

Guy Wright

Coroner's Comeback

They said he gibbered and grinned at the sight of dead people. They said he hoped Robert F. Kennedy would die. They said he prayed for plane crashes.

With such lurid charges the Los Angeles County supervisors pictured Dr. Thomas T. Noguchi as a morbidly unbalanced man and fired him last March from his post as county coroner.

After a long and unusual hearing, the Civil Service Commission has overruled the supervisors and reinstated Dr. Noguchi to his job.

The bizarre charges having received national attention, their dismissal must come as a national surprise. But not to those who followed the hearing. With each witness it became increasingly clear that foreign-born Dr. Noguchi was the victim of racial prejudice, the sniping of his staff and a political feud.

Now that he has been cleared, other heads should role in Los Angeles. Today I begin a review of this sordid case.

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"I HOPE HE DIES" — those were the highly publicized words attributed to Dr. Noguchi after Senator Kennedy was shot.

They were offered from the witness stand by the coroner's secretary, who pictured him as a man who relished any disaster that would bring him grisly fame.

Less publicized was the change she made in her testimony under cross-examination by Noguchi's attorney, Godfrey Isaac.

"I hope he dies" became "he knew he would die," from the nature of his wounds. That's quite a change.

There had been quite a change, too, in the secretary's attitude. When she first learned her boss was being fired, she burst into ears and started a petition to save his job. When defense investigators asked her about his "erratic behavior," she couldn't recall any.

She changed her mind, she testified, after getting "the facts." And from whom? From Noguchi's administrative

deputy, who was one of his chief accusers and her likely new boss.

Quite a different account of Dr. Noguchi's behavior in the Kennedy affair was told by Mrs. Thelma G. Clark, an aide in the coroner's office for 18 years. It was she who first phoned him the news that Kennedy had been shot.

"Oh, no!" she quoted him. Then, after asking details: "Keep me informed."

Mrs. Clark also was the one who broke the news that Kennedy had died. Noguchi's response was "one of resignation," she testified. "He told me he would take care of it," meaning he would start the autopsy process.

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THE KENNEDY autopsy figured large in the charges against the coroner. His accusers told him he booted it:

"Your eyes were glazed, your behavior was erratic and your dictation... was so disassociated that it was all but unintelligible."

Yet Dr. Cyril Wecht, an eminent pathologist from Pittsburgh, Pa., testified the autopsy was "the most complete, thorough and medically extensive autopsy I have ever seen."

County Supervisor Harry Hahn, who helped engineer Noguchi's dismissal, conceded it was "probably the most thorough medical examination ever made on an individual."

And in mid-hearing the county attorney withdrew the charge and agreed to stipulate the autopsy was "superior."

Dr. Noguchi was born in Japan, is a naturalized American citizen.

Martin Weeks, assistant county attorney, promised there would be no racial insinuations. Yet the hearing had hardly begun when he tried to elicit testimony that Noguchi first saw Pearl Harbor "through the periscope of a submarine."

This blatantly racial torpedo blew up when someone pointed out Dr. Noguchi was only 14 when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.

Tomorrow: The Hatchet men.