

CHAPTER 8

Death and Resurrection: The Tale of Coroner Noguchi

California Policy
Options: 2017
pp. 181-206

Daniel J.B. Mitchell

Professor-Emeritus, UCLA Anderson School of Management
and UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs

It is doubtful that when a Los Angeles County resident is asked to name an important County public function, he or she would name the Coroner's office. Certainly, it would not be on the top of the list. Yet when someone dies from unknown causes or under suspicious circumstances, it's the County Coroner's office that does the investigating. High profile crimes that end with dead bodies involve the Coroner. When celebrity deaths are involved – and LA has no shortage of celebrities – the Coroner is likely to play a role.

Maybe we don't think about the Coroner because death is an unpleasant subject to consider. Or maybe the odd structure of LA County governance is the cause. The County is administered by five co-equal supervisors; it does not have an elected chief executive. Despite periodic suggestions that the largest county in the country needs an elected chief, the elected five supervisors seem to be reluctant – to say the least – to have such an executive official. Turnover among the five is rare, unless they are termed out. And in the past, before term limits were imposed, it was rarer still.

There are other elected LA County officials: the District Attorney and the Sheriff. It's usually these elected officials who attract the major share of public attention and name recognition. But, as will be described below, there was a time when the unelected Coroner had considerable name recognition.

In recent years, however, unless there was a problem in its administration, residents were unlikely to hear much about what went on at the Coroner's office in any detail. As it happens, 2016 was such a period. A backlog of cases was highlighted in a Grand Jury report and then-Coroner Mark Fajardo stepped down, complaining that the supervisors had underfunded his office.¹ Even so, public attention quickly turned elsewhere.

There was one County Coroner who maintained high visibility throughout his career from the 1960s and into the 1980s: Dr. Thomas T. Noguchi. He wrote two books about his work, mainly

¹Hillary Jackson, "LA County coroner's office could lose its accreditation," *MyNewsLA*, April 21, 2016. <http://mynews1a.com/government/2016/04/21/report-claims-la-county-coroners-office-could-lose-its-accreditation/>.

dealing with celebrity cases.² A third book he authored was a novel about a coroner dealing again with a celebrity death. One of the books became a best seller.³

Noguchi appeared in films, one being an exploitation-documentary, *The Killing of America*.⁴ He also appeared in two related video documentaries: *Autopsy: Through the Eyes of Death's Detectives* and *Voices of Death*.⁵ Despite his propensity for popular publicity, Noguchi's technical skills were also noted in the professional world. In 2015, Noguchi – long retired – received a special award from the American Academy of Forensic Sciences and recorded an interview reflecting on his career.⁶

During his career as County Coroner, critics complained that Noguchi was attempting to “steal the last scene” from Hollywood demises.⁷ Noguchi had the distinction of being *twice* fired from his job by the Board of Supervisors, events that cemented him as a household name in LA. And his first firing ultimately triggered a community reaction, the focus of this chapter.

As the name Noguchi suggests, Thomas Tsunetomi Noguchi was of Japanese background. Unlike most of the Japanese-origin population in LA at the time, however, he had not been born in the U.S. Noguchi was born in Japan in 1927 and grew up in wartime and postwar Japan where he received his medical training. Details about his early life are scarce. But he came to the U.S. at age 25, finished his medical education, and obtained a position in the LA County Medical Examiner's (Coroner's) office.

By 1962, after only a short time on the job, he came to public attention after doing the autopsy on movie star Marilyn Monroe. After becoming Coroner in 1967, he handled the forensic aftermath of the assassination of U.S. senator and presidential candidate Robert F.

²Thomas T. Noguchi with Joseph DiMona, *Coroner* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983); Thomas T. Noguchi with Joseph DiMona, *Coroner at Large* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985). Coauthor DiMona was a “ghostwriter” who in this case was visible. He also co-wrote with H.R. Haldeman of Watergate scandal fame.

³Thomas T. Noguchi and Arthur Lyons, *Unnatural Causes* (New York: Putnam and Sons, 1988).

⁴Trailer at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjwOnQktNC8>. Full film at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9Am3iPu6z8>. Noguchi can be seen at approximately the 3-minute point.

⁵Susan King, “VCR Viewing; For a Change, Make Your Own Discovery With 'New Explorers,'” *Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 1999.

⁶<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLTgnZfaKJs>.

⁷Douglas Stein, “Thomas Noguchi: Coroner to the Stars” (Interviewed November 1986): <http://web.archive.org/web/20030402115931/http://www.omnimag.com/archives/interviews/noguchi.html>.

Kennedy in 1968. As time went on, such personalities as actress Sharon Tate (victim of the Manson family), actor-comedian John Belushi, and singer Janis Joplin, among others, passed through his hands – as corpses.

In 1969, Noguchi was fired as Coroner by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. His dismissal mobilized the Japanese-American community in LA. Up to that point, the community had been largely silent after returning from being placed by federal decree into internment camps during World War II. Ultimately, that community's switch in the 1970s from silence to protest led (eventually in the 1980s) to successful demands for a presidential apology and for monetary reparations by the U.S. government for the internment episode. Noguchi had been in Japan at the time of the internment and so he did not experience it. But his firing occurred at the cusp of a transition in the community from quiet to agitation.

Resignation

You might think that Los Angeles County, with its current large population of about 10 million, would have an extensive public archive of historical records including records related to the Noguchi case. Alas, that is not the situation. So what we know now of Noguchi's career with the County is mainly contained in newspaper accounts and in accounts of participants. And there are missing elements and uncertainties in the record.

For example, when the promotion of Dr. Noguchi to the position of Coroner was under consideration, the proposed appointment was apparently supported by the County Employees Association, a local public-sector union. But it was reportedly opposed by the County Medical Association and the UCLA and USC medical schools. Why the opposition? Who exactly within these professional institutions did the opposing? There is nothing in the public record to explain it.

Possibly, opponents had their own favored external candidate, someone other than Noguchi, the insider.⁸ One report indicates they viewed Noguchi as “too young and too inexperienced.”⁹ But whatever the reason, the opposition was reflected in the Board of Supervisors vote.

Originally, two supervisors – Frank G. Bonelli and Kenneth Hahn¹⁰ – supported the Noguchi appointment. Two supervisors – Burton W. Chase and Warren Dorn – opposed it.¹¹ To break the 2-2 tie, Supervisor Ernest E. Debs supported the appointment, but conditioned on Noguchi having “patched up (his) relations with the medical schools within six months.”¹² We know that Dr. Noguchi continued as Coroner after Debs’ six month deadline. So he presumably “patched up” his relations with the medical schools – or tried to do so. Exactly what Noguchi did in that regard is unknown, another blank-spot in the historical record.

However, it is known that he faced various managerial challenges in taking over the office from his predecessor. There was a backlog of cases (as in 2016!) and there were cumbersome procedures for handling cases which needed attention. To speed up the processing, Noguchi apparently determined his office needed more funding from the County. And that is where his problems began.

Although LA County doesn’t have an elected chief executive, it does have an appointed official handling administrative affairs. That position, and the person in it, has varied in title and

⁸Apparently, there were “applicants from all over the world” for the position when the incumbent coroner resigned. Source: Godfrey Isaac, *I’ll See You in Court* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1979), p. 55.

