

Who Killed Frank Olson?

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Wormwood

a six-part Netflix series directed by Errol Morris



Netflix

Eric Olson with his father, Frank Olson, Frederick, Maryland, late 1940s; from Errol Morris's Wormwood

“Wormwood, wormwood,” Hamlet mutters as he absorbs the realization that his mother was complicit in the murder of his father. Eric Olson uses Hamlet’s word when, at the end of Errol Morris’s devastating *Wormwood*, he sums up what it means, finally, to know that his own father, a biochemist employed at the US weapons laboratory at Fort Detrick, Maryland, did not die in an accidental fall from a New York hotel window in November 1953, did not take his own life after being administered LSD as the authorities had claimed since 1975, but was in fact executed on orders from his superiors in the Central Intelligence Agency. When Morris asks at the end of the film what it means for Eric to know this, he replies: “You think you’re going to find peace of mind? What’s that consist of? You’re going to find out that your father was murdered by the CIA. Feel better now?... Wormwood. It’s all bitter.”

Olson was nine years old when he last felt his father's touch grazing his head as he went out the door of their wood-frame house in Frederick, Maryland, never to return. It was in that house that about a week later, his father's superior at the CIA woke the family up and told them that Frank Olson had suffered a fatal accident. Eric was told that his father "fell" or "jumped" from a hotel window. Even a nine-year-old knew that "fell" and "jumped" meant two different things, and in the space between the two words a doubt grew that was to consume his whole life. He lives to this day in the same house where he heard that first lie. Now he knows that the right word was "dropped." Agents working for the CIA knocked Olson unconscious and dropped him from the window. Does such knowledge give him a feeling of vindication, having sought it for so long? "I needed truth a long time ago," he tells Morris. "Truth is no good to me now."

In writing about the Eric Olson story, I can't pretend any detachment. We were graduate students at Harvard in the 1970s, and we've stayed close since then. In 2001, I wrote a piece for *The New York Times Magazine* about his case. Writing it made me aware of just how reluctant I was—and still am—to believe, although I'm not even an American citizen, that the US government could have done what Eric came to believe it had done to his father. To believe such a thing was, in Eric's words, "to leave the known universe."

Though I still resist the facts, the facts, as Olson's research has established, are that Allen Dulles, Richard Helms, and other unnamed persons at the highest levels of the American government ordered the death of Eric's father because they feared he knew too much about US biological warfare during the Korean War and about the torture and execution of Soviet agents and ex-Nazi "expendables" in black sites in Europe during the early 1950s. Having killed him, the CIA confected the story that Olson's death was a suicide brought on by stress, and later attributed his jump from the window to the effects of a cocktail laced with LSD. It now appears that the LSD was administered, at a CIA retreat in Maryland, to discover exactly what Olson knew. When this experiment revealed that he was indeed "unreliable," he was taken to New York and disposed of.

The initial crime was compounded by a cover-up that enveloped Olson's family in a fog of silent misery and bafflement. In 1975, when the story that Olson had been given LSD first broke in *The Washington Post*, the family was quickly invited to the White House and received an apology in the Oval Office from President Ford. The scene was arranged by Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, Ford's most important staffers, and it was followed by a meeting between the family and

William Colby, then head of the CIA, at the agency's headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Colby gave them documents that had been carefully selected and redacted to support the story that Olson had committed suicide after being administered LSD. Soon after the meeting with Colby, the Olson family was maneuvered into a compensation deal in return for renouncing their right to pursue the matter further in the courts.

The story might have ended there but for Eric's determination, like Hamlet's, to establish the truth of his father's death and to avenge him, to restore his lost honor by establishing that he was not an unreliable and suicidal depressive, as his superiors depicted him, but a troubled patriot wrestling with the burden of what to do once he realized that his country had used his science to commit crimes of war.

