

May 11, 1975 A.J. Liebling Counter Convention

Excerpts of panel on the Kennedy assassination and the media.

Panelists:

Robert Richter
Robert Sam Anson
Ron Rosenbaum
Mark Lane
Priscilla Johnson McMillan
Moderator: Anthony Lukas

LUCAS:..It seems to me that when I was a reporter for The New York Times a couple of years ago that at the Times and at other straight media in this country it was simply true that if a reporter believed in a conspiracy quote conspiracy theory to explain virtually anything, you know, from a scandal at city hall to the assassination of a President he was simply not regarded as a serious man, as a serious reporter. And that, I'm not passing judgment on whether that was, you know, a correct judgment or not, but it was simply the fact. It certainly was the fact at the Times. I think as a result of Watergate and of Vietnam and of other events in the last five to ten years it can be said today that any reporter (unintelligible) who is not willing to entertain the possibility of a conspiratorial explanation for an event or series of events is today simply not a serious man....

... If my description is true, and if if if you want to challenge my my assumptions by all means go ahead, but if you accept my assumptions then why is it that despite this change uh in the last ten years, why is it that discussions of conspiracy relating to assassinations still is largely, though not exclusively the province of what Bob Anson in ourpre-panel discussion referred to as the media of the partially alienated? It is not probably limited to what we call the underground press. It is appearing certainly in papers like the Phoenix and the Real Paper in Boston; the Village Voice here; New Times here; certainly on public television; and countless lecture platforms in universities across the country. But it is my impression, again correct me if I'm wrong, it is my impression it still has not gotten into what we call the straight overground press. I do not see the Times printing much about it. I do not see the Washington Post writing much about it. I do not see it on the networks.... I would like to ask the panelists why they feel that is so and if they do feel that is so.

Richter: Well I would start by saying that the day of the steambath theory of politics of political reporting are not yet over. And I'll explain what I mean by that in a moment. When I worked on the Warren Report show for CBS, and I have a transcript of that report here. Eric Sevareid made one of the (inaudible) comments when he referred to the prevalence of the devil theory of politics, which he explained as one of the reasons why 70% of the American people did not believe the Warren Commission. He also went on to say that if Earl Warren and John McCloy who were on the Warren Commission staffs knowingly suppressed or distorted decisive evidence about ~~XXX~~ such an event as a Presidential murder there descendants would bear accursed names forever. "The notion that they would do such a thing is idiotic." Well, uh that's Eric Sevareid dealing with the devil theory of politics. And I'M saying it the steam bath theory of politics that's still around for political reporters. That is if you take a steambath with Earl

Warren, then you're not about to not believe him. And in one of the delightful experiences I've had in investigating the Warren Commission Severoid told me that he used to take steam baths with Earl Warren and how could you not believe a man if you've sat next to him in a steambath. I think reporters feel that to get the inside track on what is really going on they still have to get into the steambath theory of politics.

...
McMillan: Well, I feel that the press was way too uncritical in its reception of the Warren Commission Report when it appeared in September of 1964, and uh was lazy (inaudible) and I don't think the press did its job then as well as it might have done. I've been writing for a long time and (inaudible) waves. And the initial one which Mr. Lane was part of really began in December of '64 when he was very active, uh er well December '63 right. And uh, there was the one that started really after Johnson began bombing uh North Vietnam, and mining, and that went on through Garrison. And Garrison didn't have much, and wasn't a very serious figure. And now there's the post-Watergate atmosphere in which the credibility of Government is at a very low ebb. And I think that the Commission should have held, in the first place, Johnson mis-anticipated where his doubters would be coming from. He thought he had to worry about the Right. And he accomodated a number of figures from the political Right, some of them cronies of his in Congress. And he should have had one or two responsible figures from the Left. But he um misguessed it. Now I feel that Watergate would, and perhaps the war in Vietnam, would not have happened if it would not have been possible but for the growth of a large intelligence establishment. It's the submerged part of the iceberg. And it seems to me perfectly legitimate to look into every single nook and cranny that you can. I happen to think, uh I've devoted a lot of time to Oswald's life so uh I have uh, uh a vested interest [chuckle] in his having done it. (Laughter). But I don't fear, I really don't fear an investigation. I think some things will never be known. That is, uh you know, secret agencies just don't come forward and say we hired so and so. And if it were to turn out that uh it seems somebody had, that you have to view with about as much skepticism (tape ran out).

Richter:... My former employer, CBS and house fingerer, Eric Severoid, he's again making a remark about his conclusions about the Warren Report; "In the first place it would be utterly impossible in the American arena of the fierce and free press and politics to conceal a conspiracy amongst so many individuals who live in the public eye." That's a pre-Watergate statement, by the way. I would also like to make one other comment, that at the time of my investigation while I was working on these programs, I was sort of the lone dissenter among the team of producers. I came across a man who was sort of the administrator of the CIA office in New York, and he said to me something that I don't think I've repeated to too many people since. He said "The Warren Commission has no standing with the CIA." Now what does that mean?

