

Man in the News

Tough Erratic Prosecutor in Mary Jo Case

By John Hickey and Ed Corsetti
Special to The Examiner

NEW BEDFORD (Mass.) — District Attorney Edmund Denis is three persons.

To his friends, he is loyal, conscientious, idealistic, a determined fighter for what is right.

To his enemies, he is overly aggressive, ruthless, unreasonable, vindictive and unstable.

To men in public life with long memories, he is the rebel son of a rebel father.

This is a word picture of the man who ordered—and will bear the chief responsibility for—the inquest after Labor Day into the death of Mary Jo Kopechne in the sunken car of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy at Chappaquiddick Island the night of July 18-19.

Looks a Leader

Denis, a bachelor who lives with his mother, is the strong man in this area. He is chief law enforcement officer for an area bounded roughly by Provincetown, Nantucket, Fall River and North Attleboro covering the southeast part of the state.

When he walks down Union Street, he looks every inch a leader. Immaculate in a blue - and - white seersucker suit, 45 years old, standing just six feet, with a handsome face and dignified bearing, he would stand out in any crowd.

He speaks softly, but inside a fire burns that, in seconds, turns his casual conversation into a bitter denunciation of his foes. Without hesitation, he spits out words like "gigolo...dumb judge...doctor is a liar...corrupt cops...rackets."

Changing Moods

Without warning, his mood can change from pleasant to bitter—or from stormy to sunny. Within two minutes, he can threaten you with a jail sentence or invite you to lunch.



EDMUND DINIS
"Ruthless... idealistic..."

That happened to us. When we met him outside his insurance office, he warned of a contempt of court citation because he objected to one of our stories dealing with the Kennedy inquest. He wasn't happy about the reference to the inquest as pitting Denis against Kennedy.

Yet, two minutes later, when we happened to meet him again outside a lunchroom, he said, "Will you join me for lunch and try some of our fine Portuguese cooking?" We each enjoyed a 60-cent linguica (Portuguese sausage) sandwich.

Perched on a stool, he was polite, hospitable and cooperative. When the inevitable question was asked, why he persisted in holding an inquest.

Why the Inquest

"I feel it is obvious that this is the only thing I can do, when there are a lot of unanswered questions in a case where a death is involved. There is just nobody who can share this responsibility with me; I must go the full route," he replied.

"If all the circumstances had been explained satisfactorily at the start, there would have been no need for an inquest."

He was asked, "if you had this to do over again, would you behave any differently, would you order an autopsy?"

"If I had to do this all over again, I would have ordered an autopsy earlier.

"I did order one the day after the accident, but then I was informed the plane carrying the body had left the island. But it turned out the plane's departure had been held up because of the weather. That is the only part I would have done differently. The rest was a matter of course."

Autopsy Issue

Then he cleared up this major point—why he wants an autopsy at all:

"An autopsy can prove death was actually due to drowning. At present, we do not have sufficient medical evidence to rely on. We have the casual opinion of a medi-

cal practitioner not skilled in legal medicine.

"I want an autopsy because it can eliminate all other possible causes of death, such as a broken neck for example, and by a process of elimination arrive at drowning as the only cause left—if that is, indeed, the cause."

Replying to persistent reports that he is acting out of anger, or for political revenge, he said: "Not at all."

Denies Vendetta

Dinis also told this to close friends—that there is absolutely no vendetta in this case, that he is not feuding with the senator or the whole Kennedy family.

He takes the position that he is merely a prosecutor faced with the clear-cut responsibility of bringing out to the satisfaction of the court all pertinent facts surrounding Mary Jo's death.

But Dinis, by nature frank to the point of being blunt, does not try to sweep under the rug the fact that he has never been close to the Kennedy clan.

Democrats agree he is not "a Kennedy man."

He never enlisted in the ranks of the brothers and, in return, they have not assisted him in campaigns like his vain attempt last year to wrest the congressional seat from Mrs. Margaret M. Heckler of Wellesley.

Rivals in Court

His image as an impartial seeker after truth is hard to sell to the public. No matter how Dinis feels about it, there are two leading figures at this inquest: Edward Kennedy and Edmund Dinis.

If the proceedings end with complete confirmation of the senator's two public statements, to Edgartown police

and to the nation on TV, this will be interpreted as a failure for Dinis.

If the district attorney reveals any major details, which until now have gone unanswered, this will be regarded as his personal victory.

Whatever happens in that island courtroom, Dinis has made it clear he will personally accept full responsibility.

In Lower Court

When asked if there were any chance a full inquest would not be carried out, he answered:

"There are problems... if we don't get all the witnesses . . . but we expect them to cooperate.

"The district court is limited by statute, it is weak and questionable. The superior court process is better, stronger, with better procedures. If we were in superior court, we would be much better off."

Dinis tried to place the inquest in superior court, but was turned down by Chief Justice G. Joseph Tauro of that court, who commented the law clearly showed jurisdiction in the lower court.

'He'll Get You'

He is talented, hard-working, competent, courageous—and temperamental.

In this city, people actually fear Dinis as much as they admire him.

The best analysis of him came from a city official who insisted on remaining anonymous, stared straight ahead and said:

"If he doesn't like you, it may take him 10 years but he will get you!"