Eric remains the only friend I have who has entirely left the known universe of belief that the American state remains a government of laws rather than a regime of covert violence. For leaving that universe he has paid a price as bitter as wormwood. I've been divided all my life about that price: truth is better than lies, of course, but disentangling the two can destroy faith in institutions and in people and drain away your happiness. You can tell from Eric's eyes, when the camera comes to rest on him in the series, that living in a world without any trusting illusions is bleak and comfortless. I've told Eric many times, as have other friends, that enough is enough, but he's gone ahead anyway, with a cold-eyed courage I admire but find painful to watch. He challenges me: What else can I do? Could *you* live with these lies?

Now the six-part Netflix series has gone out to millions of people who will view it, one hopes, as both Olson and Morris intend: as a parable of American misuse of power in its moment of hegemony. It may force some viewers to leave their known universe of trust in government, while for those who've already left, the series will just confirm what they believe. My question is about the generation born after the cold war. What will they make of *Wormwood* after Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, WikiLeaks, and all the revelations that the US government has spied on its own citizens and tried to cover up the truth? One generation's shocking truth may be the next generation's banality. Truth, in other words, may have a sell-by date. Will *Wormwood* be seen, by a younger generation, as nothing more than an evening's binge-watch?

I won't try to review *Wormwood* because I'm too close to judge what kind of a binge-watch it might be. The question of whether Morris's mix of period reenactment, found footage, and interviews "works" is not one that I can answer, except to say that, as far as I could judge, it is scrupulous about the facts as I know them. But accuracy is not what makes the series troubling, at least for me. When it depicts Frank Olson falling from the thirteenth floor of the Statler Hotel on Seventh Avenue in New York at 2:30 AM on November 28, 1953, I can't stand back and assess Errol Morris's skill in reenacting the scene because I find myself asking what it would be like for Eric to see the reenactment, his father falling and lying crumpled, still alive, but moaning his last breath. The question for me is whether the reenactment affords Eric a moment of catharsis or just more bleak dissociation.

Instead of admiring Morris's skill, I find myself thinking about why Eric would put himself through the ordeal of collaborating with Morris in the first place. He might, after all, have rested content with what, by the late 1990s, he knew already. He might have decided to "move on." Instead, he returned to appear in a four-hour marathon to tell the story to a vast new audience. The question is why.

Here we get into complicated territory about why people disclose terrible stories to strangers, in this case a large television audience. Tolstoy's great story *The Kreutzer Sonata*—about a man who tells a complete stranger on a train the story of his miserable marriage and murder of his wife—asks the same question. What is this compulsion to narrate? Is pain shared pain relieved? Or is it just the hopeless display of scars? A futile search for validation?

For me, the most disturbing scene in *Wormwood*, indeed the most difficult moment in Eric Olson's quest, occurred in 1994 when, after the death of his mother, he decided to exhume his father's body and allow a forensic pathologist to examine it. I knew Eric had done this, but I had not realized that he had allowed an amateur cameraman to videotape both the exhumation and the uncovering of the body. Morris includes the footage in *Wormwood*: we follow Eric into the lab and catch a glimpse of the corpse itself, still covered in a decaying and blackened funeral shroud. Eric tells Morris on camera that he touched his father's skull and surveyed his father's penis, as the body lay unwrapped on the slab. We are here at the outer limits of what sons should see and what they should disclose. All truth is good, we like to believe, but not all truth is good to show or to say.

These filmic decisions to show and disclose flow from the entire Olson project to find the truth at whatever cost. Yet the question remains: Would you exhume your own father's body, allow it to be dismembered and displayed? Eric has paid full price for these decisions and would argue, as he does in the film, that the exhumation provided proof that his father was struck on the head before he was thrown out of the window. Without exhumation, therefore, no truth.

