

The Column: Unmasking of phantom-fighter Lane

Some notes on Mark Lane, and another abomination, jotted down at random while pondering a suitable going-away-and-don't-ever-come-back gift for BC football coach Ed "Old Oh For Nine" Chlebek (and please spare me the argument that BC can salvage this dismal season by beating the Cross on Saturday or winning the Teriyaki Bowl in Japan—this guy with his perfect record has accomplished the impossible, and made alumni yearn fondly for the dear, dead days of Joe Yukica, Ernie Hefferle, and some other guys whose names I have forgotten).

Mark Lane, for those of you mercifully spared any notice whatsoever of his addled ramblings, is a sort of vulture in a man suit who has done his feeding for the past several years off the cadavers of public figures killed by madmen. It is Lane's thesis that a whole bunch of folks were involved in the Kennedy and King assassinations. Lane has gone from campus to talk show to campus and back to talk show again, picking up lecture fees for befuddling the uncertain. At best his antics have warranted some doubt that Darwin was correct; at worst he has come nigh to giving free speech a bad name.

Through it all, Lane has done a great deal of posturing about his decision to tell the truth and his fearlessness of evil forces arrayed in snarling determination to silence him. Thus he has cleverly created the misimpression that he may actually know what he is talking about, while simultaneously nurturing the paranoia of those who would prefer to blame unnamed plotters for whatever woes beset them.

Much as prostitutes somehow regularly find themselves in proximity to the seedier of the gentlefolk, Lane attached himself as legal counselor to the late Jim Jones, whose passing may reasonably be

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taken as something less than an un-mixed curse. Jones too, though crazy as a rabid coyote, yet retained sufficient animal craft to perceive the main chance available to him who would exert himself to bedizen the poor and mislead the confused. He grasped the central truth that there are thousands of people out there who have not the slightest idea of what is happening, or not happening, to them, and will pay handsomely to hear some prophet declare to them the meaning of life. Jones was a predator, and Lane is a predator, so it is only right and fitting that they got together.

The difference between them, of course, was that Lane is a shrewd and calculating man, and Jones was a maniac. Right after U.S. Rep. Leo Ryan was murdered on the airstrip, Lane was to be found saying that Ryan's inspection of Jonestown had allayed his fears that Jones was a maniac. Which is rather peculiar, and hard to square with the fact that Ryan had been earlier afforded the opportunity to have his throat cut by one of Jones' gentle followers. But it is precisely the sort of statement that one might expect from Lane, who has been troubled by reason about as often as the rest of us have been inconvenienced by controversies in Mauritania.

Later, of course, Lane found it prudent to run off and hide in the jungle. This was when Jim Jones was passing out the refreshments mixed with poison, and marshaling the flemen to encourage those who were not thirsty.. There

was no way old Mark was going to have a couple belts with his client, charitable Jim Jones, uh uh. He ducked into the bushes instead.

This foresight enabled Lane to return to the USA, this hotbed of conspiracy. As usual, he had something to say. He said he knew all along that Jim was drugging his adherents, in order to prevent them from questioning his wilder fantasies. Lane said he was pretty much convinced before the Ryan party landed in Guyana that there was some danger for them. For one thing, Lane said, he figured the cheese sandwiches served up for Saturday night supper were probably laced with something that might somewhat discombobulate a rational human being, and therefore he didn't eat any. He never intended to, in fact—he brought along a lot of cough drops, so as to jack himself up with plenty of sugar and avoid the pangs of hunger that might tempt him to allow himself to be poisoned.

What Lane did not do was vouchsafe this conspiratorial theory of his to Ryan or any others in the party. For once, Lane was not dealing with shadowy anonymous figures who might be bent upon dark deeds, but with a living, breathing, homicidal psychopath, whom he knew very well to be ripening his plan for what amounted to mass murder.

Now, two things are possible. Either Lane is telling the truth, in which event he is unfit for inclusion in the human race, or else he is lying in order to claim the sort of percipience he has claimed about other disasters. In which case he is unfit for inclusion in the human race. Disgusting man. Too bad he wasn't thirsty.

George Higgins' column appears in the Herald American Tuesday through Friday and Sunday.