⁹Ray Zeman, “Coroner Noguchi Quits in Feud with Hollinger,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 26, 1969. This reference from the *Los Angeles Times* and others that follow are available online in the ProQuest Historical Newspapers database. Reporter Ray Zeman, who covered the initial phases of the Noguchi affair, was a longtime journalist who specialized in County and state affairs. He died in 1997 at age 86. http://articles.latimes.com/1997-03-30/local/me-43643_1_former-times-bureau-chief.

¹⁰Hahn, a Democrat, was the father of James Hahn (Mayor of the City of LA, 2001-2005) and Congresswoman Janice Hahn. (She is running for a seat on the Board of Supervisors at this writing). Bonelli’s name survives in the Bonelli Regional Park. Also a Democrat, he was noted for an unsuccessful ballot proposition to give southern California additional representation in the state senate.

¹¹Republican Chace’s name survives as Chace Park. Dorn, also a Republican, was known for efforts that helped establish the Music Center and work relating to air pollution control.

¹²Ray Zeman, “Coroner Faces Threat of Ouster Proceedings,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 1969; Richard West, “Noguchi, New Coroner, Faces Era of Change in Department,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 1976. As a state assemblyman, Debs sponsored the bill that created the UCLA Medical Center. A Democrat, Debs name survives as Debs Park. Effectively, the Noguchi appointment as Coroner was supported by the Democratic members of the Board of Supervisors and opposed by the Republicans. However, note that the office of supervisor is non-partisan.

authority over time, depending on the disposition of the Board and the degree to which the supervisors were willing to delegate. During the initial years of the Noguchi appointment, the County's chief administrative officer was Lindon S. Hollinger, who went by "L.S." or "Lin." Hollinger had been appointed to the CAO position in 1958. But he was a longtime County employee, starting as a messenger in 1925 and working his way up.

Hollinger's brother, Roscoe, had been County Auditor-Controller before retiring in 1967.¹³ The County seemed to be a family affair for the Hollingers. CAO Hollinger was supportive of expanding LA County activities. He wrote an enthusiastic internal report on the "Lakewood Plan," an arrangement by which local cities would contract for basic services, such as policing, from the County.¹⁴

By the time Noguchi became coroner, CAO Hollinger had developed a reputation as someone who wanted ultimate control of ongoing County operations and bureaucracy and who did not appreciate anyone challenging his decisions and control. Given Hollinger's long career with LA County, he understood the way things worked from the inside. Any issue from the County bureaucracy requiring the attention of the Board of Supervisors was supposed to go through the CAO.

When Noguchi decided he needed more funding to deal with his case backlog issue, he first asked Hollinger to obtain the money for him. When Hollinger decided against provision of additional funding, Noguchi went over his head directly to the Board of Supervisors. The Board granted his request. Hollinger was upset at being bypassed and called in Noguchi for a dressing down. According to Noguchi's (second) attorney, Hollinger in fact drew his finger across his throat to indicate he (Noguchi) was finished as Coroner.

In a second interview with Hollinger, Noguchi was told there had been many complaints about him. As a result, he would have to resign. Exactly what these complaints entailed, and who had made them, was not disclosed by Hollinger at the interview. But if Noguchi resigned quietly, Hollinger said he would obtain an appointment for him at Rancho Los Amigos Hospital as chief

¹³"Still in the Family," *Deseret News*, June 29, 1967, p. 6A.

¹⁴L.S. Hollinger, "The Lakewood Plan," unpublished County report, 1967. (Available from the UCLA library, Southern Regional Library Facility.)

pathologist. Noguchi apparently did resign, or at least wrote a letter of resignation. The details of whether he actually sent his letter of resignation to Hollinger privately are unclear.¹⁵ But the letter was ultimately released to the public. In any case, Noguchi consulted an attorney, a friend named David S. Smith,¹⁶ and was told by his friend/lawyer to withdraw the letter – which he later did.

To repeat, at this late date all we can do is speculate on motives of the parties involved. We don't know for sure why the local medical establishment opposed the Noguchi appointment as Coroner. We don't know for sure why Hollinger was unsympathetic to Noguchi's funding request, and why he denied it. But one could suspect that among these motivations was Noguchi's Japanese background. In any event, the Japanese-American community, although at first reluctant to make a fuss, eventually came to view the Noguchi affair as an affront.¹⁷ By the end of the affair, it was Hollinger – not Noguchi – whose job was at risk.

The Battle Begins

Once Hollinger had demanded Noguchi's resignation, and once Noguchi had (ultimately) refused, a procedure was set in motion. First the County Board of Supervisors would consider the matter of whether Noguchi should be dismissed in executive (non-public) session. If the Supervisors concurred with Hollinger's position – that Noguchi should resign or be fired – and if Noguchi still refused to resign, the matter would go to the Civil Service Commission. The Commission could ultimately dismiss Noguchi by concurring with the Board. Or it could reinstate Noguchi.

But again, exactly what happened initially is not quite clear from the newspaper accounts. First, it was indicated that Noguchi wouldn't resign. Then it was announced that Noguchi would resign after Hollinger had threatened to file "some type of charge." It was reported that Hollinger believed Noguchi spent too much time on routine deaths and not enough on violent

¹⁵Noguchi's version of the story is that he did send the letter. (Noguchi, *Coroner*, p. 111) Noguchi's second attorney indicates that he was about to forward the letter of resignation to Hollinger but thought better of it after consulting his first attorney. (Isaacs, p. 59)

¹⁶One news account lists the name as Davis rather than David. That difference could be a typo. Ray Zeman, "Noguchi Withdraws His Resignation as Coroner," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1969.

¹⁷Stanley O. Williford, "The Old Order Passes for L.A. Japanese," *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1969.

and suspicious cases. In any event, it can be assumed that anti-Noguchi allegations were being leaked to the news media to pressure him.

However, even when it seemed that Noguchi would resign, there would be a brief delay until March 4, 1969 before it took effect while Noguchi finished his testimony at the trial of Sirhan Sirhan, the assassin of Senator Robert Kennedy. Noguchi would receive no cut in pay and would continue as a pathologist for the County. He released a statement that "*I am fortified in my decision (to resign) by my knowledge that as coroner I have contributed to improvement of the office and its ability to service the public.*"¹⁸

However, after announcing his resignation, Noguchi confided in his dentist, Dr. Yoshio Yamaguchi, that he felt he was being treated unfairly. Dr. Yamaguchi, in turn, prevailed on a prominent attorney he knew to take over the case. On March 4, 1969, rather than step down, Noguchi officially announced that he had withdrawn his resignation. It was announced that he had hired a new attorney, Godfrey Isaac.¹⁹ Isaac, it might be noted, later became a lawyer for Sirhan Sirhan after he was convicted.

In hiring Isaac, Noguchi had effectively also obtained the services of Isaac's wife, Roena, who – although not a lawyer – provided important legal research for his case. Noguchi explained that he had changed his mind about resigning "*after I received tremendous support from my friends who know me well... I have done nothing wrong.*"²⁰ Despite the reference to friends, the only tangible support at that point was coming from Dr. Yamaguchi who began a fundraising effort for the Noguchi defense. But as time went on, the external support from the Japanese-American community would swell.

