

Chance Remark Led Reporter To Disclosures in Fortas Case

'Low-Level Government Guy' Suggested Inquiry, Recalls William Lambert of Life

By JOHN KIFNER

"It began on Oct. 28, when I was down in Washington running my 'vacuum cleaner' around various offices," William Lambert recalled yesterday. "I was talking to a fairly low-level Government guy, and he said, 'Why don't you look into the relationship between Fortas and Wolfson?'"

That chance tip led Mr. Lambert, an investigative reporter for Life magazine, into months of digging that resulted in the disclosure that Associate Justice Abe Fortas of the Supreme Court had accepted, and later returned, a \$20,000 fee from the family foundation of Louis E. Wolfson, who was jailed for stock manipulations. The disclosure led to the resignation of Mr. Fortas.

Ferreting out the dealings of the powerful and causing a sensation with his findings are not a new experience for Mr. Lambert.

As a reporter for The Portland Oregonian, he shared a Pulitzer Prize in 1957 with Wallace Turner, now of The New York Times, for their expose of a union-underworld alliance in vice and corruption in the Pacific Northwest.

Drew Attention to Beck

Their reports concentrated national attention on Dave Beck, general president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, and helped initiate a Senate investigation into union racketeering.

Nor was Mr. Fortas a stranger. Mr. Lambert met him several years ago while heading a Life team investigating the financial holdings of President Johnson.

The team was called to Washington at the President's invitation, Mr. Lambert said, and was immediately sent to Mr. Fortas's law office.

"He was very gracious and served us some fine Scotch. Then he tried like hell for two hours to talk us out of the piece," Mr. Lambert recalled. "Finally I told him, 'Mr. Fortas, you're wasting our time and we're wasting yours.'"

Mr. Fortas made a telephone call, Mr. Lambert said, and the group proceeded to the White House, where they spent four hours talking and sharing a dinner of leftovers with the President, winding up with a 2 A.M. tour of the mansion. Mr. Lambert, a stocky man



Walter Darran

William Lambert

with thick glasses, who never attended college but spent a year "buried in the Harvard Law Library" as a Nieman Fellow in 1960, is known among his colleagues as a relentless investigative reporter whose quiet, courteous manner instills confidence in his sources.

Discussing the Fortas case, the 49-year-old reporter said:

"The thing that was different about this story was the fear that all my Government sources had when they knew who I was dealing with—they all but dived under their desks.

"I've never worked on a story where I found such extreme reluctance to talk. One guy said, 'Don't ask me any questions; don't even tell me anything. I don't want to know.'"

Calls and Interviews

After the original tip, other work intervened, but Mr. Lambert began reading the old news reports and making the telephone calls and interviews that are part of the investigating routine.

He discovered after "about four" calls that Mr. Fortas had visited Wolfson's Florida thoroughbred farm and that "money had been exchanged."

"I thought, well isn't that curious," Mr. Lambert said. He was to repeat the thought several times in the course of his work.

Mr. Lambert began his reporting career on a weekly in Oregon City, a suburb of Portland, after World War II—in which he served for three years in the Pacific and emerged with a battlefield commission.

One of his first investigative jobs involved a promotional scheme by a fraudulent veteran's organization.

"It put them out of business," he said, "and whetted my appetite."