

SM, JP

9/11/71

Mr. John Leonard, Editor (editor?)
Sunday N.Y. Times Book Review (review?)
Times Square, N
New York, N.Y. 10036

Dear Mr. Leonard,

Your letter of 9/9 reads, in full: "Apparently everyone in the country is without honor except you. I don't think we have anything useful to say to one another."

If I believed you had a soul, I could call you the soul of brevity.

Taken by itself (and at arms length is less uncongenial) your "letter" would not credit a fourth-string high-school debater in Mississippi's most blighted school. Taken in the context of what you have done and not done and of the serious accusations to which you make no response, this being your first "answer" to detailed letters going back more than five months, you have provided one of the more convincing self-defamations. Considering the nature of the beast who is most acceptable in a function such as yours, this is not an inconsiderable achievement.

I am not aware of having represented myself as an expert on honor, whatever that word may mean to you if, from your record, it can mean anything. As I understand it, I regret I have become and will, to you, here and now, represent myself as an authentic expert on dishonor. I have made a longer, deeper, closer and more detailed study of one of the greater dishonors in our history. I claim to be an expert in that. Without the dishonor of and in the press, this great blight on our national honor would not have been possible. Circumstances have, I think I can without exaggeration allege, ~~made~~ made me an expert in this, too.

Thus I accredit both of us, each for his own role. I have never enjoyed that of the victim of the rape who is then charged with being an attractive nuisance, which seems to be the concept of the Sunday Times and its special sections.

My first letter to you was written before your assassin's debasement of the intellect and his once-honorable calling was on the streets. I had been sent a copy by a political enemy you have converted for me. I have since been told that on receipt you expressed deep misgivings and disclaimed personal responsibility (so my "editor?" in the opening is not a mere wise-crack). You would have to find some way of rectifying this terrible thing you said, agonizing as only "reviewers" can. Your "rectification" was not long delayed, a further libel by a once-decent man who exposed himself where I, having deemed him decent in our earlier dealings (if not the highest exemplification of the "honorable" journalist, for he confessed taking dishonorable orders from an editor since, if politely denounced, by his own paper, for just such things - copy on request) was careful to hide his identity. When I sent you an original carbon of my contemporaneous letter establishing exactly what I had said to be accurate, as a close reading of his falsity also establishes, asking that you forward a copy to him and return the original to me, you were silent. If you have, as is normal, sent my communications to the man ~~to~~ whom I sorrow, Wolff, and the shameless Kaplan, both have failed to display the most elemental manhood and self-respect, neither having written me. They could denounce me as a liar, or claim I misinterpreted or took out of context, or maintain that they had been honorable and truthful. What you published from Kaplan, which I believe can safely be taken as his best, addresses nothing, responds to nothing, and ignores the subsequent letters I sent you.

Your own concept of honor, yours and your journal's, apparently did not extend to informing your readers that your "reviewer" was simultaneously an official propagandist for the government's official and recognized propaganda agency, and you had assigned him the job of assassinating the book so severely critical of the government he then served as he had earlier in roles that totally disqualify him for the assignment. His former associates are those I expose in this book. Parenthetically, not one has voiced the slightest complaint. Not of accuracy, not of biased opinion, not of malice. And to extend the parenthesis, with all I have published on the Kennedy assassination, the same is true. All of the Warren Commission's lawyers have steadfastly refused to confront me in person and on radio, TV or in public forums of their own choosing. The one who related did make a single appearance to my face had been the most vocal of them. He has since been completely silent. And that was one of my poorer nights, after 36 sleepless hours and toward the end of a long and exhausting trip.

