

May 3, 1971

Sylvia Meagher  
New York

Dear Mrs. Meagher:

I just received the latest Givens papers from Dick and will be forwarding them to Harold Weisberg sometime shortly. While I may not be able to mail this letter for a while, I'd like to set down my comments while they are fresh in my mind. I'll go through the pages in order as they were sent.

The 4/15/71 letter to you from Miss Northcott of the Observer is discouraging, for I see it as a sign of what I should expect from publishers. Did Belin ever mention a suit against you based on the article? I see one possible reference in his 3/23/71 further on, but that would appear an empty threat. It is really a shame that such idle threats and (if they are translated into action) spurious suits so inhibit the ideal of a free press, which it can no longer be if it fears to publish the truth. My book has just about every ground for the autopsy docs, the Clark panel, Arlen Specter and possibly Rankin to sue me. But I would welcome it for there isn't a one who I ~~WANT~~ wouldn't want to put on the stand. It is my understanding that the best defense against libel and slander is the truth.

Thus, I regard the revisions as a minor rape of your article, for it damages the important context of criminal actions having been committed in the investigation. While I agree with Harold's remarks (as I recall from a carbon I received) that you imply too much blame for the members themselves, Belin and Ball should not be spared at all. The reformulation I would suggest to deter the chimera of a suit which stalks your publisher is something on the order: Such and such would seem to indicate, from a legal standpoint, that there was perjury, suborning.....etc. While the final determination must be made by a court of law (for such actions are both criminal and actionable), Belin and Ball certainly invite such charges based on their WC record as herein revealed.

Your reply to Belin's dire attempt at self-justification (which I envision as him standing in an open sewer and claiming to baptize himself), is excellent considering its brevity. I have found it the ultimate frustration in my short life to even try to respond to defenses of the WR and its staff.

I don't have to tell you what the first six pages of the Belin thing are full of, though I could hardly profane you more than has Mr. Belin.

The parts of his Givens deposition that Belin quotes do little more than (assuming these slots are true) indicate it was not Belin who, in effect, backed Givens up against a wall and caused the change in story. I never thought it was and frankly such a notion is foolish. If I recall, you never accused him of that either. With the police and FBI pressuring the poor guy, there was no need for a WC staff lawyer to get his hands that dirty. Belin stuck to his own kind of dirt: He suborned perjury.

Since you get at the essence of Belin's "response" so well, I shall not go into it.

That Belin should end his article with the lovely non sequitor that the deceptions of the critics are overshadowed by these of the Vietnam war is, as the bard says, the most unkindest cut. His representation of the Tonkin fiasco is that Congress forced it on poor LBJ, which--mildly--is the reverse of the truth. But I cannot help see the Tonkin Gulf Resolution as absolutely contrary to any of JFK's politics. The man who shoved it down the throats of Congress was able to do it for one reason only: JFK was no longer President. And LBJ--thanks to the WC--had not even the credentials of a legitimate President!

But at least Belin shares that one virtue with almost all of his WC alumni: He is consistent.

Continued luck with your article.

Sincerely,

  
Howard Hoffman