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AN INDEX OF OUR TIME

The American public takes certain information for granted. A combination of high technological development and traditional democratic values gives us unusually high expectations. We demand a near-perfect phone directory and up-to-the-minute TV listings in ~~daily~~ newspapers that may publish several distinct editions every twenty-four hours. We look to our government for reliable statistical information on myriad subjects, ranging from the cost of living to ~~daily~~ our daily vitamin needs, from ~~from~~ sociological obscurities like the number of Jehovah's Witnesses in Arkansas to political intelligence assessments on Soviet military hardware. We are information consumers, and this fact contributes mightily to our national health.

We take pride in what we know -- or could know, if we cared to -- about our society and the world around us. Many of ~~the~~ our contemporaries around the world are less fortunate. In some societies it would be considered a great luxury to collect the information which is at our fingertips, or to consume costly ink and newsprint in its publication. Some governments ^{undeniably} ~~evenly~~ fear ~~the need for~~ open access to information. ~~in~~ A veteran Sinologist recently described how China assiduously attempts to deny visiting scholars access to its local press:

Sometimes, however, in all innocence, the woman at the market stall where you buy a pound of apples or the cobbler who has repaired your shoes will absent-mindedly give you your goods wrapped in a taboo old newspaper; needless to say, the dirty and crumpled sheets are ~~then~~ smoothed over lovingly by China watchers, who pass them around with trembling hands, deeply excited, and after being multiphotocopied they end up on the black market in Hong Kong, where various research institutes outbid themselves to get them.

The same scholar elaborated on the all-pervasiveness of "state secrets" in a society which does not readily respect the citizen's "right to know":

Addresses and telephone numbers, whether of public institutions and organizations or of private persons, are also in the category of state secrets. There is no telephone directory, at least not that foreigners can use, and numbers and addresses that one needs for one's professional contacts are given out individually -- stingily, in fact. A number of public buildings have

no inscriptions on the outside to identify them: only their majestic appearance and the presence of sentries show that they are official. Which ministry? Better not to be too curious.

Our public opinion would never abide such absurdities as unmarked government offices, the absence of a phone book, or newspapers which are taboo to certain readers. But it would be imprudent to conclude from gross comparisons that America is an example to the world in the area of public access to information, with little room for improvement. For in the areas where public demand is not overwhelming, where the thirst for a particular kind of information is not experienced by just about everyone, we still find plenty of officials who treat requests for information as if a hungry lion had asked to ~~lick~~^{sniff} their fingertips. These folks would probably be much happier working in unmarked buildings with unlisted phones.

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy has produced an unusual paradox. On the one hand, the public has demonstrably thirsted for answers and consistently displayed a healthy skepticism toward some inadequate proposals to explain the mystery of this unsolved murder. Public demands on this question could not be ignored, and in a decade and a half there have been no less than four official investigations which have addressed widespread doubts and suspicions. All told, more than forty volumes of official reports, hearings, exhibits, and findings have been published.

But on the other hand, it is only an infinitesimal section of the public that has even perused these forty-odd volumes. Of the four official reports which purport to summarize the mass of evidence, only two have been widely available as commercial paperbacks. A citizen who wanted to know exactly what Senators Richard Schweiker and Gary Hart concluded in their subcommittee investigation of the JFK murder might not know what to ask for at the local GPO bookshop. Who could be expected to know that this dramatic little report goes by the ponderous title, E86k V, Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Government Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, United States Senate?

In short, government investigations of the Kennedy assassination

have turned up what can literally be called a wealth of information -- millions of dollars worth of legwork and paperwork -- to satisfy private citizens' craving for answers. A significant fraction of the information has been published. But the manner of publication (or in some cases, nonpublication) has hardly been calculated to encourage private citizens to delve seriously into the mystery on their own. In fact, it has hardly been calculated to encourage ongoing investigation by federal employees officially charged with this duty.