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Richter: I have to confirm Tony Lucas' idea about mindset. The Executive Producer who was in charge of the Warren Report shows that I worked on and Stephen White was a sort of behind the scenes

colleague and subsequently published a book called "Should We Now Believe the Warren Report?" told me that, Stephen White told me that as far as he's concerned anybody who did not believe the Warren Commission Report believed in flying saucers, i.e. was a nut. And that mindset, I think was behind a lot of what went on at those CBS shows. Beyond that, in the programs themselves Mr. Lane made a charge that they were deceptive. I was one of the people who worked on those programs and I can get to the specifics of what I think he is talking about and also show the omissions in which I think there were very significant mistakes, deliberately or not I'm not prepared to say at this point.

...

McMillan: Well, I there's a er, I disagree I think with everyone on this panel in a fundamental way. I don't really, I don't think there's been any conspiracy on the part of the press but there has, uh the facts are very complicated. But, um to my mind there is an immense amount of positive evidence in the Warren Commission Report that Oswald did do it. Mr. Lane doesn't accept it, and a lot of that evidence he, and um one can spend a long time talking about the bullet, you know. But uh, I think that there was an enormous amount of hard evidence in the report, that a generation has now grown up that never was exposed to those facts to start with, and grew up during the 60's when the Government was being progressively discredited, any kind of government, with Johnson himself (inaudible) his own report before he was through. But there is, I think, a lot of hard which is not fun to go through. It's very hard work. And people just simply to ignore it and get into a discussion of I think pseudo-evidence. I think we've already heard some. And um, I don't like to be dogmatic about it, (but I think the principal thing is that on top of the whole dis, cumulative disbelief that we all got in American institutions and government credibility during the 60's, there's the fact that it's, that there, it's very hard work to follow that evidence, and that there is a generation, a whole generation, I suppose between the age of, below the age of 24 or 25 that never was exposed to the facts in the first place. And I think that's one reason that, in a sense, to have it all brought out again. So that people should be aware of it, and uh, and we, and another reason for the maximum publicity for everything. For, uh I mean from the first Warren hearings which we didn't get, on But I really don't suspect the premise that the press has been loaded or itself any conspiracy to hush it up, or has really done such a bad, or such a loaded job over the last eleven years.

...

McMillan: (Following a discussion of Garrison) Well, I missed a little bit of the discussion here, but I would like to say this about Garrison. New Orleans was crawling with relatives of Oswald with whom he'd lived and whom he'd seen a great deal of in the Summer of 1963. Relatives, co-workers, bosses, neighbors, landlords, and Garrison never went to one of them. He, the only person actually connected with Oswald that he ever subpoenaed that that I know for sure was definitely connected with him was Marina. And he didn't, uh I don't know what he asked her. It was behind uh, it was a grand jury proceeding. But he, but he did have swarms of relatives to whom he could have gone, and my feeling was that had his investigation been very serious he would have tried to find out something about the alleged assassin and his personality and his

connections in that town. And Ferrie and Shaw were sort of hypothetical connections, but there were plenty of real ones that were never approached.

Lane: Well, I think Garrison was really less concerned about the psychology of Lee Harvey Oswald than about the conspiracy that killed John F. Kennedy...

McMillan: But there were facts about where Oswald was and what he was doing the whole time he was in New Orleans...

Lane: And your statement that he never talked to any of those people, I guess by that means staff also never talked to any of those people, you're mistaken. I myself spoke to three of Oswald's relatives on behalf of Jim Garrison, totally (inaudible) on their behalf and made a report to the office, and I noticed that others, Louis Ivon, were doing that also.

...

McMillan: (in answer to audience question) Well, the fact is that Marina was not the daughter of a secret police lieutenant. She was illegitimate, and does not know who her father was. But she was the niece of a colonel in charge of the timber administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Minnk Oblosk. And the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the NVD is a police ministry, although not of the sensitivity of the KGB. Uh Oswald, the second point, uh traveled, allowed to travel freely in and out with his Russian wife. Well that's a very good question, a very good question. Um, because it was very hard to defect at that time and it was also very hard to leave with a Russian wife. But she, uh, I have examined those circumstances with a lot of care and he didn't travel freely. He had a lot of trouble and he had to apply himself very hard. For example, he had to make a suicide attempt at one point. Um in October 31st of '59, um and uh...

Jones Harris (from audience): No, he did not make the suicide attempt on October 31st.

McMillan: Well it might have been another date, but he did slit his uh...

Harris: That was the date he dropped his passport at the embassy. You must get that right if you're going to do a book Miss McMillan.

