

Books

Fifth Estate Collective

1968

discussed in this article:

The Algiers Motel Incident by John Hersey. 397 pages, Hardbound, \$5.95. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.; Paperback, \$1.25, Bantam Books

Editors' Note: *Detroit News* reporter Joseph Strickland was the first newsman to break concrete news about the Algiers Motel slayings during last July's rebellion. The editors of the *Fifth Estate* quizzed Strickland about John Hersey's new book, *The Algiers Motel Incident*.

Q. Mr. Strickland, what do you think of Mr. Hersey's book?

A. I have two criticisms of the book.

One, I feel that its publication at this time will further delay the trial of the men accused of killing two of the wrong black men.

Two, the worst thing that can be said of the book is that a reader not acquainted with the incident may find it confusing.

Publishing a book of this importance without having all the facts in—in advance of the trial—certainly leaves something to be desired.

Let me explain.

Last year's rebellion caught the city unprepared to deal with it. The power structure, in my opinion, had swallowed its own propaganda and believed that Detroit was enjoying a shangri-la in race relations.

Then on July 23 all hell breaks loose. The police, who had read accounts of snipers in Watts and Newark, panicked. They began shooting at anything that moved.

Now at the height of this confusion and murder, pillage and a general breakdown in the very forces that were supposed to maintain law and order, the police attack the Algiers Motel on Woodward Ave., and kill three of its occupants after playing a deadly game with them that was rooted in sex. Two white girls were in the motel too.

Well, under the circumstances I feel Mr. Hersey should have waited until he heard the police officers' side of the tale from the witness stand.

I feel that in their testimony the policemen will reveal the sickness of American society as a whole. It will reveal to the world that perhaps it's not the police departments of this country that are at fault but the forces that employ them.

Now, let's get back to the book.

Mr. Hersey allows the policemen to paint, in their own words, a pretty sorrowful picture of the kind of men we hire to protect us.

There is a telling remark by the detective who is assigned to investigate the killings when he declares to reporters, "Sure, it's police who were the villains. Just watch and see, when this is all over, it'll be the fault of the police all over the country. Police start riots, police start trouble, police do the killing. Yeah, it's all the policeman's fault, always the police."

Here you have a detective, ostensibly dedicated to preventing and solving crime lamenting the plight of American police departments in the midst of an investigation where his comrades in arms are accused of committing the most vicious crimes with less apparent reason than an alleged robber.

Mr. Hersey apparently uses a tape recorder in conducting his interviews and is fearful of editing out any parts of his subjects' remarks.

In some instances this makes the book difficult reading but, in others, the subject through words gives insight into their personalities.

Consider Patrolman David Senak's remark in explaining what he thinks should have happened the first day of the riot.

"We couldn't have controlled them. But I think that had that officer shot that man...If he had shot him there, the crowd was such that they were more scared and apprehensive, they didn't know what to expect."

"They were feeling us out, see. Now... had the police officer acted and told the man to stop and if he hadn't stopped, shot him, I think the first instinct of the crowd wouldn't have been to rush us, as it might have been later, but to have dispersed, because they would have been fearful."

"Now this in itself wouldn't have solved things, you know this one shooting. But I think maybe had they shot in the beginning, we may have saved those forty-some lives that were killed, and a lot of innocent people that were killed, by shooting the people that were at fault."

Thus, Mr. Hersey allows his characters, which in this case are real people, to give the reader a picture of themselves like in a good stage production.

By the same method he gives the reader a fairly reasonable picture of the personalities of the three dead black youths, their parents and friends.

However, this reviewer felt the book incomplete because the policemen were reluctant to talk in advance of a trial.

On the other hand the book does a great service. It shows graphically that a society's moral fiber is no stronger than the men it hires to protect it from evil.

The fact that policemen in Michigan as well as in Mississippi can kill Negroes without provocation is worth noting by smug Northern whites and their complacent Black counterparts.

Further Editors' Note: After the publication of the book, Recorder's Court Judge Robert Colombo postponed the trial of the two cops charged with the slaying of two young men under the pretense that an impartial trial could not be held because of the atmosphere created by the book.

Colombo, a cop in a judge's robe, was counsel for the Detroit Police Officer's Association before ascending to the bench. The DPOA is providing legal counsel for the accused cops.

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