Given Noguchi's sudden un-resignation, the Board of Supervisors suspended him and appointed an acting coroner. Although Noguchi had at first gone along with the resignation

¹⁸Ray Zeman, "Coroner Noguchi Quits in Feud with Hollinger," *Los Angeles Times*, February 26, 1969.

¹⁹Exactly when the switch of lawyers occurred is unclear. Another attorney, possibly a partner of Smith's, named Manley Freid is mentioned in one account. Ray Zeman, "Noguchi Withdraws His Resignation as Coroner," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1969. Isaac died in 2015.

²⁰Ray Zeman, "Noguchi Withdraws His Resignation as Coroner," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1969.

and then withdrew it without much detailed public explanation, his wife, Hisako Nishihara, was anything but silent.²¹ And she immediately raised the racial issue:

"My husband is good enough to work under a Caucasian but not good enough to work in the position of chief... There is nothing equal about this equal opportunity business if a minority group member has to have ten times more education to successfully compete against a member of the Caucasian race."

Supervisor Kenneth Hahn, however, denied that there was any racial motivation on the part of the Board.²² But after the comments of Noguchi's wife, the issue of discriminatory intent was firmly embedded in the affair.

The Court of Public Opinion

If Noguchi had quietly resigned as Hollinger had wished, the entire matter would have received little public scrutiny and would soon have been forgotten. But Noguchi's resigning and un-resigning, combined with Mrs. Noguchi's statement, turned the matter into a very public event. Although the Civil Service Commission was to be the official locus for the investigation, both sides began to enlist public support by putting out their clashing views of Noguchi's fitness for office.

The formal firing by the Board of Supervisors – which triggered the Civil Service Commission hearing – took place on March 18, 1969. CAO Hollinger submitted a report charging that Noguchi took drugs, had symptoms suggesting he needed psychiatric care, was a poor administrator, and that he bullied his employees. Noguchi's attorney Isaac proclaimed in contrast that he had "full confidence that Dr. Noguchi will be returned to his position."²³

Martin Weekes, LA Deputy County Counsel, was assigned to present the evidence against Noguchi. He charged that Noguchi might have made "promises" to employees of the Coroner's

²¹His wife held a doctorate in microbiology. Source: Robert Lindsey, "A Chastised 'Coroner to the Stars,'" *New York Times*, March 12, 1982.

²²Quotes and other material from Ray Zeman, "Noguchi Withdraws His Resignation as Coroner," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1969. Supervisor Hahn stated, "His wife charges Oriental-Japanese discrimination, which it isn't."

²³Richard West, "Ban on Radio, TV Reversed at Noguchi Hearing," *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 1969.

office in exchange for their favorable testimony.²⁴ In contradiction, Noguchi's attorney Godfrey Isaac denied that anyone was "barging into (employees') houses at night." Isaac pushed to have the Civil Service Commission procedure broadcast on radio and TV, but the Commission at first rejected the idea.²⁵ The Commission's view was that broadcasting the hearings would result in a "circus."

However, the level of public interest was high by that point; the Commission soon reversed its decision, partly due to pressure from the Board of Supervisors. The Supervisors feared any indication of a secretive process. Isaac proclaimed the decision to reverse on broadcasting to be "a preservation of the democratic process." Commission President O. Richard Capen acknowledged the interest of the news media and professed "no wish to interfere with legitimate news operations."²⁶

Capen, six years later, was himself investigated and then convicted of lying under oath and trying to fix a civil service exam. But in 1969, he was a well-respected civil servant.²⁷

Commissioner Harry Albert was a lawyer who had been on the Commission for many years and had been with the County since at least 1931. His service on the Commission ended later in 1969.²⁸ Commissioner Thelma Mahoney succeeded Capen as President of the Commission when his service ended in 1970.²⁹ She was first appointed in 1961 after a background in the local labor movement.³⁰ The three commissioners would make the ultimate decision.

The Hearings Begin

As the Commission hearings opened, Deputy County Counsel Weekes, essentially acting as prosecutor, claimed that Noguchi suffered from a "sickness" that he had developed on the job

²⁴Weekes retired after 32 years with the County in 1995.

<http://transparentcalifornia.com/pensions/search/?a=los-angeles-county-pension&q=martin+weekes&y=2015>.

²⁵Ray Zeman, "Reports of Witness Tampering Heard in Noguchi Firing Case," *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1969.

²⁶Richard West, "Ban on Radio, TV Reversed at Noguchi Hearing," *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 1969.

²⁷<http://www.metnews.com/articles/2009/perspectives092909.htm>.

²⁸<http://www.upi.com/Archives/1983/07/13/Civil-Service-President-dies/9607426916800/>.

²⁹<http://dhrdcap.co.la.ca.us/jic/digest/pdf/digest1972/12221972.pdf>.

³⁰<http://dhrdcap.co.la.ca.us/jic/digest/pdf/digest1973/06291973.pdf>.

and that led him to make morbid statements.³¹ (Readers should keep in mind, in considering the charges of morbid statements, that we are talking here about a *coroner*, i.e., someone in an occupation dealing daily with death and dead bodies, sometimes in gruesome condition.) It was alleged that Noguchi had said at the time of the Robert Kennedy shooting, that he hoped the senator would die, because his death would elevate Noguchi's reputation as Coroner. He was said to have been cheered by various aircraft disasters in the LA area that had led to substantial dead bodies to be examined. Noguchi was said to have hoped that a 727 airliner would crash into a hotel.

Weekes attempted to blunt the racial subtext of the hearing by a tactic of reversal. He claimed that Noguchi had overworked a black employee in his office who subsequently died. Noguchi was also alleged to have misbehaved with a "Japanese secretary" and a black secretary. In short, it wasn't the County that was racist. The County was in fact *protecting* minorities by firing Noguchi.

Not surprisingly, attorney Isaac had a different interpretation. Noguchi admired Robert Kennedy and would not have wished him to die. The statements about air disasters were made in the context of budget discussions, i.e., would the Coroner's office have sufficient resources to handle such catastrophes. He characterized employees who testified against Noguchi as betrayers and malingerers. One malingerer had been given a promotion after Noguchi was fired, presumably to encourage his testimony, according to Isaac. In contrast to the testimony about mistreatment of employees, Noguchi was a kindhearted and fair administrator who paid for the office Christmas party out of his own pocket. And he would never discriminate against anyone.

However, the "Japanese secretary" that Noguchi was supposed to have mistreated testified that he had told her "*he hated all niggers, he hated all Japs and he hated all Jews.*" Despite such testimony, the local Japanese-American community – which reported was at first embarrassed by the Noguchi case – had begun to rally around him. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, most of the 150 public attendees at the Commission hearings were Japanese-

³¹The next few paragraphs describing the opening hearing – including the quotes – are drawn from Richard West, "Noguchi Charged with Kennedy 'Death Dance,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1969.

