

New information about County firing of Noguchi

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"Just another administrative decision..."

Some new and interesting information has come to our attention in the celebrated case of Dr. Thomas T. Noguchi, ousted coroner of Los Angeles County. According to his attorney, Godfrey Isaacs, and other informants, Noguchi has long been critical of the coroner's inquest system and was trying to change it at the time he was ousted.

In the Deadweiler case, four years ago, in which a black man was shot by an L.A. cop under extremely questionable circumstances, the coroner's inquest quickly ruled "justifiable homicide." Noguchi, who was not coroner then but was working in the coroner's office, disputed the finding of justifiable homicide.

Again, in the Leonard case, in which a Black Panther was shot by police, and the recent Bode case, in which another black man was shot by police as he sat in his car in front of his home, Noguchi was extremely disturbed and felt that Dr. Donald Stuart, deputy medical examiner, and chief inquest hearing officer, had ruled "justifiable homicide" much too fast, and without sufficient evidence. Stuart has been one of Noguchi's chief antagonists.

Noguchi wanted to form a seven-men blue-ribbon committee to rule on such cases, and was in fact forming the committee when he was ousted. The committee was to include members of minority groups.

In the Leonard case, eyewitnesses said that there was an angry, violent crowd outside the hearing room when the inquest was in progress; Noguchi came out and asked them to behave "like ladies and gentlemen," and told them that he fully understood their feelings. He told them that although the room was too small to accommodate all of them, he would immediately have loudspeakers installed outside the room so they could hear. The crowd, which had been close to rioting was apparently impressed with his sincerity, and became cool.

Thomas Bradley, recently defeated candidate for L.A. Mayor, testified on Noguchi's behalf last week. He shares Noguchi's views on coroner's inquests, but goes a bit farther. He feels they should

be abolished, while Noguchi only wants to reform them.

Isaac, Noguchi's attorney, told me: "I'll say this now, and if you ask me ten years from now, I'll tell you the same thing: Noguchi is a good man—the best coroner Los Angeles has ever had. He is concerned about the shooting of black men by police. He is concerned about the treatment of minority groups. There is no question in my mind that if he were a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, he would not be getting ousted. He is an expert in homicide, auto accidents and cancer, and has been widely published on these subjects. He is immensely respected in his field."

However, when you tamper with the system, as Noguchi obviously has, you can also be white and bring down a lot of shit upon yourself. What is unique about the Noguchi case is that there has seldom been a case in which so many people wanted to "get" a man for so many reasons—all bad ones.

If you've watched the hearings, as I have, you must have been impressed by the fact that the county's case against him was not weak—it was non-existent. Witness after witness, accusation after accusation, fell apart utterly, under the light of cross-examination.

Five county supervisors stated that Noguchi was mentally ill. On cross-examination, Isaacs asked supervisor Hahn, "Did you believe that he was too mentally ill even to take care of the dead?"

Hahn: "Yes."

Isaac then asked Hahn why, if he believed Noguchi was mentally ill, why did the county supervisors offer to transfer him to a position at another county hospital, Rancho Los Amigos, in Downey: "You say he's too ill to work with the dead—those people at Rancho Los Amigos are alive, aren't they?"

Hahn: "Yes."

Eighty-seven employees of the coroner's office came forward to testify on Noguchi's behalf, in spite of the fact that they knew it would jeopardize their chances of promotions and tenure. They said Noguchi was the hardest-working coroner L.A. had ever had, and the most accessible. They said the equipment in the coroner's office was so antiquated Noguchi spent his own money replacing some of it. The



county countered with the charge that if Noguchi worked eighteen to twenty hours a day he "must be 'on' something."

One employee, a black man, resigned when Noguchi was ousted. He said he could not continue to live and work in such an atmosphere of racism. "If they can do this to the chief, what can't they do to us?"

Mrs. Ethel Field testified that Noguchi had prayed for airplane crashes and other disasters, and that he had threatened to kill her. On cross examination, Isaacs reminded her that on an earlier occasion when he had questioned her, about a month previously, she had not mentioned any of these bizarre charges. Why, he asked.

"Oh," she answered, "I didn't think of it."

