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Don Bolles

On 30th Anniversary of Arizona Project: Questions Remain About Murder of Don Bolles

A journalist who was part of the famous group probe into the killing of the Arizona Republic reporter traces the bizarre legal twists since then, and suggests a new investigation is needed today.

By Don Devereux

(June 05, 2007) — (Opinion) I have a bone to pick with Investigative Reporters & Editors (IRE), a professional organization of which I've been a

supporter and member for many years. It concerns unanswered questions that still surround the murder of Arizona Republic reporter Don Bolles by a car bomb in Phoenix in June 1976. IRE at its annual conference starting this Thursday in Phoenix will honor the 30th anniversary of the Arizona Project.

In the aftermath of Bolles's death, IRE sponsored the Arizona Project, in which thirty-some journalists and researchers from around the country chose to participate. Appropriately, Bolles himself had been a charter member of IRE, then a new organization. Based in part on his prior, Pulitzer Prize-winning experience leading a team of reporters, Newsday editor Bob Greene was selected to head the effort.

Since an official investigation into the Bolles homicide was well underway when IRE's Arizona Project team assembled in Phoenix in the fall of 1976, we quickly decided that we would not duplicate or complicate that process. Instead, as homage to a slain colleague, we would investigate and draft a series of muckraking articles about corruption and organized crime in Arizona, of the sort that Bolles himself might have written if he were still alive. We would demonstrate that reporters couldn't be intimidated by the awful murder of one of our own.

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During March and April 1977, Arizona Project released some 23 articles for publication in newspapers around the country. Although we didn't investigate Bolles's murder per se, we did endorse the emerging prosecution case involving state's witness John Adamson and alleged bomber Jim Robison, along with businessmen Max Dunlap and Kemper Marley as the suspected financial backers of the plot. One newspaper, the Arizona Republic, Bolles's own publication, opted not to run the IRE-sponsored series, despite the fact that several of its reports and editors played active roles in the project. This might have been a portent that all was not well.

Soon thereafter, Dunlap and Robison were convicted and sentenced to death. But no criminal case ever could be developed regarding Marley, who was never charged. Another Phoenician who appeared to be complicit, a corrupt attorney named Neal Roberts, also escaped prosecution. By 1980, even the convictions of Dunlap and Robison had been set aside in a unanimous decision of the Arizona Supreme Court on grounds that they hadn't received a fair trial.

Then things really became convoluted. The 20-year plea deal of prosecution witness John Adamson, the one undoubted accomplice in the plot, was breached because of his refusal to cooperate any further. Adamson subsequently was tried on first degree murder charges in the 1980s, convicted, and sentenced to death. In the process, Bob Corbin, Arizona's attorney general at the time, denounced Adamson as totally lacking in credibility to be a witness in any additional trials.

But a higher court subsequently reversed Adamson's first degree murder conviction and reinstated his 20-year plea deal. Adamson promised to be a good boy if he ever was needed to testify again. Belatedly, after 13 years, in 1993 Arizona did decide to take another shot at Dunlap and Robison, once more on the basis of Adamson's dubious virtue as a witness.

This time, with some difficulty, Dunlap again was convicted and given a life sentence. On the other hand, Robison was acquitted rather easily. Fortunately for the prosecution, consistent verdicts are not required in Arizona. In effect, Dunlap was convicted by one jury of paying Robison to kill Bolles, while a second jury determined that Robison had not been involved.

That's how the Bolles case presently will go into the history books. But on June 2, 2006, the 30th anniversary of the car-bombing, the Arizona Republic acknowledged editorially the existence of unanswered questions which, it claimed, the passage of time would now keep from ever being answered. "Thus, ultimate justice for Bolles is out of our hands. It is a matter for the courts of Eternity to decide," the newspaper opined.

Two days later, former Arizona Republic reporter Athia Hart contributed similar comments to its editorial page. She wrote, "Thirty years later, the questions remain. We know what. We know when and where. But it will forever haunt that the answers to who and why remain murky."

Adding to the uncertainties are serious, lingering questions about the veracity of Adamson's testimony in the first place. Over the years, substantial evidence has accrued that suggest that Adamson lied about several critical issues, falsely accusing Dunlap and Robison in order to protect others really responsible. Last fall, an investigative unit of ABC's Channel 15 TV in Phoenix, led by Abbie Boudreau, broadcast a small portion of that evidence.

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Then there is the matter of the victim's own, officially ignored theory of the crime. Before lapsing into unconsciousness back in June 1976, Bolles not only identified Adamson as the man who lured him to the fatal location but also attributed the attack on him to greyhound racing interests and the Mafia. That was a linked investigative topic of great concern to him and a possible explanation for the crime also supported by considerable evidence.

Unwilling to accept such confusion, I sent a formal proposal to IRE in early 2006. Would IRE be willing to ask current Attorney General Terry Goddard to convene a special state grand jury later in 2006 to make a last-ditch effort to bring better resolution to the Bolles case? Contrary to the expressed pessimism of Bolles's own newspaper, there are still a modest number of potential material witnesses and/or minor accessories who have never been effectively questioned by law enforcement and who refuse to talk to the press - good candidates for subpoenas and even immunity grants if necessary. Because of aging and mortality, however, it is now a relatively small, constantly diminishing list. Along the way, Lucy Dalglish of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press agreed that her organization would join with IRE in making the request if IRE chose to do so.

IRE Executive Director Brant Houston conveyed my proposal to IRE's board of directors at the organization's last annual conclave held at Fort Worth in June 2006. The board of directors in turn deferred a decision to IRE's executive committee. I finally was notified by IRE President James Grimaldi of the Washington Post in September 2006 that IRE's executive committee had decided not to act on my proposal, thereby killing it.

There was no certainty, of course, that Arizona Attorney General Goddard would have approved a special state grand jury even if so requested by IRE and the Reporters Committee. There also was no certainty that such a last-ditch effort would have produced the desired results. But at least we would have made a collective attempt to elicit a more complete and accurate picture of what happened to a fellow journalist three decades ago. At least we wouldn't have failed by default.

Don Devereux (letters@editorandpublisher.com) is a longtime journalist in Arizona. He has researched the Bolles case for many years for the Scottsdale Daily Progress and other news outlets.

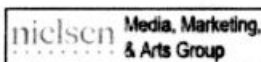
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