Americans who “applauded politely whenever Isaac appeared to make a point in his defense of Dr. Noguchi.”³² The community created an organization, JUST (Japanese United in a Search for Truth), to raise funds for the Noguchi defense.³³

As the hearings continued, Noguchi was depicted by Weekes as a megalomaniac who wanted more and more power. He was reported to want to take over the Coroner’s offices in Riverside and Orange Counties.³⁴ (How this could be accomplished given the separate governance of the counties is unclear.) Indeed, Noguchi was said to dream of being in charge of all coroners’ duties west of the Mississippi while a friend of his would do everything to the east. One witness was asked to evaluate Noguchi’s “facial expression” and described him as looking “hypnotized.” Noguchi was said to have displayed a knife, saying that he would like to use it on an autopsy of CAO Hollinger while Hollinger was still alive.

Not surprisingly, the witnesses called by Isaac painted a very different picture of Noguchi. Noguchi was an expert in his field who didn’t take drugs or make bizarre or discriminatory statements. He was described as “*a warm, articulate, humane man, a leader in his community.*”³⁵ That statement was stricken from the official record as improper but, of course, it stuck in the public memory. Ultimately, with testimony largely based on alleged statements and alleged behavior, the case became a matter of credibility.

So what was to be made of testimony that Noguchi showed “joy” when bodies of Hong Kong flu victims began coming into the autopsy room? Or that his speech was sometimes “rambling”? Would the testimony of a friendly witness, a pathologist – that folks in Noguchi’s field often used morbid humor as a way of dealing with the work they faced – carry the day?³⁶

The Tide Turns

There were some evident problems with the case presented by the County. First there was the charge that Noguchi used some kind of “pep” pills. But no pills were ever taken directly from

³²Richard West, “Noguchi Charged with Kennedy ‘Death Dance,’” *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1969

³³Richard West, “Noguchi’s Life Savings Gone, Backers Say,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 1969.

³⁴The next two paragraphs are based on Richard West, “Noguchi Said He Wanted More Authority, Witness Testifies,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1969.

³⁵Richard West, “Noguchi Said He Wanted More Authority, Witness Testifies,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1969.

³⁶Richard West, “Noguchi’s ‘Joy’ Over Influenza Autopsies Told,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1969.

Noguchi. Rather, based on testimony, the County analyzed pills that looked like pills that Noguchi was said to have taken. And even the identification of those pills did not occur until after the March 1969 Hollinger report that was the basis of Noguchi's firing. The acting coroner (perhaps in line for the permanent job if Noguchi's firing was upheld) testified that he thought Noguchi's behavior was consistent with someone taking pep pills. But no witnesses could testify that they actually had tested any pills that were known to be in Noguchi's possession.³⁷

A psychiatrist testified for the defense that there was nothing abnormal about Noguchi. Moreover, a person who sometimes rambles is not mentally ill. And facial expressions can be misleading; witnesses who found that Noguchi smiled at what they considered inappropriate times may not have known that Japanese more often maintain a smiling expression as a matter of culture.³⁸

Ultimately, CAO Hollinger's testimony had a major flaw in it. Given his supposed opinion of Noguchi as being mentally ill and therefore incompetent, why would he (Hollinger) offer Noguchi a job at Rancho Los Amigos hospital?³⁹ How could Noguchi be capable of taking care of the living at Rancho Los Amigos but be incapable of taking care of the dead at the Coroner's office? Hollinger admitted that he made the offer. But said he thought Noguchi could do the job, even if mentally ill.

"Mr. Hollinger, isn't it true that you recommended the discharge of Dr. Thomas T. Noguchi because you believed he was too emotionally disturbed to perform autopsies?"

"Yes, that's true."

"Mr. Hollinger, isn't it true that when you asked Dr. Thomas T. Noguchi to resign, you offered him a post at Rancho Los Amigos Hospital as a pathologist."

"Yes, I did."

³⁷Richard West, "Doctor Links Noguchi Actions to 'Pep Pills,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 1969.

³⁸Richard West, "Noguchi's Attorney Assails Procedures in Pill 'Test,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 20, 1969.

³⁹Richard West, "Hollinger Tells of Hospital Job Offer to Noguchi," *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 1969.

"Mr. Hollinger, would you tell this commission why you were ready to assign a man that was too ill to operate on dead bodies to a place where he'd be performing services for people who are still alive?"⁴⁰

While the Rancho Los Amigos offer was a major hole in the case against Noguchi, there were still other matters raised by attorney Isaac. Hollinger had blocked delivery of a new County car for Noguchi prior to his having undertaken the investigation that had led to the March report. Didn't that fact suggest he was planning to fire Noguchi even before the evidence to do so was obtained? (Hollinger said he blocked a new car because it wasn't needed, although the car Noguchi was using was four years old and had 70,000 miles on it.)

Didn't Hollinger decide to fire Noguchi when Noguchi went over his head and obtained more funding from the Board of Supervisors directly? (Hollinger denied it.) Didn't Hollinger make a slashing gesture across his throat when he confronted Noguchi and told him to resign? (Hollinger denied doing so.) Didn't one of the witnesses the County called against Noguchi then apply for a job in the CAO's office? (Hollinger admitted he did so, although the witness applied through one of Hollinger's deputies.)

One of the charges against Noguchi had alleged incompetence in his handling of the Robert Kennedy autopsy. But after the Hollinger testimony, the County asked that the Kennedy charge be dropped. That request – which the Commission granted – meant the Commissioners should ignore prior testimony that Noguchi had mishandled the Kennedy case. Attorney Isaac charged that the County was trying to prevent evidence being presented as to what an excellent job Noguchi had actually done. Nonetheless, the dropping of the Kennedy matter showed that "the County's case is dissolving in front of their eyes," Isaac said.⁴¹ And Isaac was able to force Weekes to declare for the record – after hours of haggling, according to Isaac – that the autopsy of Kennedy was "competent."⁴² So the County had brought a charge it knew to be false.

⁴⁰Quoted in Godfrey Isaac, *I'll See You in Court* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1979), p. 91.

⁴¹Richard West, "County Withdraws One Count Against Noguchi," *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1969.

⁴²Godfrey Isaac, *I'll See You in Court* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1979), pp. 84-85.

From Defense to Offense

After Hollinger's dubious testimony and the withdrawal of the Kennedy charge, the County's case did indeed begin to melt. Supervisor Kenneth Hahn – who was called by Isaac to testify – noted that if the charges against Noguchi were not substantiated, it would be Hollinger – not Noguchi – who would “be in a most difficult position.”⁴³ Indeed, if Noguchi were exonerated, charges might also be filed against those who brought the charges against him, according to Hahn.

But Hahn was anything but a friendly witness and accused Isaac of “getting publicity” with his questions. Hahn basically put the onus – if indeed there had been a wrong decision on Noguchi – on CAO Hollinger. He said that he initially had no reason to doubt Hollinger's view that Noguchi was dangerous. Yet he admitted that he (Hahn) was willing to go along with a private resignation of Noguchi that would put him into another County hospital.⁴⁴

The “Japanese secretary” who testified against Noguchi admitted that she cried when it appeared he was being pushed to resign.⁴⁵ Yet apart from attributing racist statements to him, she had also testified that Noguchi had threatened to kill County officials and to kill her. She also accused him of using profanity, although it appears that the offensive language in question was “Hell” and “damn.” How credible a witness could she be when first she cried and then she accused? A dentist testified that the pills the County had identified as “pep pills” were probably vitamin B he had recommended.⁴⁶ There was more testimony put in evidence that coroners are prone to make morbid jokes. And so it went.

