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What Garrison Proved

Two years and uncounted New Orleans tax dollars after he first announced that he had "solved" the John F. Kennedy assassination "beyond a shadow of a doubt," District Attorney Jim Garrison of New Orleans has had what he always intended and wanted — a chance to "allow our case to stand or fall on its merits." During those two years, Garrison has been freely attacking the Warren Commission, the CIA, the Establishment, much of the nation's press and a shadowy conspiracy which culminated in the events of November 22, 1963. But when the time came to produce his "incontrovertible evidence" and "reliable eyewitness testimony," all that emerged was a motley collection of flimsy and perhaps fraudulent claims by some of the least credible witnesses ever heard.

Did the flamboyant DA prove anything? First, Garrison had called the Warren Report "probably the greatest fraud ever perpetrated in the history of humankind." While rejecting this claim, even some of his severest critics among newsmen at the trial admitted that Garrison had scored several good points against the Warren Commission investigation. But nearly all these points were culled from various published books on the Report and were not original with Garrison. The acquittal of Clay Shaw did not, of course, mean that the Warren Report was vindicated, for it was not on trial (a point the DA generally forgot). But certainly the reputation and credibility of critics such as Mark Lane and Penn Jones who supported Garrison's case, are badly compromised.

Second, Garrison had charged the federal government with doing everything possible to withhold vital information from him; but after a federal judge finally ruled that the DA should be allowed to examine the autopsy photos and x-rays and the alleged murder weapon, he withdrew his own request.

Third, Garrison had charged the assassination was carried out by "a precision guerrilla team of at least seven men." But his own assistants in court alleged only "three men and three guns," and they could not make a plausible case for even this number.

Four, Garrison had charged that behind the actual killers lay a vast conspiracy involving "former employees of the CIA . . . anti-Castro Cuban exiles . . . fanatic warlovers . . . oil-rich millionaires in Texas . . . master-racists," but no evidence was offered to substantiate any of this, and the alleged archfiend, CIA, was mentioned in court only once. Garrison had also charged Jack Ruby was involved in the plot, and that another man had "deliberately impersonated Lee Oswald before the assassination"; but not one word was offered in court about either of these claims. Finally, Garrison had charged that Clay Shaw had been part of the conspiracy; but the case against Shaw was so

weak that even if the jury had believed every word of every prosecution witness (which was virtually impossible), Shaw might well have still been acquitted.

In the end, the DA proved only that he had cynically used Shaw as an excuse to expound his theories. When he first arrested Shaw in 1967, he had shown less of a case than was presented in court. Garrison's 25-minute closing statement to the jury about the conflict of Vanity and Truth in Government Power suggested that those who had pivoted the whole case on Garrison's paranoid fantasies may have had a point. At least some of his statements, such as "if you murder truth, you murder freedom, and if you murder freedom, you murder your own sons, and you are told they died in industrial accidents or were shot by the enemy, or God knows what," cast doubt on the extent of his contact with reality. Finally, after having his prize case unanimously dismissed in less than an hour by a jury many had called a "convicting jury," the DA proved his often-noted vindictiveness by indicting the acquitted man for perjury. When one adds to this shambles the fact that not a single elected official in Louisiana, from governor and senators down, has yet dared to utter a single critical word about the DA's action, what Garrison has proved is that Louisiana — a state with an unenviable record for political chicanery, corruption, incompetence and negligence — may now have its most potentially dangerous demagogue since Huey Long.