

MEMORANDUM - NEW YORK TIMES JFK INVESTIGATION

TO: Harold Weisberg, Sylvia Meagher
FROM: Jerry Policoff
SUBJECT: Conversation With Gene Roberts, National Editor, The New York Times - 9/29/71
DATE: 9/29/71

On August 26, 1971 I wrote to Gene Roberts requesting information about the New York Times investigation into the JFK assassination which was conducted during the latter part of 1966. Mr. Roberts, now National Editor of the Times, was a member of the investigation team. I received no reply, and on September 14, 1971 I sent a similar letter to Harrison Salisbury. On September 17, 1971 I sent a second letter to Gene Roberts, this time certified, requesting an answer to my letter of August 26. I received a reply dated September 20, 1971 in which Mr. Roberts suggested that my motive in writing to both he and Mr. Salisbury was to receive different answers to the same questions. He told me that upon receipt of my original letter he had consulted with Mr. Salisbury to check out what the dates of the investigation were and found that I had sent a similar letter to Mr. Salisbury. He said that as Mr. Salisbury had answered me, he could see nothing that he could add. I wrote back that I had received no letter from Mr. Salisbury, and that moreover, I had not written to Mr. Salisbury until three weeks after I wrote Mr. Roberts and had received no reply. I then repeated my questions and asked that either Mr. Roberts or Mr. Salisbury reply. I sent a carbon copy of this letter to Harrison Salisbury. This letter was dated September 23, 1971.

This evening at approximately 7:30 PM I received a telephone call. A secretary asked me if I was Jerry Policoff, and when I replied that I was I was asked to hold on for Gene Roberts. Mr. Roberts then got on the phone at the other end.

Mr. Roberts told me that he felt that he could best address himself to my questions over the phone, and he asked that I address any questions to him that I might have. He sounded cautious at first, but warmed up during the course of the conversation, and he was quite polite, and to a reasonable extent, rather candid. He apologized for the misunderstanding and said that he was under the understanding that Mr. Salisbury was answering my letter. He said he had been on vacation in August, hence the confusion on the time lapse between my letter to him and my letter to Salisbury.

Roberts told me that he could not recall the precise dates of the investigation, but to the best of his recollection it began a short time before Thanksgiving and disbanded a day or two before Christmas, 1966. He said that the investigation lasted 5 or 6 weeks, and he said that it could have been a week more or less either way. He also qualified the term "investigation," saying that it had aspects of an investigation, but it was more of a review of allegations made by the various critics of the Warren Commission. The purpose according to Roberts was to determine whether these allegations carried validity, and to see if they could generate any news stories.

Roberts told me that members of the team attempted to interview every member of the Warren Commission and its staff. For the most part they were successful with some exceptions, the most notable of which was Earl Warren. By and large, according to Roberts, the staff defended

the report. Some, including Arlen Spectre according to Roberts, wished that they had seen the autopsy photos. Although several staff members regretted not having seen this evidence, they did not feel that any basic conclusions would have been affected had they seen them. Wesley Leibeler expressed the opinion to members of the Times team that the Warren Commission had not adequately explored the possibility that the assassination may have been the result of "a left-wing conspiracy." Joe Ball also expressed the opinion that conspiracy might have been further investigated, although he did not suggest that there had been one or that it was left-wing. According to Roberts, the team did uncover a certain amount of dissatisfaction on the part of Warren Commission staff members, but none of it was major, and no one was dissatisfied with the basic conclusions of the Warren Commission.

During the course of the investigation the Times made an effort to obtain access to the autopsy photos and X-Rays, but they were rebuffed. Roberts said that they made requests to see this material from the National Archives, the Justice Department, and the Kennedy family, both directly and indirectly, but they were unsuccessful.

Roberts said that the Times attempted to find new witnesses but found none. He said that they checked into the New Orleans aspects of the case as well, but concluded that nothing substantial was uncovered. He said that he had interviewed a gas station attendant whose station was about two blocks from where Oswald lived. The attendant told him that Oswald was a frequent customer, and that he drove a panel truck into his station on several occasions. He claimed that Oswald had a close friend who often accompanied him in his truck. He claimed that the last time he saw Oswald, Oswald bought gas from him on credit. He never paid the bill. Roberts said that he recognized the significance of this since Oswald was not supposed to have any close friends, and he supposedly could not drive at that point. However, the attendant had not saved the unpaid bill, and there was no way to verify his story.

Roberts said that the Times discounted the reports of smoke on the grassy knoll. He said that the Times had checked extensively and concluded that no modern armaments give off smoke, and that nearly all gunpowder is smokeless.

According to Roberts the investigation was discontinued while Harrison Salisbury was in Hanoi. He left for Paris about mid-way in the investigation about two weeks before arriving in Hanoi (Salisbury arrived in Hanoi on 12/23/66). The investigation continued for about two or three weeks after Salisbury departed, and it was then disbanded.

Roberts said that the purpose of the investigation was to check out leads, and that they did not find anything substantial. He said that nobody came up with proof to knock down the Warren Commission. "The basic conclusion was that we couldn't find that there was supporting evidence to the contentions of the critics." Roberts added that "we found no evidence to indicate that the Warren Report was wrong, which is not to say that the Warren Report was right." He said that "we are not in the business of printing opinion, and that is why nothing was printed in the end."

Roberts told me that he was disposed to accept the findings of the Warren Commission, and he felt that by and large, the rest of the team had felt the same way. He identified the Times reporters who had worked fairly extensively on the team as himself, Peter Kihss, John Corry, Martin Waldron, and Mike Handler. Until he left for Hanoi,

Harrison Salisbury was the head of the team, but did not actively participate in its work.

Roberts discussed various other matters with me during the course of our conversation, largely dealing with the various aspects of the JFK case and the Jack Ruby trial which he had covered both for the Times and the Detroit Free Press. We talked for approximately 90 minutes.

cc: Jim Lesar, Howard Roffman, Gary Schoener, Ed Williams