The project that Olson and Morris share is to coldly expose the illusion that the truth shall make you free. The phrase, after all, is inscribed in the entrance hallway of CIA headquarters in Virginia. The CIA's appropriation of it is beyond irony, but for the rest of us there is the therapeutic implication that human beings can recover from anything once they call a hurt by its name and trace it back to its deepest roots. In place of such consoling thoughts, the American writer Liam Rector wrote a poem in 2000 with these concluding lines:

*America likes to think
Every one can recover from every thing,
But about this,
Especially, America is wrong.*

If telling painful stories does not help us to recover from them, what then is the point of *Wormwood*? Eric's answer—and Morris's too—would be that the purpose of truth-telling is not therapy but politics. Eric says at one point that the truth has to be shared for it to be truth at all. What is truth if only you know it? In this case, the truth cannot become truth unless it is acknowledged as a public fact, and if the American government will not provide this acknowledgment, then the next best thing would be validation by a mass television audience.

Such validation, however, is only the next best thing. Eric Olson knows that it's not enough to dig up his father's body, not enough to track down witnesses, comb the records, launch legal suits. The final confirmation—and the closure, if such a thing is possible—must come from the ultimate source, the CIA itself. Eric admits, in the film, that he cannot rid himself of the belief that somewhere in the agency's innermost vault, on a shelf, in a dust-covered box, in a folder, there must be some final proof that Frank Olson's death was not a suicide, not a murder, but an execution. There must be some yellowing piece of paper that will confirm, at last, that everything Eric knows actually happened.

The person most likely to know whether such a piece of paper exists and to know the old-timer who could sign himself into the vault to find it is the investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, now eighty years old. He has reported on the story for nearly as long as Eric has pursued the truth. In the final episode of the series, Hersh says that he believes Eric's version, but refuses to provide the final confirmation he has been seeking. Hersh tells Morris that protecting his sources has to prevail over disclosure: "I can't say what I know without putting somebody in jeopardy, so I can't do it."

We are left to speculate why. Either to protect himself, or because he genuinely revels in keeping a secret, Hersh tells Morris that he shouldn't be looking to tie the Olson story up in a neat bow. Morris agrees, saying, "Part of the story is the fact that you can't tell the whole story." Then Hersh adds that "the fact that [Eric] can't get closure... will be of great satisfaction to the CIA. The old-timers, they'll love it.... The tradecraft won. It's a victory for them... one for them, zero for us." One can only hope that a day will come when Hersh decides to deny the old-timers their victory. If he doesn't, they will carry their secrets to their graves, and Eric's version of the truth will never have official confirmation. But that very idea—of government as the final validator of truth—may have died a long time ago, even as far back as the Warren Commission, which was supposed to establish the truth of the Kennedy assassination and instead furthered a generation's worth of paranoid speculation.

At one point in *Wormwood*, Eric Olson stands back from his own narrative and asks, "What is this story about?" What is the ultimate frame in which it finds its meaning? The answer may be that his father's story is an important chapter in the history of Americans' ceasing to believe in their government as a source of truth. President Ford's false apology to the family belongs with the lies that surround the secret bombing of Cambodia in 1969–1970 and the Watergate break-in and flow forward, in a slowly cumulating narrative of betrayal that now encompasses lies about the torture of detainees after September 11 and the stories revealed by Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning. Taken one by one, such episodes can be dismissed as regrettable exceptions. As a pattern, they undermine the fundamentals of democratic faith.

It may be sentimental to imagine that there ever was a time when Americans entirely believed their government, but anyone born during the cold war cannot help feeling that a process of damage and disillusion began in the 1950s and has not stopped since. *Wormwood* was released at the end of the first year of the Trump presidency, which is built on this cumulative narrative of loss of faith and trust in

the American state and its government. Without this sixty-year narrative, how could we begin to explain how a president could get away with constant attacks on the credibility of his own country's intelligence agencies? It was and is right to demand accountability from these agencies and to unearth, as Olson has done, the dire truths they have sought to conceal for so long. Eric has done all that one man can do in the service of the truth, but if truth has no consequences, if the secret agencies cannot be made answerable to the people they protect, the result can only be ever increasing public disillusion with the American state. Donald Trump has feasted on the disillusion. This might be the most bitter legacy of Eric Olson's quest for truth.