The withdrawal of the Kennedy charge was also a breakthrough for support of Noguchi by the Japanese-American community. Dropping one charge suggested other aspects of the case might not be solid. A big fundraiser/dinner was held for the Noguchi defense by the JUST organization in a large hall. But despite the hall's size, many Noguchi supporters had to be

⁴³Richard West, “Hollinger Reputation Involved in Noguchi Hearing, Hahn Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 1969.

⁴⁴Richard West, “Hollinger Reputation Involved in Noguchi Hearing, Hahn Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 1969. Apparently, by the time the matter had gotten to Hahn and the rest of the Board, the target hospital had switched from Rancho Los Amigos to Harbor General.

⁴⁵Richard West, “Aide's Fear of Resignation by Noguchi Told,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1969.

⁴⁶Richard West, “Civil Service Board Dismisses Five Charges Against Noguchi,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 1969.

turned away for lack of capacity. In the view of the community, Noguchi had switched from being a potential embarrassment to an obvious victim of a discriminatory decision that had to be reversed.⁴⁷

By early June, the Civil Service Commission had dropped still another five charges. It was no longer to be charged that Noguchi prayed for a crash of Mayor Sam Yorty's helicopter, that Noguchi wanted great tragedies to occur to enhance his reputation, that Noguchi had made fun of a disabled person in his office, that Noguchi had changed topics to something irrelevant in the midst of a meeting, and – as noted above – that he used profanity.

Isaac wanted to rebut the idea that Noguchi was a racist. To do so, he called as a witness City Councilmember Tom Bradley. Bradley, an African-American former police officer in the Los Angeles Police Department, had run for mayor in a bruising campaign in 1969 and lost, after incumbent Yorty had hinted that Bradley was a front for black radicals. The Bradley testimony – which came only a week after the mayoral election – was held after the 1965 Watts Riots and thus in a period when racial tensions were still high in Los Angeles. But Bradley was a recognized leader of the black community; his testimony would be important.⁴⁸ (Bradley went on to defeat Yorty in 1973.)

Councilmember Bradley could not testify directly on allegations about what might have been said within the Coroner's office. But he did testify that he supported reforms in procedures advocated by Noguchi and that Noguchi had been "lucid" (not crazy) in a lengthy meeting that Bradley had had with him. The simple fact that Bradley was testifying for Noguchi – the subject was not important – was an indirect way of combatting the racial allegations. Isaac also called three black employees of the Coroner's office who testified that Noguchi was an excellent manager. And he called executive of a black-oriented radio station who testified that Noguchi favored making inquest procedures more open to minorities.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Godfrey Isaac, *I'll See You in Court* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1979), pp. 88-89.

⁴⁸ Bradley came in first in the primary but lost in the general election. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnDjQ1QbWho>. On the 1973 mayoral election in which Bradley won, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Val48Xn8UrY>.

⁴⁹ Richard West, "Noguchi Coherent, Lucid at Meeting, Bradley Testifies," *Los Angeles Times*, June 5, 1969.

Finally, there was testimony that Noguchi had calmed a tense confrontation with black "militants" who could not get into an inquest hearing regarding the police shooting of a Black Panther member. The witness – a statistical clerk in the Coroner's office – contradicted testimony that Noguchi had misbehaved poorly at a retirement dinner. In fact, at the dinner, Noguchi had been the target of a racist joke by a TV actor who alluded to Pearl Harbor and said "if this had been 1941, Dr. Noguchi would have come and shot the Hell out of us." Noguchi had responded to the remark gracefully.⁵⁰

In short, the offensive mounted by Isaac was going well. But there remained one potential danger point. Noguchi wanted to testify in his own defense – something he was not required to do. Indeed, it had been affirmatively announced that Noguchi *would* testify on his own behalf, an event that would have been a climax for the defense's case. Pulling out and not testifying might look bad. But attorney Isaac feared that Noguchi would not make a good witness for himself.

Isaac viewed any hesitancy in responses by witnesses to questions as dangerous to their perceived credibility. Noguchi's native language was not English and he often did hesitate while searching for a word. To the Commission, that hesitancy might seem like evasion or equivocation. In the end, Isaac announced at the last moment that Noguchi would not testify after all and then closed the case. The explanation given to the news media is that Noguchi, were he to testify, would have to say unpleasant things about those in the Coroner's office who testified against him which would be bad for morale.⁵¹ Isaac told the news media that Noguchi didn't want "the cheap success which would come from castigating a handful of his subordinates."⁵²

Despite the explanation, according to Isaac's later account, when the announcement of no testimony by Noguchi was made, "*pandemonium broke out. The hearing room exploded. People jumped up shouting. Some were angry. Some were hostile. The three commissioners*

⁵⁰Richard West, "Noguchi Averted Racial Trouble, Witness Claims," *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 1969.

⁵¹Godfrey Isaac, *I'll See You in Court* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1979), pp. 92-96.

⁵²Richard West, "Noguchi Decides Not to Testify in Dismissal Hearing," *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 1969.

were visibly upset. Weekes was red in the face, furious, yelling at me.”⁵³ Would the decision up-end a case that seemed to be going well for Noguchi up to that point?

Isaac couldn't be sure at the time if he had made the right decision. Supervisor Kenneth Hahn – even after the Commission had heard all the evidence and had retired to consider its verdict – pushed for a reopening of the case on the grounds that Noguchi hadn't testified. In Hahn's view, there was “still confusion and a cloud” over Noguchi's fitness, without his testimony.⁵⁴

Wrapping Up

After the shock and letdown that accompanied the decision not to have Noguchi testify, the hearings went on in much the same way they had gone before. A UCLA psychologist diagnosed Noguchi as manic-depressive based on tests that had been administered to him, although he never met Noguchi.⁵⁵ The dean of the USC School of Public Administration also testified about Noguchi's alleged manic-depressive tendencies based on the tests, although he was not a psychologist. But he was tripped up by Isaac in not knowing a technical psychological term and ended up complaining about being cross-examined.⁵⁶

There was testimony that the African American employee who was alleged earlier to have died from being overworked by Noguchi in fact had died of cancer. The acting coroner – who replaced Noguchi – refused, however, to say that the cause was cancer and instead said he died of respiratory failure – but acknowledged that an embolism and a malignant tumor were present. Another witness, a coroner from Detroit said explicitly the cause was a cancer that had spread to the brain.⁵⁷ There was also testimony to the effect that morale in the Coroner's office had declined following Noguchi's dismissal.⁵⁸

In his closing argument, attorney Isaac depicted LA County as a huge giant attacking a lone individual. CAO Hollinger had become an egotistical autocrat. The anti-Noguchi witnesses were acting out of jealousy and other bad motives. Among the witnesses who made false

⁵³Godfrey Isaac, *I'll See You in Court* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1979), p. 95.

⁵⁴William Endicott, “Noguchi Backers Charge Hahn with ‘Sabotage,’” *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 1969.

⁵⁵Richard West, “Noguchi Personality Syndrome Brought Out by Psychologist,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1969.

⁵⁶Richard West, “USC Dean Blasts Procedure at Noguchi Dismissal Hearing,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 1969.

⁵⁷Richard West, “Noguchi Testimony Focuses on Petition Urging His Retention,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1969.

