

The end of the affair

Eric Olson, PhD

My father died at a specific time and place, of course, as everyone does. Even those bits of particularity seem surprising, though, in view of the endless murkiness that surrounds every other aspect of his death. How he died has been a matter of contention and conjecture for sixty-four years, and is now the subject of a six-episode Errol Morris film, “Wormwood,” premiering on Netflix this week (Dec. 15).

The place was the sidewalk outside the Statler Hotel (now the Pennsylvania) on Seventh Avenue between 32nd and 33rd in New York City. He had somehow *gone* — the choice of verb has always been the problem — out the window of Room 1018A. I had just turned nine.

Over the years since then, the narrative has splintered and proliferated like a school of spawning salmon. It became hard to believe that *l'affaire Frank Olson*, as I came to think of it, would ever end at all, much less in a time and place as specific as the one from which it had all begun. Nevertheless, that's what happened. It began on Nov 28, 1953 across the street from Madison Square Garden. On April 22, 2014 it ended, for me, in a dark bar called The Sign of the Whale, just off Connecticut Avenue near Dupont Circle. I was a few months shy of 70.

The final chapter had begun five days earlier when I met Seymour Hersh for a burger at a more upscale watering hole a few blocks from the Whale called the Tabard Inn on N Street. The lunch date was a fulfillment of a long-standing promise to catch up and have a burger someday. We had been talking about that burger for decades.

Hersh had played a prominent role in the story forty years earlier after a series of articles he wrote in the *Times* in the 1970's led to investigations of the CIA. Several Congressional committees and a Presidential commission chaired by Nelson Rockefeller would all trace their origin to Hersh's explosive disclosures. The report on CIA misdeeds issued by the Rockefeller Commission in June of 1975 had included a two paragraph mention of an unnamed Army scientist who had been unwittingly dosed with LSD by the CIA in 1953, and then, a week later, jumped out the window of a New York hotel. We heard about it when we read a summary in the Washington Post. My father's name wasn't mentioned, but who else could it be?

On July 10, 1975 Hersh published a page-one story in the *Times* revealing what we had subsequently discovered. The unnamed Army scientist referred to in the Rockefeller Report was indeed my father. The next day we had a press conference in which we demanded that the government tell us the whole story. Ten days later we were in the Oval Office at the White House receiving a Presidential apology from Gerald Ford, the only Americans ever to have gotten such special treatment. I would later discover that the White House meeting had been engineered by two of Ford's top aides, Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, to stanch the wound. Two days after that we were in the seventh floor executive dining room at CIA headquarters in

Langley, lunching with the Director and receiving a package of documents from DCI William Colby himself. Again, treatment that very few receive. The documents, Colby said as he handed them to me, would give us the whole story of how my father died.

To make a very long story short, they didn't.

There hangs the tale I had wanted to tell Hersh when we met for lunch forty years later, in 2014. The conversation didn't start well. When I told him that the LSD story was just another layer of the coverup, a myth, Hersh exploded. How could I say that?, he demanded. Everyone knew, he insisted, that the whole story had been told decades ago by John Marks in his book, *The Search for the Manchurian Candidate*. It's all a myth I said. It's not what happened. As we crossed M Street on the way to the Tabard we were shouting at each other. By the time we ordered our burgers, Hersh had calmed down. "If what you're telling me is right," he said, "that the CIA murdered your father, it's a very important story. I'm going to have to try to verify it."

"Please do," I said. "By all means, do it."

That was on a Thursday. Five days later, on Tuesday morning, Hersh called me.

"I've found something," he said. "But I'm not going to tell you what it is."

"What?," I muttered contemptuously. "What are you talking about? What do you mean you're not going to tell me?"

"Okay, get in your car and come down here."

Hersh's office on Connecticut struck me as a quonset inserted into a high rise, piled with books randomly tossed at the wall and resting permanently wherever they fell. From there we went down the back stairs, out into the alley, turned right on M, walked through the front of a bar I'd never noticed before, and then up a small flight of steps where we sat down at a table in a badly lit deserted alcove at the back. Cokie Roberts had said hi as we entered the Tabard; here nobody seemed to give a damn. That was the idea.

We ordered burgers again. Then Hersh pulled out a pile of yellow pages from a legal pad, scrawled everywhere with his notes. "I made a one-in-a-million bank shot" he said.

Even before we reached the restaurant Hersh had looked different to me. Blanched, bleached, drained somehow. Now as he sat across the table he appeared stricken, shocked, irritated, nervous and twitchy, eager to get to the point. The guy I went to, he said, is a very old pal, somebody I've relied on for a lot of stuff. Absolutely trustworthy, a brilliant guy who's had all sorts of high level jobs with CIA, the Senate Intelligence Committee, the Joint Chiefs. Comes from a very distinguished military family. It turns out he's the only guy who could have answered the question I put to him. That's the one-in-a-million bank shot.

I listened almost without breathing. Hersh continued.