McMillan: Well, thank you. But at any point, the truth is when they were trying to get rid of him he pulled something which caused them at least to hospitalize him. and think about his case some more. But I don't think his travels in and out of Russia were so easy. But uh, there were, it has to be stressed that at that time of 1961-62 when he was trying to get out, each case was a precedent. And there weren't really any rules to go by. One case was decided or the decision was made and all that the same time as the Oswald case, December 1961, which, in which the American student was allowed to take out his wife. so the conclusion says that the "CIA did know that the real answer lies in Russia." Well, uh. It would open up a can of worms all right. But, it's a possibility, just like everything else.

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colleague and subsequently published a book called "Should We Now Believe the Warren Report?" told me that, Stephen White told me that as far as he's concerned anybody who did not believe the Warren Commission Report believed in flying saucers, i.e. was a nut. And that mindset, I think was behind a lot of what went on at those CBS shows. Beyond that, in the programs themselves Mr. Lane made a charge that they were leceptive. I was one of the people who worked on those programs and I can get to the specifics of what I think he is talking about and also show the omissions in which I think there were very significant mistakes, deliberately or not I'm not prepared to say at this point.

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Richter: (in answer to question)... "In your Warren Commission show," the second question asks, "did you endorse the findings? How did you dissent?" I was one of the team of producers. My role was primarily to examine the major arguments raised by the critics, that had already been raised, to try and develop new information, that they were getting into that had not yet been made public, and to film whatever seemed relevant. A lot of what I filmed never got on the air. Dr. Wecht, this forensic pathologist, was interviewed by Dan Rather for an hour. I was the producer of that interview. About a minute and a half or two of his comments got on, but the information which really was at the heart of his questioning of the Warren Commission and its conclusions did not get on. Mark Lane was interviewed through the arrangements that I made through Bill Stout, and some of the most telling arguments that he made did not get enough (inaudible) in the program. The entire thrust of those four one-hour programs as far as a lot of the American public was concerned, and I share that view, was that these shows were primarily shows that endorsed the findings of the Warren Commission. I thought that that was not our role as journalists. I thought our role as journalists should be to examine the evidence critically, objectively, skeptically. That was not done. The comment that you heard of Dan Rather that was interjected over the Zapruder footage. I can go into that briefly. In those shows there were a series of tests that allegedly proved that the Warren Commission was right and that Oswald could have done what he allegedly did do. One of those tests was, the Zapruder footage could not be shown on the telecasts because Time, Inc. owned the material at the time and would not allow CBS to run the footage; one of those tests involved photo experts who took individual frames from the Zapruder footage which they could run; but not the footage as a rolling piece of film where you could see action; they took individual frames and a photo expert said there were three places where those frames were out of focus. And these correspond with a few frames after a shot was fired. In other words, there are three places where the Zapruder frames go out of focus, i.e. three shots. I would (inaudible) photo expert was being filmed for this broadcast, and while camera rolls were being changed, I asked him "what about all these other places where the the individual frames are out of focus?" I had noticed at least three other places. Does that mean that there were six shots fired? He said no, there are only three because they're out of focus in a certain way. And I said please tell me the way in which these others are different. He said it's too complicated. I said try me. He turned and walked away. Well either there were three shots fired, no there were six shots fired or the theory doesn't stand up. I think that that was a gross deception.

Lane: I wonder if I could just interject for a second, Tony. I think that Mrs. McMillan has played a really active part in this being one of the few people to question Lee Harvey Oswald in Moscow, having access to Marina Oswald after some eleven years on a book which hasn't yet come out. And I know that you told me before I met you today for the first time that you were working for the North American Newspaper Alliance at the time that you conducted that interview. I wonder if you've seen Commission Document 49, an FBI report which reads as follows: "on November 23rd, 1963

Mr. Jack Lynch of the United States Department of State Security Office telephonically advised special agent in charge, Allen Gillies, Oswald had been contacted in Moscow by three employees of the State Department, whom he identified as John McVickar, Priscilla Johnson, and Mrs. G. Stanley Brown. Lynch indicated each of the above persons had interviewed Oswald in Moscow." I wonder if you were at any time, or at that time employed by the State Department, if you're familiar with this document, or if you've tried, if it's incorrect if you've indicated to the Warren Commission that the United States Department of State's Security Officer had made a mistake when he gave that information to the FBI?

McMillan: Well, no I'm not familiar with the uh doc... with the document. Uh John McVickar was the Vice-Consul (inaudible) no, uh I do not, I'm not familiar with the document. Um, but John McVickar was the vice-consul who was present the first day Oswald went in to, uh put down his passport. and, uh he was, he did work for the State Department. Mrs. Brown was the wife of the ~~consul~~ Attaché, and she was sort of a receptionist in the consul's office, and I I suppose she was authority in the State Department. But, uh, that was a mistake about me, and I wouldn't bother to uh correct that mistake. I worked for the North American Newspaper Alliance and I didn't work for anyone else.

