

THE SHAME OF DALLAS, TEXAS

There may be those who found some satisfaction in the Jack Ruby trial in Dallas, but we are not among them. The whole train of events, from the moment the assassin's bullets were fired on November 22, 1963, to the squalid scene in the courtroom when the Ruby verdict was announced, surely will rank as one of the most appalling chapters in American history. Whenever we think of it, it makes us cringe for the society where such a thing could happen.

When President Kennedy was murdered, it did not seem possible that the revulsion could be compounded. But that was before the mills of Texas "justice" began to grind.

What happened in Dallas after that still is beyond belief. A man who was accused of the most monstrous crime of his time, of murdering the President of the United States, was handled by the Dallas police as if he were a celebrity or a participant in an extravaganza planned and executed for the convenience of television and the press.

If ever there was a time when extraordinary precautions should have been taken, when every effort should have been made to prevent a slip, that was it. Yet Oswald's transfer from Dallas police headquarters to the county jail was announced in advance so that TV, the press, and anyone else who happened to be around would know precisely when it was going to occur. A creature named Jack Ruby, who had no business on the premises, was lurking among reporters and policemen. He was carrying a gun, but no one bothered to stop him, search him or question his presence. When Oswald appeared, Ruby drew the gun, rushed up to him, pointed the pistol at his abdomen as millions watched on TV, and pulled the trigger. In doing so, Jack Ruby killed the most important prisoner the Dallas police ever held, right in the basement of police headquarters, in the middle of a swarm of cops.

Jack Ruby committed a heinous crime. He did not simply kill Lee Harvey Oswald. He murdered the very concept of justice, the basic principle that a man is entitled to a trial before he is condemned.

The trial of Jack Ruby was another unbelievable event. At a time when every effort should have been exerted to secure as fair, as dignified and as decorous a trial as possible, publicity once again seemed to outweigh every other consideration. In the middle of the trial a scene that was too crude for the rankest TV Western occurred in the courthouse, as seven inmates broke out of a cellblock four floors above the courtroom. Brandishing a pistol carved out of soap, one of them grabbed a county employee, stuck the "pistol" in her back. The prisoners barreled past the courtroom, bowled over "Little Lynn" Bennett, one of Jack Ruby's strippers who was appearing (fully clad) in the trial as a witness for the defense. In the fracas that followed, two jailbirds were captured, but five got away (three were captured later). By Dallas standards, it hardly mattered. TV cameras had captured most of the sequence.

On Saturday afternoon, March 14, as the nation watched on television, a circus atmosphere prevailed in the courtroom. When the verdict was announced, reporters and photographers climbed over benches and chairs. Ruby's showboat lawyer, Melvin Belli, displayed his lack of respect for the judicial process by blurting out that the court was a "kangaroo court, a railroad court," and calling Dallas a "festering sore." (That was too much even for Jack Ruby's family, who later fired Belli.)

Who can forget Judge Joe B. Brown as he read the verdict . . . wetting his fingers and casually turning the pages of the decision as if it were a bill of lading, or some infinitely boring memorandum? Who can forget his voice so matter-of-factly droning out the words, "We, the jury, find the defendant guilty of murder with malice, as charged in the indictment, and assess his punishment as death."

Now, unless the finding of the jury is upset, Jack Ruby will be dragged from his cell one day. He will be strapped into an electric chair, and a terrible jolt of electricity will go coursing through his body until he dies. Somehow, in a simple-minded way, through this barbaric anachronism, society will conclude that "justice" has been done. What actually will have happened is that Jack Ruby, one of the lowest creatures in memory, will have dragged society down to his level. The letter of the law may have been served, but let us not claim that the degrading spectacle in the courtroom was "justice," or that any part of the whole sordid business in Dallas was civilized.

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Melvin Belli