Early in 2002, soon after 9/11, Dick Cheney had convened a small working group to think through the sorts of problems that could occur as the country pursued the war on terror. "Walking the dark side" as Cheney called it at the time. What could be learned from the past about how to minimize the risks of blowback from illegal operations? The man Hershey had approached with the question of what had really happened to Frank Olson had been a member of Cheney's little working group. But that's still not the bank shot.

This guy, let's call him "Deep Creek," was tasked by Cheney to go into a very highly classified archive to read the Olson file, the *real* Olson file. The archive was known as the "medical records," though that was merely a code name. The archive had nothing necessarily to do with medical records. As I listened, I imagined this archive housed what Norman Mailer had once called the "High Holies," in contrast to the Family Jewels which, under duress, could be declassified without disaster for the institution. The Medical Records were accessible only with the highest level of authorization. I imagined the necessary authorization had to come from the President, though Hershey didn't say that explicitly.

He did say that Cheney had been concerned about the sort of bullet the White House had just barely dodged in 1975, when the Olson family almost went to court. I knew that was correct; the White House memos from the Gerald Ford library which I had discovered in 2001 (with help from historian Kathryn Olmsted) had told the same story. The concern at that time had been that we might ask for documents which the government would have refused to provide, particularly ones relating to what my father was actually doing. If they had not complied by providing the required documents, they would have had no defense at all. Therefore better to invite us to the White House to head us off in advance.

Apparently in 2002 Cheney thought there was still more to be learned from that brush with disaster twenty-seven years earlier. How much detail he had had about the Olson case already in 1975 was not clear. What was clear was that he knew there was a file, and he knew where it was.

None of the records in this archive could be removed. "Deep Creek" had made notes on the file as he read it, and he had those notes in front of him as he spoke to Hershey, who had then taken his own notes — the ones he had on the table at the Sign of the Whale. I took notes only later; as I listened to this story I was too stunned even to think of writing.

The main points from the file are quickly summarized, though I knew as I heard Hershey go through them that I would never, no matter how long I lived, absorb what I was hearing.

It had been Vincent Ruwet, my father's boss at the Special Operations Division and a family friend, who had gone to the Office of Security at the CIA to insist that Olson had to be dealt with harshly. In the document, my father is referred to not as a traitor or a whistle blower, but as something even more problematic, namely a "dissident," which is interesting for many reasons. One hears in this archaic term an echo of the germ-warfare confessions of that time, and the subsequent recantations which the men who made those confessions subsequently gave. They said they had confessed only because they had been "brainwashed." Neither traitors, nor dissidents, merely dupes. One hears echoes too of Martin Luther's defiant stand against the

Catholic Church. "I will not recant." In a bizarre coincidence, on the last Sunday evening of his life, my mother and father had gone out to see a new film about Martin Luther.

My father's case is more straight-forward. Knowing as much as he did about a whole range of disavowed operations, and having taken a moral stand with which his superiors couldn't argue, they had concluded they had few options. The decision to kill him had been fully vetted all the way up the Agency hierarchy, apparently with implicit consent from Allen Dulles, though there seemed to be some vagueness on that point, as of course there would be. My father had been poisoned before being thrown out the window, though Hersh didn't know (or say) what poison had been used. That jibed with a bizarre fragment in the Colby documents, which say that the doctor treating him had come by the hotel the final night with "bourbon and nembutal."

What I was hearing meant that my father had not simply been murdered, but that he had been executed. That was a term I had never allowed myself to contemplate.

The clincher for me was the elucidation in the document of something my father had said during his last weekend at home, something my mother had told us about as kids but which neither she nor we could ever figure out. When he came back from the meetings at Deep Creek Lake where he had allegedly been drugged, he told my mother he had made a "terrible mistake." Now, sixty-one years later, I would hear what that terrible mistake had been. He had been given a chance at Deep Creek to "recant;" the mistake was that he hadn't taken it. Later, when he realized the implications for himself and his family of the stand he had made, he had regretted it.

Yes, of course. That was it. My heart sank on hearing that explanation, as it does now on writing it. We would never have thought of that idea in a million years, but there it was.

In the months and then years after that day at the Whale in 2014 Hersh and I would get into a bitter struggle about whether and when he would publish an account of what he had discovered. Over time Hersh came up with dozens of excuses for not doing so, and so far he hasn't. He does say in the final episode of *Wormwood* that he knows Frank Olson was murdered, but declines to give further details about exactly what he knows or how he learned it.

This is how. For me, hearing it marked the end of the affair, and even the end of the Cold War itself, whose residual battles I had never stopped fighting, and whose lingering mysteries had never ceased obsessing me. I had thought I wanted an account of my father's death that made sense. But now, having gotten one, could I stand it? My problem was no longer epistemological, about knowing, or about uncertainty, or doubt, as it had been for six decades. My problem now was much harder. It was ontological. It was about how one lives with what one knows — that the death of one's father was *intended* by one's government — and absorbs, or writes off, the cost of having lived so long in the dark.