Richter: I guess I didn't finish answering the question before. "How did I dissent?" I dissented by administering my vigorous criticism to the executive producer, presenting evidence that I felt ought to be included in the show that were not, uh the final determination was that they would not because of the thrust of the program. My dissent was so much known by the underground press, the radical press and was published, uh people reported my dissent.

...

McMillan: (answer to question) Well, first of all, no I am not an employe of the CIA of the DIA. I have to think twice before I know what it is. (several sentences inaudible) and I kind of respected him at his youthful age, He had just turned 20, for the very great difficulty of what he was trying to do. Did I have access to him in Minsk, Moscow, or the U.S.? Well, I had that one meeting with him in Moscow in November of 1959. But uh, uh, uh foreigners at that time, of course I wasn't interested. I wrote my story, did try and see him once after that in the hotel just to say hello, and the lady the (inaudible) lady on his floor said he was gone. Actually he had only gone to another room, but I saw that as meaning that he was out of Moscow, and I never saw him again. The U.S.? I didn't know that he was back in the U.S., although I would have liked to see him if he had been because I was interested in writing a piece about the changing attraction of Moscow for people, uh since the thirties. And he was the only, that is in the thirties people defected for ideological reasons and in my time, which of course were the fifties and the early sixties, they always seemed to be career reasons, both journalists, even defectors or unhappy love affair, not ideological. He was the only person

I ever met who claimed to be defecting for an ideological reason, and I was very much interested in him for that reason. And if I had known he was back in the States I would have liked to ask him about the circumstances of his return because he was the exception that proved my rule. (shout from audience to answer question about financing of Marina book) Okey. And who is paying for my book? It's an advance from Harper and Row. As for the Beelin (sic) book, I believe that my husband first talked to John Leonard or somebody at the book section of the Times, and wanted to do a tenth anniversary piece, and uh, we didn't know who Beelin was and never had any connection with him, and we simply wrote that review. But we were asked to review all the, we wrote it one version. It was rejected. We were then asked to review all the conspiracy theories, especially Mr. Lane. We tried. But it was just an arrangement that we, my husband asked I think, and they assigned it. It was a New York Times or quadrangle book, and uh the other thing is uh well if I was picked as the token woman (for the panel), okey. (from audience. "How did you gain access to Marina?") Oh, oh access to Marina. Well, that's a good story too. I owed Harper and Row a book on Russia which everybody always has trouble writing, you know their book on whatever it is. And um, two other people much better known than me tried it. One was Jerold Frank, and one was Isaac Don Levine. And Marina was anti-semitic. Uh they tried to talk to her about politics and sometime that Winter I asked my editor there would they be willing to make an approach to her on my behalf. to do it after I had read a little about her and found her rather interesting. So they did. They approached both her lawyer who was then William MacKenzie and her brother-in-law, Robert Oswald. And I don't know which approach got through to her. So I'm, down in June of 196-, whichever year it was, 1964, and she looked at me and said okey. I think she saw the way that her husband did that a woman wouldn't bother her much about poli... political things. She's bored by it. And I think that's fundamentally what he (inaudible) too. That he didn't think women and politics mix, and (inaudible).

....

McMillan: (in answer to question whether she was ever a member of any intelligence agency) No. (from the audience: "would you be willing to repeat that under oath?") Absolutely. ("Well you may have the opportunity to do so.") I'd be glad to. As to the nature of my contact with Lee Harvey Oswald, it is not that they were un... I believe, um it might have been four hours or so that I talked with him on one evening, and that's it.

Jones Harris (from audience): Mr. Lucas, I didn't get a card and I would like to ask Miss McMillan one quick question. Could she tell us why she called Mr. Owens of the Soviet desk at the State Department the day after the assassination?

Lucas repeated question.

McMillan: Well it happens that uh, Mc McVickar, the vice Consul, who also occasionally took me out, and (giggling) who I don't think was a CIA agent, but you know you don't look a gift box (sic), um called me up from Washington. He said uh, you should probably call Bob Owens who's head of the Soviet desk. And I did.

Harris: Did he tell you why he thought you should?

McMillan: No. I didn't particularly ask him. I think, but I didn't, wasn't give it too much thought, but at that moment like that was a time of great shock.

Harris: And then when you did speak to him can you tell us what was the course of the conversation?

McMillan: Well, I don't think that I spoke... I think what happened in the end to me was that I went there in uh December of '63 and uh Abe Shames (phonetic) who was the chief legal counsel at the State Department, Maheu Jeminovs (? phonetic) was present; debriefed me, but it was fundamentally the same stuff that was in my notes from my interview with Oswald. I mean, in other words everyone was trying to cooperate and they were pouring really the same information from different directions.

SEARCH SLIP - G. McMillan

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