

Inside Los Angeles: The Coroner's Report

Over the past decade the deaths in Los Angeles of Marilyn Monroe, Robert Kennedy, the Tate murder victims and Janis Joplin all added their own chapters to the American Book of the Dead as edited by Dr. Noguchi, who conducted the inquest for all.

SHOULD A MAN BE CONSIDERED dangerous, if not mad, because he smiles too much? Two years ago the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors considered the question and, in a quick series of events during the spring and summer of 1969, fired the county coroner, Dr. Thomas T. Noguchi, then grudgingly welcomed him back—smile and all—after a Civil Service Commission hearing cleared the pathologist of all charges brought against him, which included taking drugs in excessive amounts, exhibiting behavior that showed a need for psychiatric care, improper administration of the coroner's office, and bullying employees.

The three-man Civil Service Commission which conducted the hearing in the Los Angeles Hall of Records sat for six weeks and listened to over 60 witnesses. Many of those called by the county to testify against Dr. Noguchi were asked to describe his smile and "graveyard sense of humor." The coroner's counsel at the trial contended that, rather than misplaced exuberance, these were the result of ethnic conditioning in Japan, where Dr. Noguchi grew up and where smiling is a traditional way of hiding grief; similarly, the macabre joke was part of the coroner's occupational jargon—the particular property of those toiling in the shadow of the morgue. The defense called pathologists from as far away as Detroit, Chicago and Wichita to testify that coroners were wont to joke as an outlet for their tensions

and that "graveyard humor" was a form of comic relief all of them occasionally indulged in.

That a facial affect as innocuous as a smile should become the object of a bitter and costly legal wrangle tells as much of the specters that haunt the abode of the dead as it does of the paranoia that stains the sheets of otherwise clean corporation minds. If anything, the trial showed more of the infernal working of the county machine, including the morgue, than either the county supervisors or Dr. Noguchi would have wished to see revealed. The Civil Service Commission heard allegations of homicide victims dug up from the grave because someone had neglected to take fingerprints as required by state law; of parts of a dismembered body taken out of the coroner's office by a woman pathologist; of a nasty argument among several medical examiners about who was going to work on what body and on which table; of gurneys stacked with not one body but two during busy days in the morgue; and of one weird dinner party for a retiring employee at which Dr. Noguchi arrived in a sheriff's helicopter fresh from the scene of a plane crash and during which, the county charged, he had made himself look ridiculous by stating in a speech that he "had first come in a warship to the beautiful Harbor of Pearl and wanted to become an American." (At the time of Pearl Harbor Dr. Noguchi was 14 years old.) This same party was attended by television actor Ben Alexander—officer Frank Smith in

Illustration by George Willet

by Maxwell Boas

the original "Dragnet" series and himself an old hand around the autopsy room—who reminisced nostalgically during dinner about "old times in the morgue" and remarked at one point that had this been 1942, Dr. Noguchi would have tried to shoot him.

Dr. Noguchi's trial revealed enough inter-office squabbles, suspicions, plots, rivalries and clumsy machinations to fill an up-to-date handbook on the peculiar status of death in Los Angeles—a companion volume to earlier observations by writers such as Nathanael West, Aldous Huxley and Jessica Mitford. Ever since the funeral of Rudolph Valentino, dying here has always meant something altogether different from what it means anywhere else. In a city of cemeteries built on the scale of Versailles, where the departed arrive groomed like poodles, it was only proper that the coroner become a *cause célèbre*. Over the past decade the deaths in Los Angeles of Marilyn Monroe, Robert Kennedy, the Tate murder victims and Janis Joplin all added their own chapters to the American Book of the Dead as edited by Dr. Noguchi, who conducted the inquest on all of them—thus earning both the envy and enmity of ambitious subordinates in the morgue, according to his defense during the hearing.

