



COMMENTARY AND OPINION ON HISTORY & POLITICS

Hugh's News

Historians support Forrestal inquiry

by Hugh Turley

New evidence has emerged that America's first secretary of defense, James Forrestal, was assassinated. Pulitzer prize-winning American history professor, Martin Sherwin, told the Hyattsville Life & Times, "I have always thought Forrestal committed suicide, but this is not because I investigated the manner of his death. You are doing that and I look forward to reading the results."

Sherwin, a professor emeritus at Tufts now teaching at George Mason University, co-wrote an acclaimed biography of nuclear scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer, a Forrestal contemporary.

May 22 is the 60th anniversary of Forrestal's death. Historians were invited to comment on the official investigation of his death for this article. The investigation, known as the Willcutts Report, was first made available to the public in 2004.

Keith W. Olson, professor emeritus of history at the University of Maryland said, "If I had more time I would read it and write an analysis. The need for such a study is obvious."

Initial reports said Forrestal transcribed a morbid poem as his suicide note and then jumped out of a window at the Bethesda Naval Hospital. The Hyattsville Life & Times (Dec 2007) published

the transcribed poem alongside a letter written by Forrestal. The writing appeared to have been that of different people.

The story that Forrestal copied the poem from a book has been repeated for decades. In 1992, Forrestal biographers Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley said a corpsman looked in on Forrestal at 1:45 a.m. and saw him "busy copying onto several sheets of paper the brooding classical poem 'The Chorus from Ajax.'"

That story is not supported by the corpsman's testimony in the Willcutts Report:

Q. What time did you last see Mister Forrestal?

A. It was one forty-five, sir

Q. Where was he then?

A. He was in his bed sleeping.

Q. Where were you at that time?

A. I was in the room when I saw him.

The official report makes no mention of the book of poetry or any witness who supposedly found the book and transcription.

The report offers new evidence of a struggle in Forrestal's room. Broken glass was found on his bed and photographed on the floor of his room. This could explain why the sash from his dressing gown was knotted around his neck.

Initial news reports contained

speculation that Forrestal used the sash in an attempt to hang himself out of the 16th-floor window from which he fell. None of them even hinted at the much more plausible notion that the sash had been wrapped around his neck to subdue him.

The Willcutts Review Board did not comment on why the sash was around his neck.

It has been fashionable among historians to say that Forrestal was paranoid. Anna K. Nelson, the distinguished historian in residence at American University said Forrestal, "was truly paranoid ... I never doubted that he committed suicide."

Nelson admitted she "never heard about the [Willcutts] report." None of the doctors who treated Forrestal at Bethesda used the words "paranoid" or "paranoia" to describe him in their testimony. Captain Stephen Smith, second in command of the doctors, was impressed with Forrestal's exceptional command of reality.

In fact, the Willcutts Report did not conclude Forrestal committed suicide.

Historians and the public can study the official report of Forrestal's death online at Princeton's Seeley Mudd Library. Sherwin concluded: "You don't need the validation of a historian to put together an article that opens up this issue to a new understanding."