

Goals and Purposes of the Famous Trials Site

Any parent or teacher knows that you can't please everybody all the time. In fact, some people are never going to be pleased no matter what you do. So I fully expected that the Famous Trials Site would have its critics. For a site that now averages one million "hits" (page requests) each month, the criticisms have been surprisingly few. I'd say that roughly 95% of the comments that I've received, and over 90% of the reviews I've read, have been generally favorable. Most visitors to the site that take the trouble to offer their thoughts seem to be happy with my choice of trials and with the eclectic mix of primary and secondary materials chosen to tell their stories.

It is the unhappy minority out there in cyberland that has prompted this statement of purposes and goals. I'd like critics to understand what this site is trying--and NOT trying--to be. (That said, I do welcome and appreciate criticism. I'm always looking to find ways to make the site better.)

My original purpose in creating the Famous Trials site was a very modest one. I wanted to post a variety of background materials for students enrolled in my Famous Trials Seminar. There is no single text that works for such a seminar, and requiring my students to purchase, say, fourteen books about fourteen trials seemed out of the question. Soon, however, I discovered through e-mails that there was a wider audience for such materials.

My purpose shifted over time. Now, I see my principal audience as high school, college, and law school instructors and students. Sure, I also hope the site will serve as a useful starting point for the serious scholar working on a major book or paper on one of the trials covered on the site. But the site does not pretend to be archival in the traditional sense. Most of the trial transcripts for the thirty-plus trials on the site run into the thousands of pages. Without grants and without significant university resources, there is simply no way that I can scan such voluminous materials and post them in complete form on the site. In fact, such a massive posting of materials would run counter to my basic goal of providing a clear, concise, and reasonably balanced understanding of the trials. Transcripts can be overwhelming. I've tried to present some of the most important and compelling testimony, and leave out materials that are less significant--and often mind-numbingly repetitive. I might add that editing transcripts is time-consuming work--but work that I have found important enough to justify several trips to the National Archives and other archival libraries where such transcripts are found.

I do not especially care if my site doesn't reflect all the capabilities of modern web-building technology. I'm not a web design expert and I can't afford to hire one. I've learned a few new tricks over the seven-plus years I've worked on this site, but I have neither the time nor inclination to go back and spruce up the sites that were developed years ago. I prefer a look that is not "institutional," even if it leads critics to complain as

did one (a professor at George Mason) who called the site "garish." Yes, perhaps all the pages should be white, and maybe the margins should be more uniform, and maybe the table format is a bit "clunky," but so what? My goal is to lay out the materials in an obvious and understandable way, using my trial commentary as the anchor to understanding.

To be useful and engaging for sixth-graders as well as graduate students, the materials posted must vary considerably in their structure and sophistication. I fully understand that few twelve-year-olds will get much out of some of the full appellate opinions posted on the site, for example. By the same token, some of the materials on the site (comics, jeopardy games, and various "fun facts") may seem insufficiently serious to some especially serious people.

One of the unfortunate consequences of running on a shoestring budget is that I am my own proofreader, and I'm not an especially good one. I know that various misspellings (I discovered the existence of "spellcheck" only a couple of years ago), typographical, and grammatical errors have found their way into my materials. Some visitors have noted that, and I especially appreciate those who have troubled to point out such errors so that I might correct them.

A few critics have also complained about my choice of trials, suggesting that my trial selection ought to be "more focused." One critic noted that my trials ranged from ancient times (Socrates) to very modern times (Simpson), and included trials from both sides of the Atlantic (the Wilde trial from England), and from various types of courts. Other critics have complained that their favorite trial (say, the Manuel Noriega trial) has been inexcusably omitted while some other frivolous and inconsequential trial (say, the Chicago Black Sox trial) has been included. To such critics I can only say, "I'm not getting paid a penny for this--I put up the trials that I, with all of my idiosyncrasies, find interesting or compelling in some way."

Finally, some critics complain about coverage of some trial or another as not being balanced. I'm equally likely to be charged with placing a conservative slant on a trial as a liberal slant. I try to call 'em as I see 'em, but to minimize my editorializing. If I think (as I do) the facts compellingly suggest that Julius Rosenberg or Alger Hiss were Soviet agents, I'll say so--knowing that a few true believers will condemn me. And when I think (as I do), the California Parole Board is not providing equal treatment of the laws to the convicted female followers of Charles Manson, I'll say that as well--knowing that any showing of sympathy for persons who long ago committed such heinous acts is not going to go without criticism. It's generally good to be balanced, but it's also generally good to speak out against evil and hypocrisy.

Yes, the Famous Trials site is not everybody's cup of tea, but I'm comfortable in the

knowledge that it has stimulated many people to think more seriously about both our legal system and the nature of justice.

Doug Linder,
February 2003

[Building the Famous Trials Website \(Essay published in *Jurist* in 2000\)](#)
[New York Times Review of Famous Trials \(1999\)](#)

[Famous Trials Homepage](#)