THE TWIN TINCTURES of contemporary poison—racism and bureaucratic lunacy—clung to many of the charges brought by the county supervisors against the chief of the coroner's office in the basement of the Hall of Justice. The hearing which reinstated him to his post cost the taxpayers \$50,000 and Dr. Noguchi another \$50,000. Most of his share of the cost was raised by JUST (Japanese United in Search for Truth)—a committee of supporters formed by leading members of the Japanese-American community in Los Angeles. The committee considered the trial the greatest injustice done to the Japanese-American community "since the dark days of 1942." Its members crowded the sessions of the hearing, applauding politely each time Dr. Noguchi's counsel scored a point in his defense. Support was not restricted to the Los Angeles area alone. During the course of the legal proceedings, expressions of sympathy poured in from all over California and the United States. President S. I. Hayakawa of San Francisco State College (who'd had his own problems the year before) fired off a telegram urging Dr. Noguchi to fight without stint. The news made the papers in Japan, and a number of reporters from large Tokyo dailies showed up in Civic Center to interview the coroner and to file stories on the case in court. They saw Dr. Noguchi's stand as an act conforming in all respects to the ancient Japanese code of *giri*—the almost mystical concept of obligation, honor and duty which binds the individual both to his family and society. Ironically, one of the major prosecution witnesses who put forward much damaging testimony against him was a Japanese secretary in his office. "She was pressured to testify against me," Dr. Noguchi says. "She wanted to be accepted as an American."

The question of patriotism—or the lack of it—never became an outright issue during the hearing, but it was implicit in many of the charges levelled against the coroner. Similarly, the counsel for the county supervisors never

called him mentally disturbed, preferring to subsume the instances of his "erratic behavior" under a generic "sickness" that supposedly manifested itself in a number of symptoms. Foremost among these was a misplaced and outsized ambition in Dr. Noguchi's plans for his office as it allegedly strove to reach the "magic number" of 14,000 deaths (a number the coroner was said to have earmarked as the productive output for the morgue since taking it over in December 1967). At the opening session of the hearing when this charge was made, Dr. Noguchi stood accused of having gloated over the death of Robert Kennedy after receiving word that the senator had been shot. He had been heard to say, "I'm going to be famous. I hope he dies, because if he dies my international reputation will be established." An office typist testified that he had smiled while informing her that the senator was not going to recover. Another time, after a helicopter crash with a heavy loss of life, he was quoted as saying, "Isn't it nice? Isn't it nice?" The coroner was further charged with having prayed for disasters, especially plane crashes (including Mayor Sam Yorty's), so he could get his name in the papers. It was claimed that he frequently showed a "look of elation" or "slight smile" whenever tragedy struck the Los Angeles area, and that at the height of an influenza epidemic in the city three years ago a witness had seen him beam with joy while surveying the rows of gurneys stacked with bodies in the autopsy room. Another witness quoted him as saying at about the same time, "It's all mine. All mine." The final proof of his "sickness," according to the county counsel, was Dr. Noguchi's confession to some members of his staff that "I had a vision . . . that a 727 loaded to capacity crashed into a hotel. And amidst the flames, I, Thomas T. Noguchi, stood, and the press was there. . . ."

The trial heard allegations of assassination threats the coroner was reported to have made against a number of people, specifically against the person mainly responsible for his dismissal, County Chief Administrative Officer L. S. Hollinger, a 40-year veteran of county service. A secretary in the coroner's office said she'd seen Dr. Noguchi pull a knife from his belt and slash a piece of scrap paper in two while remarking that it "could be used to perform an autopsy on the living and perhaps to perform an autopsy on Mr. Hollinger." According to County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn, Hollinger was so afraid of the coroner that he would not speak to him without an armed deputy sheriff by his side. When he made these threats, Dr. Noguchi sometimes smiled and sometimes looked serious, stated another secretary. Several members of his staff accused the coroner of being addicted to drugs, especially amphetamines, whose effects they claimed to have observed in such behavioral oddities as euphoria, feelings of omnipotence, irritability and nervousness, disconnected outpouring of ideas, paranoid fears for personal safety and hostility for other people.