"You mean to say that this man prayed for airplane disasters and assassinations and threatened to kill you, and you didn't think of it. All you could think of to say was that he was once rude to you over the telephone?"

"Yes, I didn't know the whole story then."

"When did you find out the whole story?"

"I read it in the papers."

Yet, according to Isaac, on the day Noguchi resigned under pressure, Mrs. Field wept, and started a petition to reinstate him.

When Isaacs cross-examined Hollinger, the county's chief administrative officer who has led the attack on Noguchi, he asked if Hollinger had made any memos, or interviewed any witnesses at the time he began the attack upon Noguchi. Hollinger said he had made no written memos, and didn't remember what anybody had told him about Noguchi. He said it didn't seem that important.

"How many times during the years you've been administrative officer have you ever reported a department head?"

Hollinger replied that it was the first time.

"And you don't remember? And you didn't keep any written memos?"

Hollinger replied that it was "just another administrative matter."

At the time Noguchi performed the autopsy on RFK, it was acclaimed by pathologists from all over the world as the most thorough and excellent autopsy they had ever seen. The county supervisors voted a resolution congratulating him for his "magnificent" work. Yet, months later, they stated that at the autopsy Noguchi was glassy-eyed, and that his speech was dissociative and unintelligible, implying that he was high on drugs.

Stephen Smith, the brother-in-law of RFK, when he heard the charges, offered to come and testify for Noguchi. "He was fine," Smith said, "I was there! I saw him!"

Supervisor Hahn, who had once described Noguchi as the hardest working coroner in history, later voted to fire him.

When the county rested its case, county counsel Weeks, who acted as prosecutor said to Isaac, "This (Noguchi) is a brilliant man. I spent all weekend looking for his achilles heel."

Isaac told me of another employee who worked in the coroner's office who befriended Noguchi and had lunch with him dozens of times. Noguchi fought to get this man raises in salary and promotions. Yet, this same man, whom, several have described as "a highly ambitious young man," "stabbed Noguchi in the back," and testified against him at the reinstatement hearings. He has since been promoted.

Last night, I attended a meeting of J.U.S.T. (Japanese United in Search for the Truth), in a banquet room at the Disneyland Hotel. Isaac spoke at length on the history of the case, and an attorney, Mr. Ito, then paraphrased Isaac's remarks in Japanese for those who did not understand English well. He added his own comment that the Japanese community had been largely apathetic until Isaac's enthusiasm had aroused them. Then Noguchi was asked to address the group. He rose and spoke briefly.

What kind of a man, I wondered, would want to be a coroner? One tends to expect a Boris Karloff or a Bela Lugosi type, and after all the bizarre accusations in this case, a snarling, drooling monster.

Noguchi has, instead, a boyish, diffident personality. He speaks softly, but has a groovy sense of humor. He thanked these Orange County people for coming and showing an interest in his dilemma. He recalled that he had done his internship in an Orange County hospital where he had enjoyed seeing the many orange groves nearby and had wistfully wished he had some money to invest in one. He thanked Isaac, his attorney, who, he said, "has worked so hard on this case that he has become a specialist in ousted coroners." He introduced his wife, a small woman with a gentle, friendly face. She is also a doctor.

Noguchi has come through a cruel and bizarre ordeal with quiet dignity. When asked how he would feel if reinstated, towards the employees who testified against him, he said, "I do not want the cheap success of castigating a few of my employees."

In case you didn't pick up on it by now, there is an important lesson to be learned from the sad story of Tom Noguchi: The man who is hard-working and conscientious does not fare well in a bureaucracy; it is the political-minded, the treacherous, the psychopathic, who rise to the top and then sit in judgement of people like Tom Noguchi, in cases such as this. This is not evidence of the superiority of the men who rise to the top, but rather, of the inferior breed of man who goes into the bureaucracy.

And something should be said about the nature of the charges: In the fifties, they called you a Communist when they wanted to oust you from your job. Now they say that you are mentally ill, glassy-eyed, dissociative, a user of drugs. This kind of charge should not be allowed in a civil service hearing or any quasi-judicial proceeding. Civil service boards, like courts of law, should restrict themselves to the facts. Then it would not be quite so easy for the politicians to get rid of a sincere official who threatens the feathers of their nest by trying to reform and update an antiquated and corrupt system.