⁵⁸Richard West, “Former Noguchi Aide Quits, Blames Decline in Morale,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 1969.

statements, according to Isaac, was the acting coroner who had conspired with others to come up with the pep pill story. Obviously, the County's attorney did not see things that way. The County, from his perspective, had acted to protect the "little people" who had a right to expect an efficient Coroner's office.⁵⁹

Testimony and hearings had started in mid-May and ended in late June after seven weeks, although originally a much shorter proceeding had been expected. The Commission adjourned to consider the evidence with no set date to produce a decision. It had developed a reported 3,000 pages of testimony from about 80 witnesses for the commissioners to ponder. Noguchi simply said at the end that he was "available to return to public service."⁶⁰

The Verdict

While the Commission deliberated, the Japanese-American community through the JUST organization continued its campaign to exonerate Dr. Noguchi. A petition scroll with 7,000 names was sent to the Civil Service Commission and the Board of Supervisors.⁶¹ A full-page ad was placed in the *Los Angeles Times* on Noguchi's behalf by JUST. It was entitled "A Plea for Justice" and noted that "never has the Japanese American community been more aroused."⁶² Below the title, the subtitle warned that "if this happened to one of us, it can happen to one of you," and the text then went on to list a series of injustices to Noguchi.

While it appeared that the case had ultimately gone well for Noguchi, no one could be sure what the Civil Service Commission would decide based on the evidence presented. While Los Angeles waited, actor George Takei, who played Sulu on the original *Star Trek* TV show, and others prominent in the Japanese-American community, took issue with the efforts by Supervisor Hahn to reopen the case.⁶³ But it remained unclear when a decision would be announced.

⁵⁹Richard West, "County Pictured as Monster at Noguchi Hearing," *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 1969.

⁶⁰Richard West, "Noguchi Lawyer Accuses Four Witnesses of False Testimony," *Los Angeles Times*, June 25, 1969.

⁶¹Ray Zeman, "7,000 Sign Scroll, Ask Just Ruling on Noguchi Dismissal," *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 1969.

⁶²*Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 1969, p. B5.

⁶³William Endicott, "Noguchi Backers Charge Hahn with 'Sabotage,'" *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 1969.

Then it was announced that the Commission would issue its ruling on July 31, 1969. Attorney Isaac prepared two statements – one if Noguchi were cleared and one if the firing were upheld. On July 31 in a crowded hearing room, Commission President Capen delivered the verdict:

“We the Civil Service Commission of Los Angeles County, after hearing over one million words in over six weeks of testimony, find that not one charge against Dr. Thomas T. Noguchi has been proven. He is reinstated forthwith as Los Angeles County Chief Medical Examiner-Coroner and awarded full back pay.”⁶⁴

The Commission did recommend that the duties of the Coroner be divided between medical and managerial. But such a reorganization was not something the Commission could order; it would require an action by the Board of Supervisors. And the Board, particularly those who voted to fire Noguchi, had had enough of the affair and were unlikely to undertake such a restructuring. Doing so would be perceived as a vendetta against Noguchi. Supervisor Debs said there needed to be a “cooling off period.”⁶⁵

Following the verdict, Noguchi walked the few blocks from the hearing room to his former – and now regained – office and sat down in his old chair. The now-displaced acting coroner who had testified against Noguchi, along with other hostile witnesses/employees were out of the office on vacation or otherwise elsewhere. They subsequently requested transfers or resigned.⁶⁶ One was subsequently prosecuted for having a fake medical degree.⁶⁷ Supportive employees meanwhile welcomed Noguchi back.

CAO Hollinger – out of town on his honeymoon when the verdict came down – maintained the charges he had brought against Noguchi were valid, despite the Commission’s decision.

Hollinger, whose own job was now potentially in question given the outcome, denied that he planned to retire the next year, despite reports circulating that he would do so. And the next

⁶⁴Quoted in Godfrey Isaac, *I’ll See You in Court* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1979), pp. 97-98.

⁶⁵Paul Houston and Stanley O. Williford, “Noguchi Cleared and Reinstated to Coroner Post,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 1, 1969.

⁶⁶Paul Houston, “Hollinger Still Feels Charges Against Noguchi Are Factual,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 1969.

⁶⁷William Farr, “Deputy Coroner Arrested as Imposter with Fake Degree,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 1972.

year, he in fact did step down.⁶⁸ Despite Hollinger's insistence to the contrary, Civil Service Commission Capen, in response to a reporter's question, clarified the verdict's meaning. It wasn't just that the charges against Noguchi were unproved, he responded. "*The fact that (Noguchi) was restored to his job is indicative that he was exonerated.*"⁶⁹ (Underline added.)

A Shift in Attitude

At the time of the Noguchi affair, the civil rights movement was in full swing; other protest movements were also active. There was growing opposition to the Vietnam War, and there was "women's lib." But even with such examples, the Japanese-American community had at first been reluctant to become involved aggressively in the Noguchi case, despite the suggestion early on that a discriminatory motive for the firing was involved.

Harry Kitano, a UCLA professor, 30 years later co-authored a book on the movement for an apology and reparations for the World War II internment of the West Coast Japanese-origin population.⁷⁰ But at the time of the 1969 verdict, Kitano reacted to the eventual support of the Japanese-American community for Noguchi:

*"It really is a dramatic change. Very few would have predicted it. I would say that had this happened ten years ago (the community) would have acquiesced. However, this is the first time the Japanese have been in such publicly visible positions... I once said that if a wartime evacuation situation occurred again, the majority of the Japanese would merely go again. That was three years ago. After this incident I'm not so sure. The vast majority might try to resist."*⁷¹

The creator of the JUST name for the fund raising organization, Mrs. Kats Kunitsugu, elaborated:

⁶⁸Ray Zeman, "Hollinger Job Secure Despite Failure to Have Noguchi Fired," *Los Angeles Times*, August 10, 1969. Hollinger had indicated he would resign several months before the Noguchi case was presented to the Board of Supervisors. He then reversed the retirement decision after the death of his first wife, still before the Noguchi case was filed.

⁶⁹Paul Houston, "Hollinger Still Feels Charges Against Noguchi Are Factual," *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 1969.

⁷⁰Mitchell T. Maki, Harry H.L. Kitano, and S. Megan Berthold, *Achieving the Impossible Dream: How Japanese Americans Obtained Redress* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

⁷¹Stanley O. Williford, "The Old Order Passes for L.A. Japanese," *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1969.

*"The Japanese are bred to respect authority. They hate to express ill feeling against constituted authority. The formation of JUST then was quite a phenomenon. I feel that recently with the Black Power movement and the Brown Berets, the Japanese community has been standing off to the side and has not been involved. They have been learning. The Japanese don't like to picket and carry signs. But they learn that in these times quiet people aren't going to be heard. There is a feeling that it is no longer the right thing to do by staying quiet."*⁷²

Of course, the civil rights movement and others would have been examples even if there had been no Noguchi firing. So surely, pressure for an apology and reparations for the World War II internment would have come about. The book on the apology/reparations movement co-authored by Kitano mentioned above does not go into the Noguchi case or even mention it. But the book does suggest that a shift in attitudes within the Japanese American community was taking place. It dates the period of relative postwar/post-internment quiet as ending in 1969 – the date of the Noguchi affair – and the new era of more activism beginning in the 1970s. So perhaps the community support for Noguchi was a symptom of the larger shift in attitudes.