At one session of the hearing the Civil Service Commission was told of a fantastic scheme—the establishment of a "forensic Mafia" which would give Dr. Noguchi control over all autopsy cases west of the Mississippi, leaving those east of the river to a pathologist friend of his. A number of witnesses testified that he had already earmarked several neighboring counties, including Orange County and River-

side County, for annexation to his office. One witness, Dr. Noguchi's former No. 1 assistant, said his chief had a habit of suddenly jumping up from his desk, dashing across the room and slapping a map on the wall, shouting, "This is my jurisdiction!" And in order to make himself look important, according to his secretary, he carried a radio-signal "beeper" device on his belt which she was instructed to activate whenever he was giving a speech in public so his audience would be properly impressed, if not awed, by his hurried departure. (A former assistant claimed that once, while in a car going 30 m.p.h., he had been forced to restrain Dr. Noguchi from jumping out of the vehicle when the "beeper" on his belt suddenly began to sound its alarm.)

ONE OF THE MORE SPECTACULAR moments of the hearing occurred in connection with the death of a black coroner's aide whom Dr. Noguchi was alleged to have once told that he would work him "until he dropped." The county counsel then delivered his own bombshell—"And drop he did!"—noting that the funeral of the coroner's aide was taking place the following Monday. The aide, whom Dr. Noguchi employed as both bodyguard and chauffeur, had collapsed and failed to recover a few hours after he finished testifying against his chief's "erratic behavior" in office. The deceased's widow further informed the commissioners that just before his death her husband had admitted to her that Dr. Noguchi had once thrown a shoe at him and called him a "black bastard." The county claimed further that most of the other offenses the coroner committed in his office were directed against "little people"—specifically, a "Japanese secretary, a black secretary and a young kid." His secretary, a Japanese-American, said she'd heard him say he "hated all niggers, hated all Jews and hated all Japs." Another secretary testified he referred to all Orientals as "yellow submarines," while the toxicologist at the county morgue, a citizen of India, stated Dr. Noguchi had once told him, "Never trust an American," and that once when summoned to his office the coroner had greeted him with shouts of "Out! Out! Out! Out!"

A number of psychiatrists, mostly from the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute, concurred with the county that the coroner "could be helped by psychiatric counsel." One of them explained the results of a profile sheet which showed Dr. Noguchi as wanting to prove himself, being boastful, seeking praise and showing a tendency to get angry quickly when thwarted in his plans. On the basis of his scores, the dean of the University of Southern California Von Klein-smid Center for International and Public Affairs concluded that he would never recommend the coroner for a high administrative post.

It was significant that when the Civil Service Commission handed down its decision at the hearing's final session none of the more vocal prosecution witnesses was present to hear it. Hollinger had chosen the day for a honeymoon trip to Las Vegas after marrying his secretary shortly before the outcome of the trial. County Supervisor Hahn did not call for a reopening of the hearing as he'd threatened to do following Dr. Noguchi's refusal to testify in his own defense. Other members of the coroner's staff who had testified against him either were on vacation or left the Hall of Rec-

ords minutes before the decision came down. The commissioners' verdict calling for Dr. Noguchi's immediate reinstatement with full back pay had been expected. Shortly after their decision, Frank G. Bonnell, one of the five supervisors who had voted for the coroner's dismissal, told reporters that "from the lack of evidence of the county's charges which appear to be based mainly on innuendo, hearsay and pure fabrication, the Civil Service Commission's findings are clearly justified."

All of the witnesses called by the defense had given the commissioners a picture of Dr. Noguchi which differed considerably from that painted by the county counsel, who'd called the coroner a "complex collage," an "explosive man" with "grandiose ideas." They swore they'd never seen him perform any of the actions relative to the charges levelled against him. The judges were told that Dr. Noguchi's alleged abandon to joy in the midst of disaster had its foundation in distorted accounts of budget discussions in his office when he had pleaded for more equipment and personnel by presenting a sober statement of what might happen, rather than what he wished would happen; they said that all of these requests, including a trip to an AMA convention in Chicago and a new staff vehicle, had been consistently denied by Hollinger. According to defense witnesses, the "forensic Mafia" was merely a facetious figure of speech and a standing joke between Dr. Noguchi and a colleague on the East Coast; he had never taken any drugs but took medication for a lesion on his tongue; he'd been shocked and saddened by the death of Robert Kennedy and gladly would have given "part of his life so that the senator might live"; his office, rather than being anti-American, was a "delight in Americanism," where secretaries received fresh flowers on their desks at the beginning of the week and staffers were once treated to an office Christmas party paid for by Dr. Noguchi; his coroner's aide had died of terminal cancer and had been promoted during his employ by Dr. Noguchi himself despite the fact that his classification barred him from advancement; and that, far from being a racist, he'd long been known to complain that in shootings of blacks and members of other minority groups by police too many verdicts of justifiable homicide were returned and for this reason he wished to set up a committee which would protect their rights at inquests by excluding the police, the office of the DA, county officials and members of the sheriff's department.

