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EVERY ONCE in awhile—we trust not very often—a reader of The Washington Post might reach the end of a story and ask, “now what was that really all about?” It’s as if, having had what seemed like a meal, you don’t feel nourished by having had it. For Your Information, that phenomenon occurs even among journalists. Not all such incidents are worthy of note, but on Tuesday there was such a case. It involved Jervis S. Finney, the Baltimore lawyer who was nominated to replace George Beall as the U.S. attorney for Maryland. The first-page story began:

*In a desperate effort to eliminate Justice Department objections to his nomination as U.S. attorney for Maryland, Jervis S. Finney yesterday acknowledged that “way back” in his bachelor days he periodically visited the “establishment of a woman in Baltimore” which informed sources identified as a massage parlor.*

The story went on to identify Finney’s statement as “unusual” and explained that his action was taken to eliminate “the possibility of embarrassment or even blackmail.” It said the FBI discovered in the course of its routine background check on Finney that his name appears in a “client book” confiscated in a raid some time ago on the woman’s establishment. The raid was unconnected to Finney or his nomination, and the names of other political figures are in the book, “according to sources.” It said Finney finally spoke up about the matter after “four days of turmoil and personal anguish.”

Most of the rest of the story was background and some elaboration on what was told in the beginning: Finney was recommended by Maryland’s two Republican senators; the job is a sensitive one because investigations under way may involve “politically powerful people”; by way of illustration, it was noted that the political demise of Spiro Agnew was brought about with the assistance of the same office.

“The existence of the Baltimore massage parlor’s client list was known to various Maryland politicians,” the story went on, and, “sources said, the Justice Department feared that it could ultimately be used as leverage or to embarrass Finney.” That’s when we began to put our fork aside and wonder if we were getting the right kind of fare. For some reason, from then on, the story seemed as if it should be about something other than a nomination for the U.S. attorney’s office. The story seemed to be about a book that is floating around in Maryland political circles like a hornet in a closed car. That it stung Jervis Finney was possibly no more than happenstance. Plainly, from the evidence on hand, any number of other Maryland officials could easily have been its victim. Certainly no one in this day and age is going to argue that the fact that a bachelor frequented a massage parlor should later disqualify him

for the office of U.S. attorney. We dare say that if such a standard were applied to all present and future holders of public office . . . well . . . it would make filling public posts a lot more difficult.

It is the book that wanted the attention, not Mr. Finney. Who obtained that book? When was that raid? Who, if anyone, was prosecuted in the course of the investigation that followed? Where is that book now? Who was in a position to place it before the FBI? Why was the FBI interested in the one name of Jervis Finney and not in finding out about the potential blackmail that so concerned the Department of Justice in the case of Jervis Finney? Why is he the only potentially blackmailable person in the book if the names of other prominent officials are in it? If blackmail is the issue, then somebody is in a position to commit a crime. What did the FBI do about that potentiality? Those are the questions that concern the book, but they aren’t all the questions that concern the episode.

There is next to consider the matter of the way in which the Department of Justice handled itself. Where else but at the Department of Justice could such a sordid little incident have had that kind of repercussion for Mr. Finney? If someone other than a Justice Department official had such a tale to tell, and if Mr. Finney were not the nominee for that office, nobody would listen to such tales. The Justice Department had only one reason to know such a thing about Mr. Finney; it was doing what is a supposedly confidential check on his candidacy. That this particular little piece of dirt should have played any role in its thinking is disturbing—unless there is something more to it than even a careful reader of the story can deduce. Unless and until someone in authority can demonstrate that the matter concerned much more than was available to the press at the time of that story, we fail to see why the Justice Department made of the matter what it did. With respect to Mr. Finney as a candidate, it should have been discounted. With respect to the potential for blackmail, the FBI should have considered an arrest. In either case, Justice should have played no role in having the matter come to light as an impediment to the Finney nomination.

Instead, Mr. Finney felt called upon to make public a detail from his private past that is to this day none of anyone’s business. In the end, to skirt around the unmistakable fact that it was none of our business, that news story took the reader through the torturous problems Mr. Finney faced and hinted at the details without really saying what the matter really was about. One is forced to conclude that the paper knew not just more than it could print, but more than it should have known and more than anyone other than Mr. Finney needs to know about his past personal life.