticism and doubt. The atmosphere was poisonous and had to be cleared. I was aware of some of the implications that grew out of that skepticism and doubt. Russia was not immune to them. Neither was Cuba. Neither was the State of Texas. Neither was the new President of the United States....

In addition, we were aware of stories that Castro, still smarting over the Bay of Pigs and only lately accusing us of sending CIA agents into the country to assassinate him, was the perpetrator of the Oswald assassination plot. These rumors were another compelling reason that a thorough study had to be made of the Dallas tragedy at once....

When the country is confronted with threatening divisions and suspicions, I said [to Warren, trying to get him to head the Commission], and its foundation is being rocked, and the President of the United States says that you are the only man who can handle the matter, you won't say "no," will you?

He swallowed hard and said, "No, sir."

[See also: Warren's Memoirs, pp. 356-7; Katzenbach memo of 25 Nov 63 to Moyers, as quoted on p. 23 of the Schweiker Report.]

Most of the above-cited sources skirt the obvious question of the potential incompatibility of quenching the worst of the rumors and finding the full truth. I'm confident that all of the participants were well aware of this problem. The Katzenbach memo is unusual in that it spells out that "The public must be satisfied that Oswald was the assassin; that he did not have confederates who are still at large; and that the evidence was such that he would have been convicted at trial." Maybe Katzenbach should have been a consultant for the ABC program!

In sections of this memo which have not previously been made public, Katzenbach wrote: "Unfortunately the facts on Oswald seem about too pat -- too obvious (Marxist, Cuba, Russian wife, etc.). The Dallas police have put out statements on the Communist conspiracy theory, and it was they who were in charge when he was shot and thus silenced.... We can scarcely let the world see us in the image of the Dallas police when our President is murdered.... We need something to head off public speculation or Congressional hearings of the wrong sort."

I think that the kindest thing you can say about the attitude of the Johnson administration is that top officials recognized that reports of a Communist conspiracy were being pushed by those with a potential vested interest in seeing them accepted, and that those officials were confident that these reports were false. Thus, many of the people involved in the coverup were acting with the best of motives. (The historical role of the Communist-conspiracy theories is worth keeping in mind in 1977.) Although I have serious doubts about the idea of this kind of dramatized history, I think the words attributed to Johnson by ABC are a fair summary of the Johnson-Katzenbach position.

Some additional quotes:

[Newsweek] CBS also has a docu-drama in the works on the Kennedy tragedy, but its approach promises to be significantly different. "Ruby and Oswald" will confine itself almost entirely to sworn testimony before the Warren Commission, and the script will be checked for accuracy by the network's news division.

[NY Times] Another treatment of Oswald, being prepared by CBS, contends it contains no fictional material and will be subjected to the scrutiny of CBS News for an accuracy check. Comparison should prove valuable and perhaps provocative.

[Newsweek] Yet by indiscriminately blending hard evidence with pure conjecture, ABC must stand accused of irresponsibility in the first degree. The verdict here is guilty as charged.

[NY Times editorial] Since ABC has asked for our vote, we're glad to give it: The offense is gross irresponsibility and the network is guilty.

(I guess good writers just follow the same paths.)

[NY Times] A Cuban woman, who says she saw Oswald with some Mafia figures, is given some prominence, but the script fails to note that she later was placed in a mental institution. [Sylvia Odio? That's news to me! Where would the Times find a piece of information, or misinformation, like that?]