At the conclusion of his trial, Dr. Noguchi, in the company of a group of Japanese-American supporters, walked down the hill from the Hall of Records to the coroner's office in the basement of the Hall of Justice where he sat down in his old chair and said, "Oh, I feel great, I feel good. I haven't been in it for a long time but this is the chair I sat in before."

TWO YEARS LATER HE'S STILL in the same chair, looking small and trim between the flags of the United States and the State of California which flank his desk. Inside one of the drawers are his boxes of color and black-and-white slides of autopsies he's performed or been associated with—approximately 10,000 by his own estimate. Apart from private showings for his own edification, he exhibits them mostly as visual illustra-

tion to the speeches he gives at the rate of two a week (although his log of invitations registers far more). Most of the invitations come from civic and social groups ostensibly dedicated to raising the roof and spreading cheer; others come from professional organizations. Still fresh in the memory of the members of the American Academy of Forensic Science is a seminar he conducted three years ago during which he showed slides of autopsies so unusual that the average coroner would never encounter them in all his years of practice. Several months ago he watched in the privacy of his own office a videotape made of the autopsy on Jimi Hendrix in London, which he compared to the one he'd performed earlier on Janis Joplin. "Like him," he says, "I consider she already had a very used body. I think she went through a very hard life."

When Dr. Noguchi speaks, it becomes immediately apparent why he wrinkled the starch in the county cloth two years ago. In his green blazer, with its crest on the breast pocket, his striped tie, soft blue shirt and ready smile, he doesn't look like the faceless 20-year medallions doing service in the bureaucracy mints. He's *alive*; and for a coroner, that's something. There's a touch of sing-song in his voice which might easily be mistaken for laughter; and if it can drive the praetorians of county morality up the wall, then it's all to the good. But for all the apparent levity which his rambling speech might convey, he shows greater concern for the dead than the technocrats of Civic Center display towards the living.

"I try to handle this professionally," says Dr. Noguchi. "Not that I'm not sympathetic to death. I'm very sensitive to the family who lost a member but if I personally, emotionally, get involved and start to cry, well, what good is the county coroner who gets upset? He cannot do the autopsy. The one person who must be stable during death should be the coroner. Perhaps the reason is that I do consider very clearly what we have to work with is a sanctuary, in a sense; however, at the same time, like a blood stain. That is, a dead man tells a tale. It is up to me to find out this information, otherwise if I don't find out no one is going to find out."

The coroner has a retentive mind and he can cite the minutiae of hundreds of autopsy cases he has handled. Those of celebrities are engraved in his memory. He remembers in detail the first inquest he performed on a famous person. "It was Sunday, August 3rd or 5th of 1962. I was assigned this case and told to conduct the autopsy on Marilyn Monroe. Of course, I was rather puzzled and at first didn't believe it. I thought it must be someone else with the same name. . . . Her remains were brought here first. Later, armed with more scientific data, I went to the scene. We found a number of empty containers for containing pills. We looked for suicide notes or any notes indicative of self-destruction, but we couldn't find any. I would generally describe the deceased as after death showing a considerable difference. My impression at that time—I thought her facial expression was very peaceful. In most cases when death terminates a life the muscles relax and it looks very peaceful to me. . . ."