All we can say is that the Noguchi firing and hearing did come along at a critical point in time and that it created a cause around which the Japanese-American community in Los Angeles could rally. Before the Noguchi firing in 1969, there wasn't a highly visible rallying event – other than the internment episode itself – and not much was being said about that in the post-World War II period. After 1969, there was a more activist stance.

As time went on in the 1970s, there began to be more general public awareness about the history of unjust events of all types. A dramatic TV movie about the internment, *A Farewell to Manzanar*, was shown in prime time in 1976.⁷³ *Roots* – a 1977 TV mini-series – focused on black slavery in the U.S. The following year *Holocaust* – about the Nazi extermination of

⁷²Stanley O. Williford, "The Old Order Passes for L.A. Japanese," *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1969. The JUST name was unveiled in an article in a Japanese-American community newspaper by Mrs. Kunitsugu.

⁷³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7GN6kvmGZ0>.

European Jews – appeared as a TV mini-series. So the popular background for the enactment of a bill in the 1980s that provided an apology and reparations for the internment was being established.

Aftermath

In any event, by the 1980s, it appears that the Japanese-American community in LA had moved on from the defense of a single individual to the apology/reparations issue for the larger group. In 1982, there were complaints about Noguchi – which seem to be perennial when it comes to the Coroner's office regardless of who is heading it – that the office wasn't being managed well and that there was a case backlog. In its 1969 verdict, the Civil Service Commission had recommended dividing the leadership of the office between a medical expert on the forensic science side and a professional manager on the administrative side. But the Supervisors never reorganized the office in that fashion. Maybe it would have been (would still be?) a good idea.

More significantly, the Hollywood establishment was annoyed with Noguchi's high profile presence when celebrity deaths were involved.⁷⁴ The Screen Actors Guild, complained to the Board of Supervisors about Noguchi's handling of the Natalie Wood and William Holden cases. Both were situations in which excessive drinking appeared to be a factor in the accidental deaths of the two movie stars.⁷⁵ Noguchi's justification for discussing drinking in the context of those cases was that he wanted to educate the public so that the living would learn from the dead.⁷⁶ However, there is an old Latin saying, *De mortuis nihil nisi bonum* (of the dead say nothing but good). Saying the departed drank too much wasn't saying "good."

The Board of Supervisors in 1982 once again removed Noguchi from the Coroner position. It first suspended, and later demoted, him. Hearings were again televised, as in 1969.⁷⁷ Noguchi

⁷⁴Noguchi was said to be the model for a coroner hero of a popular TV series in the 1970s and early 1980s: Quincy. "Los Angeles Coroner Faces an Investigation," *New York Times*, December 30, 1981.

⁷⁵Cecilia Rasmussen, "High Profile Twice Cost 'Coroner to the Stars' His Job," *Los Angeles Times*, January 16, 2005; Robert Lindsey, "A Chastised 'Coroner to the Stars,'" *New York Times*, March 12, 1982.

⁷⁶Thomas T. Noguchi with Joseph DiMona, *Coroner at Large* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 248.

⁷⁷The County hired a well-known outside attorney – William Masterson – to handle the litigation rather than use an insider as in 1969. Masterson later became a noted judge.

blamed Proposition 13-related funding problems for administrative deficiencies.⁷⁸ He remained in County employ after his demotion as a physician-specialist in the Coroner's office and also had an appointment with USC.⁷⁹ Appeals were filed – with Godfrey Isaac again as Noguchi's lawyer. The case moved from the Civil Service Commission, which this time did not countermand what the Supervisors had done,⁸⁰ to the courts, and eventually to the state Supreme Court in 1987.⁸¹ In the end, the Supreme Court did not reverse the demotion and Noguchi was not reinstated.

Noguchi definitely had some outside public support at the time of the 1982 demotion, in part because he had made himself a popular personality. The racial issue was raised by Isaac again, but this time it was met with some skepticism. It couldn't be denied that Noguchi had developed an image as "coroner to the stars." Moreover, there were major deficiencies in the administration of the Coroner's office that had been described in a *Los Angeles Times* investigation.⁸² The *Times'* investigation is what triggered the Board of Supervisors' action. Noguchi himself graded his administrative work (as opposed to his medical work) as only a seven on a scale of ten.⁸³ And he was not by that point a self-deprecating person.

Thus, in this second Noguchi case – where anti-Japanese animus did not seem to be the issue – a community outcry did not result, certainly not to anywhere near the degree that had occurred in 1969. That pattern has persisted in Los Angeles. In 2016, for example, Japanese-

⁷⁸Proposition 13 of 1978 drastically cut local property taxes. Thomas T. Noguchi with Joseph DiMona, *Coroner* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983); Thomas T. Noguchi with Joseph DiMona, *Coroner* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 245.

⁷⁹Noguchi's salary was reported to be higher in his demoted position than as Coroner. Dan Morain, "Supreme Court Refuses to Reinstates Noguchi," *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 1987. He retired from County employment in 1999 but continued with USC.

⁸⁰Sara Adler, a hearing officer of the Civil Service Commission, recommended reinstatement of Noguchi. However, she found significant deficiencies in the administration of the Coroner's office. The full Commission reversed the ruling, based on those deficiencies. In the litigation that followed, Noguchi's attorney claimed there was a conflict of interest because Adler's husband worked at a law firm used by the County (although Adler had issued a ruling favorable to Noguchi's retention as Coroner). The court rejected the conflict on interest claim. *Noguchi v. Civil Service Com. (1986)*, Court of Appeals of California, Second Appellate District, Division Seven. December 12, 1986. <http://law.justia.com/cases/california/court-of-appeal/3d/187/1521.html>.

