

What I Really Meant to Say Was...

By JOHN SPARROW

"DO you really want to be made a fool of before 20 million people?"

Put like that, the prospect certainly did not appeal to me. At first, when I was invited to appear on NBC's "Today" show earlier this year and give my views on the controversy concerning President Kennedy's assassination, I welcomed a chance of vindicating the conclusions of the Warren Commission and exposing to a nationwide audience the extravagances of its critics: it seemed an opportunity too good to miss.

But I soon began to have misgivings. I was told about the innocent victims of television—honest and intelligent men made to appear, under its merciless inquisition, as knaves, or fools, or both. In England the inquisitors were fearsome enough; in the United States, I was assured, they were no less formidable and even more unscrupulous—they stuck at nothing. I might be confronted, without any warning, by Mark Lane, the archdemonologist, by the egregious Harold Weisberg, or the maniacal Joachim Joes-ter; or all three of them might spring upon me together and tear me metaphorically limb from limb. Worse still, I might find myself under cross-examination by the redoubtable District Attorney, Jim Garrison himself.

To take on such experts without notice and on their home ground, was to ask for trouble. They would not pull their punches, and their blows, I was warned, might not be all of them above the belt. I should be chased ignominiously round the ring and then knocked flat in full view of the American public.

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When I reached New York, the warmth of those who welcomed me was certainly disarming: my fears, according to my hosts and sponsors, were all illusory; no surprises would be sprung upon me; the organizers of the program promised full cooperation. Surely no dan-

ger could lurk behind such comforting assurances?

And yet, a doubt forced itself upon me. Perhaps the intention of these friendly-seeming people was precisely that: to disarm me, to lead me, all unsuspecting, to the slaughter. Was not this just the kind of stratagem I had been warned against? By the time the fatal day arrived, my misgivings had returned in full force. But it was too late to retreat. I would have to face the camera, and face it protected only by the thin disguise—a touch of intelligence below the eyes, a dab of honesty about the mouth—provided at the last minute by NBC's resident cosmetician.

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Once inside the studio, I realized that all was well: I had nothing (except fear itself) to be afraid of; there was no hiding place for Mr. Lane to lurk in, no trapdoor

to release the demon Garrison. It was obvious from his greeting that my interviewer, Hugh Downs, was a friend and not an enemy; I was to be given a clear run to make my own points in my own way. And the points I had to make were plain enough: the Warren Report was right, the conspiratorialists were wrong; the Commission and its staff were honest men who did a good job; the critics, or most of them, if they were not actually crooks, were the cracked, the crazy, and the credulous. I had only to be myself, and this plain truth would surely come across.

Myself! Alas, that was just what the merciless medium compelled me to be; as always, it stripped bare the real man.

The first question—"Do you support the Commission's conclusions?"—seemed to give me just the lead I wanted. "Certainly," I said. "They

did a fine job and they reached the right result." At least that was what I meant to say, but somehow it came out different: "Conclusions? Well, yes, I think, the main conclusions . . . But, of course it depends what you mean by 'conclusions.' On the whole, I think I would say . . ."

My questioner came quickly to my aid: "What about the critics?" That was easy. "A crowd of crooks and crackpots," were the words that rose to my lips—but they were not the words I uttered. "Well," I heard myself saying, with a most superior English intonation, "I think they're sincere. I mean, while there is an element of distortion that might, on the one hand . . ."

My friend hurried once more to my rescue: "I believe you have called some of them demonologists. What do you mean by that?" I gladly seized the proffered life belt:

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"Troublemakers who stir up fantastic suspicions for evil ends" was of course my answer. But it was not the answer that I actually gave: "Well, I would say, I think, that, while an honest critic looks at the evidence and builds a hypothesis upon it, the demonologist, if we may call him so, is a man who, having formulated a hypothesis that fits a predetermined theory, motivated, at any rate in some cases . . ."

So, for what seemed to me—and surely to my audience—three-quarters of an hour, but was, I am told, 10 minutes by the clock, I chased myself round the ring, and scored a handsome victory over myself on points.

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Made a fool of before 20 million people? There had been no need for any American inquisitors to do the job. I was perfectly capable of doing it myself.