Dr. Noguchi was also one of the first to stand between the bloodied walls of the Tate home in Benedict Canyon, by his own admission the "most bizarre" case in his career. He

also admits to knowing more than he testified at the Manson trial. "I will not be able to reveal details other than I testified." He smiles, but there is no joy in it. It is the reflex of one who has weighed the horror and the dread on the scales of mystery and magic. "I know more than I testified. I did not volunteer this information. I was not asked that which may not have anything to do with the hearing matter. Simply a scientific analysis, such as the behavioral life cycle of the deceased.

"I would say it was the most bizarre case I ever handled. In that form of massacre we had a couple of cases in which we were called upon the scene and as I entered, the body was hanging . . . [Dr. Noguchi gets up from his chair and demonstrates in the open space beside his desk. He bends down over his stomach and does a backward paddle with one arm while placing the other around his neck to simulate the constriction of the noose. He holds this pose briefly, then unfreezes and returns to his chair] . . . the body was hanging in the bathroom and the mirror here . . . [Dr. Noguchi points in the air] . . . He was not only hanging. The head was placed in this fashion and he was leaning like this [Dr. Noguchi leans to the right]. And not only that. Quite obscene language was written on the wall.

"This was in Hollywood in 1968. I will not be able to mention the name. It was a horrible scene. I hid my face. And then he had three needle marks. As a matter of fact a syringe was stuck in his buttocks. . . . I found out later he was an actor, age about mid-fifties. In fact, during the scene of the investigation I discovered a whip, and a number of other things indicated he may have been engaged in a number of sexually deviant activities. Apparently he'd been doing this quite often. As I was studying it was interesting to find out that his neck was indeed in a regular hanging-type noose, but he had one arm here [Dr. Noguchi twists his arm to the left of his head]. You see, he was holding the rope. He was nude, watching himself being hanged. That is a masochistic act. This was an older man and he used needles to stimulate further. But one of the things he did not count on was that he himself had a slight heart condition while he was doing it and he had a heart attack and fell and was caught by the noose."

THE EXHIBIT OF SLIDES accompanying his speaking engagements is titled the "Coroner in Action." It shows the job of the coroner, his surgical methods and the techniques he uses in establishing the cause of death. The latter in particular is Dr. Noguchi's forte. In his pursuit of forensic excellence he has perfected a technique which he calls the "medical-detective" approach to forensic pathology, combining the skills of the medic with the nose of the sleuth and the mysterious "sixth sense" of the hierophant. He credits the latter faculty with solving the less cut-and-dried cases, the stunners and the bafflers which require an intuitive, rather than a rote, approach. It is the "sixth sense" that tells him which case to investigate further and which tack to pursue during the scene of investigation. "I smell it or I feel it. I should be there," explains Dr. Noguchi. As an example he cites the case last October of a suspected homicide which turned out to be a suicide. It involved a 70-year-old Los Angeles father who

died on the very day of his arraignment in court for neglect of his 13-year-old daughter. "We look for certain clues in a suicide . . . But in this case, not only did he leave two notes which were written by him, but he placed a plastic sheet by his side and he placed [his] left hand over the barrel and placed the gun to the right temple and the bullet was recovered. He was a definite suicide."

Conversely, his "sixth sense" solved a number of cases which at first glance appeared to be suicides but later turned out to be homicides. One of these, seven years ago, involved a woman found unconscious in a burning building in the ghetto area of East Los Angeles. "The burn area was very interestingly limited to the pelvic area and the inside of her thighs," Dr. Noguchi remembers. "She had a wig on, but interestingly enough—of course, I'm not Sherlock Holmes. I'm not that fancy. But I do take my time because the body is not going to go anywhere. You see, my reputation is at stake. I do not like to make even minor mistakes. You know, it was funny, there was a wig. I am no expert, but the front and back of the wig were twisted. We remove that wig and what we see is very interesting. It is like a bullet hole beneath the wig. But after careful examination it is not a bullet hole. What penetrated is very characteristic. I was able to see like this—about three punched holes. So I said, 'Ah-ha. Weapon will be stainless steel spike heel.'"