I conceive it to be a proper function to leave a record for history and for men to live with. I therefore have this single added word about the evil man you had do your dirty work. It is not a new challenge for me, but it is one I think makes a tidy record. You arrange for, and you moderate a debate between him and me, on his work, mine or any combination of ^{his} ~~my~~ choosing or yours, in any decent public hall you can arrange in New York. We can soon enough establish honor, honesty of writing and intent. I am aging, the past seven years have been exhausting, I haven't in them averaged five hours a night's sleep, and these weeks got as little as two. I may have to sit if you are man enough to do this, but I will be there. I think neither you nor he will accept this challenge, and then at least the three of us - and perhaps history - will know who speaks seriously of honor and who uses the word as other whores use "love".

Nobody-ever- has written me as I have you. ~~with no definite intention of ever answering me~~ Nobody will without definitive and specific response. Not ever. There is no weariness, no poverty, no abuse, that need rob a man of honest intent of his self-respect. And there is no flippancy that can impart it to a man who is not manly enough to face his own record. If perfection is no more than condition of writers than it is of other men, and I do not claim it, I challenge you, expert that you are, to show me any work of non-fiction on any subject, contemporaneous or historical, approaching mine in extent, less characterized by even human error. You may still find my earlier works in your library. It was not until after the first 13 of the first had disappeared that I began charging the Times for them. But for so noble a purpose, even though you, personally, have added to my burdensome debt, I will provide you copies free.

In short, there is no challenge I will not meet. And there is none you have-or will.

Prior to completion of FRAME-UP I wrote Huie, Foreman, Hanes, Cahale and others, spelling out what I intended to say and soliciting any opposite view they might want me to include. Neither then nor since has any one had a word to say. When Hanes faced me on TV- the show Foreman fled from the studio rather than face me in even a gang-up, he acceded to my charges against him. You can hear the tape. Huie was without a single specification of factual error when he changed his mind and did confront me, and on that, also a gang-up, his accomplice, incredibly enough a sitting judge who had been chief prosecutor, had no word of complaint about my severe treatment of him. Again, you can hear the tape.

I sent each and every member of the Warren Commission, J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the Secret Service, the autopsy doctors and others I can name copies of my first work and solicited comment. No one has had a single complaint to make to me. Despite its rather clear editorial stand, one of policy rather than fact, I submitted to a ranking New York Times executive (and not him alone on the Times), advance copies, manuscript copies, of my first two books. How many writers of controversial non-fiction do you know who have subjected their work to such scrutiny and have no single complaint? But where some of my work was worth as much as a half-page as news to the New York Times, the review department would not acknowledge their existence. Not even after I had, without a cent of budget and no professional help- without so much as a single classified ad - made a success of my first book, which I believe was the first underground book. That was not book news, not was its first reprint of a quarter of a million copies to the dictator of the book trade, the Times reviews.

So there is a record, oh dictator's handmaiden. Mine and yours, two records.

I believe that the writer above all should live by Polonius' advice. "iving this way means more to me than the favor of the Times and its censors. Quite obviously, I do not seek yours. As I did not start this fight, so do I not abandon it. I take time I do not have from work that is without end to meet any challenge to my integrity. This, obviously, is not your policy. I think I have more peace of mind in the poverty you and your ilk have guaranteed for me than you in your lofty and respected position in your calling.

Your comment "I don't think we have anything useful to say to one another" is one with which I disagree, and not only here. I think it is useful to make you look at yourself and I could not bear to look at myself. There will be other books on other taboos, and perhaps you may remember me and this shameful thing you have done and be less the most subversive any representative of any element of the media can be, an unofficial arm of government that can be made honest only by exposing its dishonesty.

Moreover, especially taken with earlier history of which you may be unaware, I think the Sunday Times has crossed the malice line. You did not respond when I asked that you do what is still possible to undo the damage you have done, to my work and to my reputation. Meaning, of course, to my future writing, too.

Although I am without income or resources and more than \$30,000 in debt, I do intend to explore this, as best I can with such handicaps. It is an obligation I think I owe to more than myself.

You may wonder whether at some point we may have "anything...to say to one another", but in another medium than letters, another forum than the literary scumshaw you control. We may then learn whether or not it can also be "useful".

Personally, I look forward to the possibility.

Sincerely,

Harold Weisberg