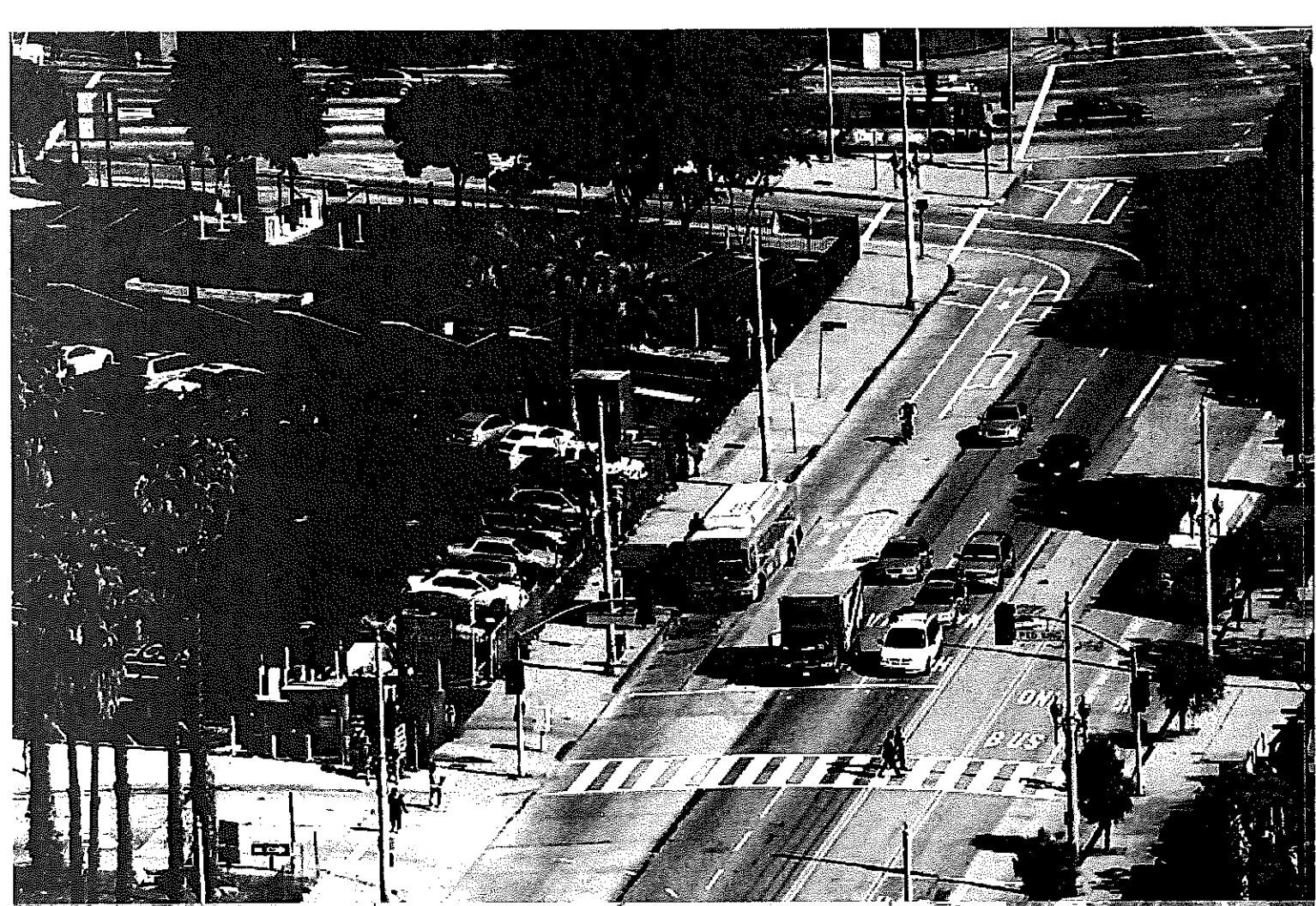
⁸¹The County operated with an acting Coroner during the litigation. After the decision of the state Supreme Court, the acting Coroner was officially appointed as Coroner.

⁸²Investigative reporter Laurie Becklund, who died in 2015, wrote most of the stories that triggered the Supervisors' actions.

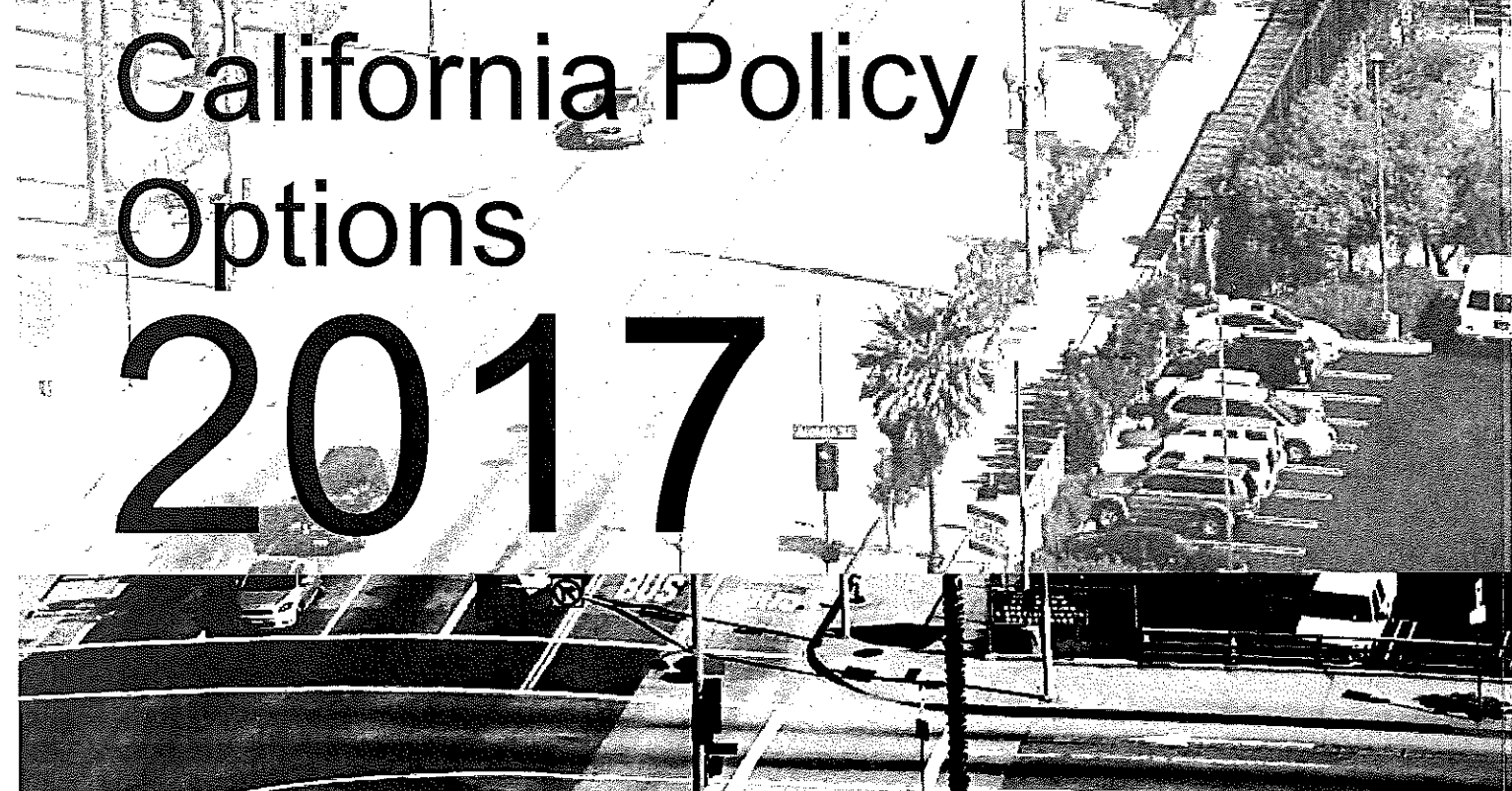
⁸³Thomas T. Noguchi with Joseph DiMona, *Coroner* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), pp. 242-243.

American Paul Tanaka – the former undersheriff of LA County and mayor of Gardena – was sentenced to five years in prison for obstruction of justice along with other top officials in the Sheriff's Department. But there was no suggestion that the Tanaka prosecution was discriminatory, and no community reaction developed to oppose it.

The tale of Coroner Noguchi, Episode 1, became a larger cause, and an injustice was reversed as a result. But Noguchi, Episode 2, was ultimately seen as just a personnel matter, albeit one involving the high profile coroner to the stars.



California Policy Options 2017



UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs
Lewis Center