

Is the Oswald inquiry

America's Dreyfus case?

The following is a major excerpt from an address given by Staughton Lynd, professor of history at Spelman College, Atlanta, at the GUARDIAN-sponsored meeting Feb. 18 in Town Hall, N.Y., to inquire into the facts about the assassination of President Kennedy.

YOU MAY BE THINKING: Can one really suppose that here, in these United States, there may have been a conspiracy to kill the President? Or that, if there was a conspiracy, parts of the federal government may desire to conceal it? Let me, as a historian, suggest an answer to these questions by an historical analogy.

There was once a man accused of treason on the basis of circumstantial evidence. He was convicted because a secret dossier was sent to his judges by the counter-espionage agency of his government with the consent of the Minister of War, but without the knowledge of the rest of the cabinet. The prosecution was unable to suggest a motive for the alleged crime of the defendant, and the defendant himself steadfastly affirmed his innocence. Yet the defendant was declared guilty. No one in public life questioned the judgment of the court. Only the family of the condemned man protested the decision and was determined to bring about a revision of the trial by working to find evidence pointing to the real traitor. Eighteen months later a new head of the secret service accidentally discovered that the condemned traitor was, in fact, innocent. When he attempted to have the case reopened he was broken in rank and given a job outside the country. Not until 12 years later did a court finally clear the name of—Alfred Dreyfus.

THE DREYFUS CASE suggests to us how a conspiracy might have worked in Dallas. Only a very few persons need have been part of the actual conspiracy to kill the President. After the crime, one or more of these persons would have directed the investigation away from the couple whom so many people saw running from the viaduct, and toward the killer whom nobody saw, Lee Oswald. The historian, Marcel Thomas, has said that no one suggested Dreyfus was guilty because he was a Jew, but that "because he was a Jew, the idea of his guilt was accepted, more easily than it would have been for another." Similarly with Oswald: Once it became clear that a man who had been to the Soviet Union and who, so it was said, had worked for Fair Play for Cuba, was a possible culprit, public opinion could consider no one else. Then, on this hypothesis, federal agents who may well have known better closed ranks behind the theory of Oswald's guilt.

To quote another historian of the Dreyfus affair, it was "not that the leaders of all those forces deliberately meant to invent a charge against an innocent man, but once it had been levied, and its solidity assumed, the innocence of the accused became really

unthinkable." Still later, when it was realized that the original trial of Dreyfus had gone astray because of evidence concocted by the French secret service, a military court of review—comparable to the Warren commission—nonetheless once more declared Dreyfus guilty, in the belief (to quote Prof. Thomas) that "the counter-espionage service would have been disorganized, to the great cost of national security, if its methods had been divulged."



Guardian photo by Robert Joyce
PROFESSOR STAUGHTON LYND
He cites a lesson from history

ACTUALLY, I DON'T THINK the conspiracy theory is unbelievable to persons close to this story. I would be prepared to wager that a majority of high officials in Washington privately have their doubts about the received version of the crime. The real problem is what they do about their doubts. For I think most of them go on to say to themselves: Even if Oswald is not guilty, isn't it better things be left as they are? Lee Harvey Oswald and John Fitzgerald Kennedy are dead, we can't help them now; so isn't it wiser to keep silent rather than challenge the prestige and authority of those agencies and individuals in government who are committed to the theory of Oswald's guilt?

No, it is not better. The fundamental issue in this case is whether truth and the welfare of individuals should be sacrificed to a putative national interest. And I say, "No." There was a time when Americans were convinced, with Milton, that let winds of doctrine blow, so long as truth be in the field, then there is nothing to fear. There was a time when Americans could say, with Thoreau in *Walden*, that finally, we want only the truth. Now we seem to have become a society in which, when push comes to shove and the chips go down, we fall back on a previously prepared cover story. And so we lied about the U-2, we lied about the Bay of Pigs, and now, in my judgment, we are lying about the assassination of a President. Surely at some point we should stop and ask ourselves why our society has become so fearful of the truth.

NDK →

THE ANSWER to those who plead for silence in the national interest was long ago phrased by the French intellectual, Charles Peguy. Peguy, commenting on the Dreyfus case, put the case of the pseudo-patriot as strongly as it can be put, and then refuted it. "A nation," said Peguy, paraphrasing the condemners of Dreyfus,

"is something unique, a gigantic assemblage of the most legitimate, the most sacred, rights and interests. Thousands and millions of lives depend on it in the present, the past and the future . . . It is all of infinite price because it can only be made once, be realized once; it cannot be made or begun over again . . . The first duty of so unique an achievement is not to let itself be jeopardized for one man, whoever he be, however legitimate his interests; that is a right no nation possesses. That is the language of wisdom, of reason. Dreyfus had to sacrifice himself, and to be sacrificed against his will, if needs be, for the repose, the safety of France."

Thus Peguy put the case of his opponents. And then he said, and I would like to lay these words on the conscience of each person here tonight:

"But we answered that a single injustice, a single crime, a single illegality, especially if it be officially confirmed and registered, a single insult offered to justice and to right, especially if it be universally, legally, nationally, conveniently accepted, a single crime, is enough to break the whole social pact; a single breach of honor, a single disgraceful act, is enough to dishonor and disgrace a whole nation. It is a gangrenous spot, which soon spreads over the whole body. What we defend is not our honor only, not only the honor of our nation now, but the historic honor of our nation, the honor of our ancestors, the honor of our children."

"Our adversaries," Peguy concluded, "were concerned with the temporal salvation of our country; we were concerned with the salvation of its eternal soul."