An obscure FBI Airtel of August 16, 1966, makes the point perfectly. It was addressed to the FBI's director, J. Edgar Hoover, from the Dallas office. Not surprisingly, the Dallas office had had to follow up some leads about the Kennedy assassination; not surprisingly, putting together the Letter ^{Head} Memorandum that accompanied this particular Airtel was a lot of work. Some poor agent had to go all through the Warren Report trying to check small details. The author of the Airtel recognized that this wouldn't be the last time the FBI would be called upon to look into this ^{matter}. But he had discovered, from the usual reliable sources, that in faraway New York lay an invaluable tool for the performance of these duties -- an index! The Bureau's prose cannot be imitated:

To locate the necessary material to compile the enclosed LHM required extensive review of the report of the President's Commission on the assassination of President Kennedy; and it is recognized that in the future, it will be necessary to perform numerous other research projects of similar nature. In this regard, it is noted, as set out in Dallas LHM, dated 8/9/66, captioned as above, that PENN JONES, JR., Editor, "Midlothian Mirror," Midlothian, Texas, mentioned that a SYLVIA MARR has compiled an index on the testimony and exhibits contained in the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy Report and Hearings, which index has been printed by the Scarecrow Press of New York. PENN remarked that this is an excellent index for reference purposes.

The Bureau is requested to furnish one copy of the MARR index to the Dallas Office for future use in conducting research regarding captioned matter.

The FBI Airtel is a modest and misspelled tribute to Sylvia Meagher's monumental labor -- a subject index to the Warren Commission's twenty-six volumes of evidence. To the FBI agents in

Dallas -- who at least were doing their research on company time -- the thought of plowing through thousands of pages of unindexed reference material was indeed daunting. Should we not pause to imagine how intimidating such work looked to spare-time researchers, that first generation of Warren Commission critics? Sylvia Meagher's index to the volumes not only enabled many researchers to get to work, pushed them over the first hurdle, so to speak; her efforts also provided a model of scholarly rigor and selfless personal dedication which has only grown more stunning with the passage of time.

The Warren Commission's failure to provide an index to its twenty-six volumes -- if only for the future use of the FBI -- is inexcusable. An index would have cost the taxpayers some money, to be sure; but the sum could not have approached one-half of 1 percent of what the Warren Commission had already spent. The long-term saving might have been measured in time the FBI ^{could} ~~would~~ be spared in checking out future leads and rumors. The best that can be said in defense of the Commission is that it never dreamed its volumes would receive such intense scrutiny over the years.

This argument turns inside out, however, when applied to subsequent investigations. Congressional investigations could not expect their evidence to escape the scrutiny to which the Warren Commission's was subjected. Decisions which limited the accessibility of their evidence -- like the continuing failure to provide indices -- were, if not cynically intentional, at least taken with a conscious understanding of the consequences. The Schweiker-Hart Senate subcommittee held no public hearings, provided no index to its slender but fascinating report, and made none of its evidence public. The House Select Committee did hold public hearings and it did publish twelve volumes of supporting material; but neither its report nor the twelve supporting volumes contain any index.

Once again, it is left for selfless private citizens -- Sylvia Meagher and Gary Owens -- to perform a task of essential scholarship that an official body with a budget in excess of five and a half million dollars did not see fit to provide. The House Committee, in fact, specifically urged the Justice Department to pursue the investigation further. Can one seriously imagine Justice Department

~~xxxx~~ staff making much headway in the twelve-volume labyrinth without the guideposts which Meagher and Owens supplied so promptly and competently?

Researchers like Meagher and Owens have received little public recognition, and indeed they and other serious critics of official findings have often been lumped with irresponsible sensationalists in disparaging ~~attacks~~^{comments} from the established media. How many times have we ~~xxxxxx~~ heard it asserted that speculation and conspiracy theories lead to lucrative book contracts and lecture tours? How ironically this image of the assassination-profiteer contrasts with the reality: few of the serious researchers could ever hope to receive even nominal financial compensation for the years of painstaking labor they have contributed in the effort to break open this case.

In many ways this community of scholar-critics has had to function in the same way as the China watchers ~~we~~ described above. Their search for fragments in the documentary puzzle resembles the Sinologists' alert watch for taboo newspapers inadvertently let loose. A document ~~denied~~^{withheld} by one federal agency in Freedom of Information requests may turn up already released in the files of another agency. The Chinese cobbler who wraps his goods in forbidden papers has had ~~many~~ counterparts in the JFK case.

But no piece of the JFK puzzle would make any sense without the guiding intelligence supplied from the beginning by a few critics like Sylvia Meagher who catalogued what was known[?] and enabled others to match new pieces with old. The importance of such a simple research