Links to previous *New York Times* coverage:

Seymour Hersh (1975) "Family Plans to Sue C.I.A. Over Suicide in Drug Test" July 10, 1975

Family Plans to Sue C.I.A. Over Suicide in Drug Test



Alice W. Olson, widow of Frank R. Olson, with her children, from left, Lisa W. Hayward and Nils W. and Eric W. Olson, at their home in Frederick, Md.

By SEYMOUR M. HERSH
FREDERICK, Md., July 9—The widow and children of a researcher who committed suicide in 1953 after being made an unwitting participant in a Central Intelligence Agency drug experiment said today that they planned to sue the agency for his "meaningful death."

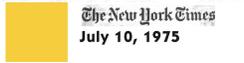
In an interview at their home here, Alice W. Olson and her three children said that they learned the circumstances of Frank R. Olson's death after the Rockefeller commission disclosed last month that C.I.A. files showed a suicide had occurred during a 19-year agency program of administering the drug LSD to unsuspecting subjects to learn its effects.

The commission's report did not identify the victim, who worked for the Army, but his family identified him today, and later, David W. Gettem, director of Vice President Rockefeller's panel looking into C.I.A. activities, confirmed that Mr. Olson had been the victim.

"I'm very angry at the C.I.A., because they let us grow up thinking our father had 'voluntarily' committed suicide," said Eric W. Olson, 26 years old, the eldest son, who is now a graduate student at Harvard.

After weeks of family discussions, Mr. Olson said, the

...the New York Times
...the family announced about
...the C.I.A. officials in connection through a gov-
...the C.I.A. agency's operations, to receive \$12.5 million
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<https://mobile.nytimes.com/1975/07/10/archives/family-plans-to-sue-cia-over-suicide-in-drug-test-family-planning.html?refer=>

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1975/07/10/129436622.html?pageNumber=1>

<https://nyti.ms/2yHFtWT>

Joseph B. Treaster (1976) "C.I.A.'s Files on LSD Death Found to be Contradictory" January 11, 1976

C.I.A.'s Files on LSD Death Found to be Contradictory



By JOSEPH B. TREASTER
...the C.I.A. agency's operations, to receive \$12.5 million
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<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1976/01/11/92205619.html?pageNumber=29>

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Michael Ignatieff (2001)

"What did the C.I.A. Do to Eric Olson's Father?"

New York Times Magazine, April 1, 2001

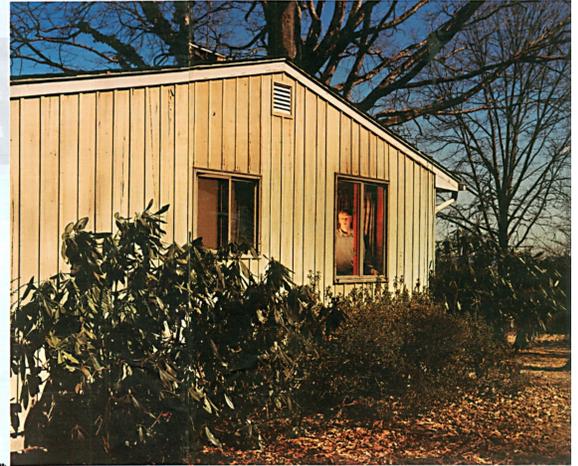
**WHAT DID THE C.I.A.
DO TO HIS FATHER?**
**ERIC OLSON'S LIFELONG MISSION IS TO
PROVE THAT HIS FATHER'S DEATH WASN'T
A SUICIDE. BY MICHAEL IGNATIEFF**

PHOTOGRAPH BY TERRY O'NEILL

For a quarter of a century, a close friend of mine, a Harvard classmate, has believed that the Central Intelligence Agency murdered his father, a United States government scientist. Believing this means, in my friend's words, "entering the known universe," the one in which it is innocently accepted that an agency of the American government would never do such a thing. My friend has left this known universe, even raising his father's body from the grave where it had lain for 42 years to test the story the C.I.A. told him about his death. The evidence on the body says that the agency may have lied. But knowing this has not healed my friend. When I ask him what he has learned from his ordeal, he says, "Never dig up your father." Then he laughs, and the look on his face is wild, bitter and full of pain.

On Nov. 26, 1953, around 7 a.m., Armand Pastore, night manager at the Statler Hotel opposite Penn Station in New York, rushed out the front door on Seventh Avenue to find a middle-aged man lying on the sidewalk in his undershirt and shorts. "He was broken up something awful," Pastore told reporters many years later. One on his back with his legs smashed and bent at a terrible angle. Looking up, Pastore could see a blind pushed through an empty window frame high up in the Statler. The man had fallen from the 12th floor — apparently after crashing through a closed window — but he was alive. "He was trying to mumble something, but I couldn't make it out. It was all garbled, and I was trying to get his name." By the time

Eric Olson still lives in the family's ranch house.



<https://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/01/magazine/01OLSON.html?pagewanted=all>

James Risen (2012)

"Suit Planned Over Death of Man C.I.A. Drugged"

Nov 26, 2012

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/27/us/family-of-frank-olson-man-drugged-by-cia-plans-suit.html?ref=us>