Two days later detectives found a pair of high-heeled shoes similar to the ones delivered proleptically by Dr. Noguchi's sixth sense operating in tandem with his medical-detective approach and its emphasis on a thorough, all-inclusive examination of the evidence at the coroner's scene of investigation. The latter encompasses not only his pet theory—the "behavioral pattern and life cycle of the deceased"—but goes beyond the human factor to include a "mechanical autopsy" in, for instance, car crashes when Dr. Noguchi submits the vehicles involved to an examination similar to an inquest in the morgue. In the case of actual victims he sometimes works his way through dozens of friends, relatives and acquaintances to determine if and how the "behavioral pattern and life cycle" of the deceased contributed to the cause of death. "I don't think cutting into the body alone would be sufficient to determine the cause of death," the coroner says. The medical-detective approach by itself, however, is not enough. Dr. Noguchi points out, "You must have certain integrity. You must be certain. You must do a lot of study. And I'm quite outspoken as you can see. And when I feel I have to, I speak out."

Dr. Noguchi finds it hard to relax. Even during casual expeditions in the city he maintains a vigilant eye for the kind of thing he might incorporate into his stock-in-trade. "I work like a medical detective. The sixth sense is aroused. There is a tenacious, a continuous digging and thinking. I don't dream about it. I do think nothing but the medical-detective approach or else developing a technique while I'm awake. For example, if I go to Sears, just walking through the carpentry department, you know what I think? I pick up this. A hammer. And I think, what kind of mark would this leave on a skull? My wife says, 'You're crazy,' but I tell my wife, 'Just a moment. I want to see how many different kinds of saws there are, so in case we find a dismembered body we can determine the thickness and the serration.'"

At home the coroner finds it equally difficult to decompress himself from the force of the medical-detective habit. If he is watching a television western he automatically analyzes the action on the screen from the viewpoint of forensic pathology, starting with the climactic shoot-out or death-trap, which is subsequently translated in terms of the coroner's scene of investigation. He then reverses all the frames that led up to the climax so the cause of death can be established from a retrograde study of the previous action. "I study frame by frame how the death occurred. General Custer's death, for example. The cowboys are attacking the Indians. My job is to develop, column by column, scene by scene, how the death occurred."

ALMOST TWO YEARS AFTER his reinstatement, some of the charges the county brought against him continue to puzzle Dr. Noguchi. "This matter of Robert Kennedy was included in the charge, but it didn't make sense to me. Of course, I think anyone who has an opportunity to investigate something like this is always subject to undue criticism based on jealousy and a number of things. It almost seems like a joke to me now. It is perhaps a dangerous thing for any professional man to become too well-known. Ha-ha-ha. In many ways I think the ironic part of this trial was that it made me more famous than before. Of course, I'm no different from anyone else, but it seems nearly two years ago I was considered a folk hero for the community. Many Japanese came from Japan with briefcases showing clippings saying, he has been badly beaten and crucified and here he stands. So I have nothing to hide. The whole thing was like David and Goliath.

"What came out was there was no foundation. Some of the things the prosecution came up with were too much. But I did not do it for selfish reasons. If I'd done it for selfish reasons I'm sure community support would not have come. But I felt this way. As the first Oriental American to be ever appointed as county department head, if he succumbs to undue, say, pressure, political pressure, by resorting to the easy way out, then the second man . . . may be denied the opportunity. Generally I would say there was no racial bias. But during the course of the investigation there were many disturbing remarks. One top medical man said, 'We are not ready for a Japanese coroner . . .'"

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The Los Angeles Hall of Justice sits in Civic Center like Stonehenge in the smog. It's a building dedicated to order—the orderly process of death in the coroner's basement offices and the orderly process of law in the chambers and courtrooms on the upper floors. The integration of the coroner's turf with the barristers' aerie shows how law and death have at last become compatible enough to cohabit: Upstairs the judge dishes it out from the plate in his head and downstairs the stiffs are up for a nose count. It works like a charm, and it's going to work better yet. At Dr. Noguchi's trial, one fellow pathologist praised the coroner for being "in the process of developing probably one of the most outstanding offices in the world."

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