

Covering Big Jim

For the past two years New Orleans' two daily newspapers—the morning Times-Picayune and the evening New Orleans States-Item—have suffered from an apparent case of astigmatism. As a result, they missed an excellent opportunity to expose District Attorney Jim Garrison as he spun out a fantastical conspiracy theory implicating everyone from Cuban exiles and homosexuals to the CIA in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

When Garrison made known his intentions the States-Item ran an editorial chiding him for spending \$8,000 of the taxpayers' money on his investigation. But in the entire two-year period from the time of Clay Shaw's arrest until the time he was acquitted, reports *Newsweek's* Hugh Aynesworth, neither paper ran any editorial comment on the Garrison affair. (Both newspapers are owned by the S.I. Newhouse chain, which has a rule of not interfering in local editorial policy.)

Considering that the case was coming to trial, such silence could be regarded as laudable, except when viewed in the light of the papers' news coverage. The papers—and in particular the States-Item (circulation: 134,707)—constantly trumpeted Garrison's charges (headlines above). On Feb. 9 The Times-Picayune (circulation: 196,345) ran one story on Charles I. Spiesel, a state witness, who led the jury to the French Quarter in search of a building he contended was the site of a party hosted by Shaw in 1963. It was not until the 28th paragraph on page 10 that readers learned Spiesel believed himself to be the target of a conspiracy whose members had hypnotized him, tapped his phone and disguised themselves as his relatives.

Attention: In the beginning, the newspapers' enthusiasm for Garrison was understandable. One of the biggest stories of the century had come to their hometown—if the district attorney was to be believed. Also, several national news organizations gave Garrison all the attention he wanted. Life magazine reporters followed Garrison across the country and local staffers in such cities as Miami, Los Angeles, New York and Rome tracked down "leads" provided by Garrison. So cozy were Garrison and Life's investigators that the district attorney allowed a Life photographer to station himself behind a one-way window while Garrison interviewed Shaw and other "suspects." Life ended its close ties with Garrison after several months. "By March 1967, it was apparent he had not solved the assassination," says Richard Billings, who headed Life's investigative reporting section but has since left.

Some news organizations were skeptical of Garrison from the first. The Saturday Evening Post weighed in early with



New Orleans newspaper headlines: Hometown story

a detailed examination of Garrison's flimsy case. The New York Times downplayed the story. On May 15, 1967, *Newsweek's* Aynesworth wrote that Garrison had no case and was bribing and intimidating witnesses. The Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times and Time magazine also treated the prosecutor coolly. NBC attacked Garrison's story so pointedly that the district attorney was given time to reply. (NBC's affiliate in New Orleans, WDSU, has been the only local news agency consistently critical of Garrison.) CBS dispatched correspondent Mike Wallace to New Orleans when the story first broke but the network thoroughly dismissed Garrison's case in its four-hour report in June 1967 that upheld the Warren commission findings.

CBS's local affiliate, WWL-TV, retained its enthusiasm for Garrison far longer and was granted "exclusive" interviews. Some of the reporters who went along with Garrison's "press releases" ("Now we have another lie in behalf of the Federal government's false, fraudulent 'investigation' of the Kennedy assassination," began one release) were guaranteed "scoops" (one copyrighted story by Ross Yockey and Hoke May, both of the States-Item, said that Garrison would seek to prove that Lee Harvey Oswald was "not a Communist, but an undercover agent who aided the cause of anti-Castro Cubans").

Ads: Some critics charge that the two New Orleans newspapers declined to give much space to Garrison detractors, even to such responsible ones as the New Orleans Metropolitan Crime Commission, which had long opposed Garrison for his voracious political ambitions.

"We believed that what we were saying about the Garrison probe was not being sufficiently communicated by the papers," says Aaron Kohn, 58, managing director of the crime commission. "And

so on Aug. 29, 1967, we bought advertising space in both papers in order to state clearly our position." (The ad, among other things, called upon Garrison to answer the charges brought by *Newsweek* and NBC.) Hodding Carter, former publisher of the Greenville, Miss., *Delta Democrat-Times* and now publisher of *New Orleans magazine*, puts the case more strongly. "I think the New Orleans papers behaved very badly," he says. "They could have started slugging at Garrison much earlier than they did." (Not that *New Orleans magazine* performed much differently. Before Carter became publisher the magazine ran several pro-Garrison pieces written by States-Item reporters Ross Yockey and Hoke May. The two newsmen were eventually taken off the Garrison story and left the paper.)

'Straight': George W. Healy Jr., executive editor of the two newspapers, believes that the newspapers handled the Garrison story fairly. "We stand on our record," he says. "My instructions to everyone were to play everything straight and not slant anything." President and publisher Aston Phelps, a lawyer, says that the papers held back on editorial comment for fear of violating Judge Edward A. Haggerty Jr.'s strictures against pretrial publicity. "The last thing we wanted to do," says Phelps, "was to get in a position of being responsible for curbs being put on the press coverage."

And, in fact, as soon as the trial was over the newspapers both attacked Garrison in editorials. "We don't think that charges ever should have been preferred against Mr. Shaw," said the *Times-Picayune*, "on the basis of the unreliable verbal statements and flimsy documentary evidence which were available to the district attorney." And the *States-Item* added: "Garrison should resign. He has shown himself unfit to hold the office of district attorney or any other office."