

Getting Vaccinated, Of Course (1945)

*John Q. Barrett**

In April 1945, President Truman recruited Justice Robert H. Jackson to serve as “the Representative of the United States and as its Chief of Counsel in preparing and prosecuting charges of atrocities and war crimes against such leaders of the European Axis powers and their principal agent and accessories as the United States may agree with any of the United Nations to bring to trial before an international military tribunal.”

This assignment became, over time, Justice Jackson’s Nuremberg work, prosecuting Nazi war criminals. The job lasted more than seventeen months. It included myriad tasks, including innumerable meetings, staff building, work planning, administration, diplomacy, international law analysis and codification, evidence gathering, prisoner and witness interrogations, charging decisions, extensive writing, major courtroom speeches, witness examinations at trial, public speeches and appearances, and extensive travel.

For Jackson at the personal, physical level, this job required, at least at the start and maybe more later, medical care to protect his health and the health of those around him. On multiple occasions, he was inoculated with vaccines against prevalent diseases.

Early on (May 10, 1945), Jackson worked with staff at the Pentagon on administrative details. These included getting office space, getting identification credentials, getting stationery and office supplies, and arranging for staff members to be inoculated—“pleasant topics,” he drily noted at the time.

Two days later, on Saturday morning May 12, Jackson went back to the Pentagon. He was, along with staff members,

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photographed for identification including a passport, given a physical examination, and inoculated with the shots that were standard for World War II military service in the European and Mediterranean Theaters.

A week later (Saturday, May 19), Justice Jackson, amid morning meetings at the Pentagon, received additional inoculations. He then attended a Conference of the Supreme Court justices; had additional war crimes staff meetings; met with a representative of the Allied Reparations Commission to reiterate his (Jackson's) vehement opposition to using defeated, captured Germans as, in effect, enslaved laborers to help rebuild nations that had been devastated by Nazi military aggression; and did other work in his chambers.

That evening, Jackson attended a dinner of government officials that his friend, U.S. Attorney General Francis Biddle, gave at his Georgetown home. Biddle insisted on having the dinner to wish Jackson well before he embarked for Europe. Jackson felt dull from his shots, but he got through the evening, enjoyed the company, and received lots of advice on his tasks ahead.

On June 2, Justice Jackson received one more round of inoculations at the Pentagon.

On June 18, he left Washington with his staff for London. Except for a brief return to Washington in late summer, he was away from the U.S., and primarily he was in Nuremberg, until August 1946.

It seems likely that Jackson received additional vaccine shots during his months in Europe. Members of his staff received flu shots in Nuremberg in November 1945, shortly after the trial began. In July 1946, his closest legal adviser, his son and executive assistant William E. Jackson, received inoculations in Nuremberg.

It is known that Justice Jackson, although sometimes ill during his work at Nuremberg, avoided serious illnesses. He stayed healthy enough to do the work well.

Robert Jackson's knowledge of vaccines did not begin at the Pentagon in 1945. He knew, respected, and benefitted from scientific advances and medical knowledge throughout his lifetime.

In winter 1938, for instance, when Jackson was Assistant Attorney General heading the U.S. Department of Justice's Antitrust Division and about to be nominated to serve as U.S. Solicitor General, he received a letter from his mother, Angelina Stickle. During warmer months, she lived in Jamestown in western New York State, in a house on which Robert made the mortgage interest payments. In colder months, she lived with her daughter Helen Adams, son-in-law Percy Adams, and grandson Harold Adams in nearby Frewsburg, in a house that had been hers, the house where she had raised Robert and his sisters. In February 1938, Jackson's mother wrote that her grandson Harold, age ten, was ill with what she feared was scarlet fever.

Robert promptly dictated a letter back to his mother, which his secretary typed up and he signed and mailed. He stated his hope that Harold, his favorite nephew, did not have scarlet fever.

Robert also gently informed or reminded his mother, and through her his sister Helen, that scientists had developed a beneficial vaccine for scarlet fever, and that Harold should get it:

I am quite sure that they now have a pretty dependable vaccine which either prevents the development of the disease or at least reduces its severity.

GETTING VACCINATED, OF COURSE (1945)

February 25, 1938

Dear Mother:

I enclose check for \$180.00 to Miss Florence Terry for your interest.

I think you will probably find a good deal of winter yet ahead of you, and you will not want to get in too much haste about getting the house open.

I hope Harold will not have scarlet fever. I am quite sure that they now have a pretty dependable vaccine which either prevents the development of the disease or at least reduces its severity.

We have been pretty busy, but are all well.

All send love.