

*An authoritative summary of how Oliver Stone distorted an already discredited account of John F. Kennedy's assassination—a distortion that, like many film histories, threatens to become the story we accept*

## THE SECOND COMING OF JIM GARRISON

BY EDWARD JAY EPSTEIN

**M**ORE THAN A century before the advent of the Hollywood pseudodocumentary Karl Marx suggested that all great events and personalities in world history happen twice: "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce." Oliver Stone's film *JFK* is a case in point.

In 1969, when the conspiracy-to-kill-Kennedy trial brought by New Orleans's District Attorney Jim Garrison collapsed, his entire case that the accused, Clay Shaw, had participated in an assassination plot turned out to be based on nothing more than the hypnotically induced story of a single witness. This witness, Perry Raymond Russo, testified that he had had no conscious memory of his own conspiracy story before he had been drugged, hypnotized, and fed hypothetical circumstances by the district attorney and his staff about the plot he was supposed to have witnessed. To the dismay of his supporters, this was the essence of Garrison's show trial: a witness who acknowledged he could not, after his bizarre treatment, separate fantasy from reality. After that, Garrison's meretricious prosecution of the case was considered by the press to be, as *The New York Times* said in an editorial, "one of the most disgraceful chapters in the history of American jurisprudence." In this debacle Garrison was exposed as a man who had recklessly disregarded the truth when it suited his purposes.



Then, in 1991, a generation later, in the film *JFK*, Garrison re-emerged phoenixlike from the debris as the truth-seeking prosecutor (played by Kevin Costner) who brilliantly solves the mystery of the Kennedy assassination. In this version there is no hypnosis: Garrison resourcefully uncovers cogent evidence that Clay Shaw, in New Orleans, participated in the planning of the Dallas ambush of President Kennedy along with two confederates: David William Ferrie (played by Joe Pesci), a homosexual soldier of fortune, and Lee Harvey Oswald (played by Gary Oldman). Garrison establishes that this trio all worked for the CIA, and were recruited into a con-

spiracy to seize power in Washington.

Partly filmed in a grainy semidocumentary style, with newsreels and amateur footage incorporated into it, *JFK* appears to reveal the truth about the Kennedy assassination. From the moment it was released, its director, Oliver Stone, so passionately defended its factual accuracy that he became, for all practical purposes, the new Garrison. What could be more appropriate in the age of media than replacing a crusading district attorney with a crusading filmmaker as the symbol of the truth-finder in society? In this capacity Oliver Stone-Garrison played out his case on television news programs and talk shows, in magazines, and on the op-ed pages of newspapers. He met with congressional leaders and, as the original Gar-

ri-son had done a quarter of a century before, used his visibility to focus attention on the possibility that the government was hiding the truth about the Kennedy assassination. In exploiting the official secrecy, Stone proved far more successful than his predecessor at rousing interest in releasing the classified files pertaining to the assassination.

Where Jim Garrison failed to build a plausible conspiracy case against Clay Shaw, how did Oliver Stone succeed? The answer is that whereas Garrison attempted only to coax, intimidate, and hypnotize witnesses into providing him with incriminating evidence, Oliver Stone fabricated for his film the crucial evidence and witnesses that were missing in real life—even when this license required deliberately falsifying reality and depicting events that never happened.

CONSIDER, FOR EXAMPLE, THE WAY STONE FABRICATED Ferrie's dramatic confession to Garrison in a hotel room only hours before Ferrie died. In reality, and also in Jim Garrison's account of the case, David Ferrie steadfastly maintained his innocence, insisting that he did not know Lee Harvey Oswald and that he had no knowledge of any plot to kill Kennedy. The last person known to speak to Ferrie was George Lardner, of *The Washington Post*, whom Ferrie met with from midnight to 4:00 A.M. on February 22, 1967. During this interview Ferrie described Garrison's investigation as a "witch hunt." Several hours later Ferrie died of a cerebral hemorrhage.

In *JFK*, Oliver Stone invents his own version of Ferrie's last night. *JFK* shows Ferrie not being calmly interviewed by a reporter in his home but being doggedly interrogated by Jim Garrison and his colleagues in a hotel suite until he breaks down and confesses. Ferrie names his CIA controller and, in rapid-fire succession, admits in the film everything he denied in real life. He acknowledges that he taught Oswald "everything." He then explains that not only does he know Clay Shaw but also he is being blackmailed by him and controlled by him. He admits that he still works for the CIA—along with Oswald, Shaw, "the Cubans," and the "shooters" in Dallas. He displays intimate knowledge of the conspiracy by explaining that the shooters were recruited without being told whose orders they were carrying out. He tells Garrison that the plot is "too [expletive] big" to be investigated, implying that powerful figures are behind it, and that, because they know Ferrie is now talking, they have issued a "death warrant" for him.

After Ferrie leaves Garrison and returns to his apartment, he is shown being chased, held down, and murdered by a bald man who forces pills down his throat. The murderer is shown in other fictional scenes to be associated with Shaw, Oswald, and the anti-Castro Cubans. When Garrison arrives at the murder scene and finds the empty bottle of pills, he concludes that Ferrie was murdered, which gives Ferrie's earlier revelations to Garrison the force of a deathbed confession. (In reality the coroner ruled that Ferrie had died from natural causes—a verdict that Garrison, as the empowered authority, did not contest.)

Oliver Stone's transformations, as seen in the table below, involve more than some trivial cinematic contrivances. They provide the critical linkage for the conspiracy. Ferrie's confession connects the team of anonymous shooters in Dallas with Clay Shaw and Lee Harvey Oswald in New Orleans, and other CIA "untouchables." It changes the entire story—just as a story about the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg would be changed if a film fabricated a fictional scene showing the Rosenbergs confessing to J. Edgar Hoover that they were part of a Communist conspiracy to steal atomic secrets.

Ferrie's false confession is not an isolated bit of license. Throughout *JFK*, in dozens of scenes, Oliver Stone substitutes fiction for fact when it advances his case. He free-wheelingly uses facts from the two books he represents as being the bases for *JFK* (*On the Trail of the Assassins*, by Jim Garrison, and *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy*, by Jim Marrs). He makes especially effective use of this substitution technique when it comes to witnesses. Here, like all fictionalizers, he has an advantage over fact-finders: he can artfully fashion his replacement witnesses to meet the audience's criteria for what is credible. His substitution of the fictional Willie O'Keefe (played by Kevin Bacon) for Garrison's flawed witness, Perry Raymond Russo, is a case in point.

Russo, it will be recalled, was the sole witness Garrison had to the plot that was allegedly planned in Ferrie's apartment. But his credibility suffered from three problems.

First, there was the memory lapse. Not until four years after the assassination did Russo tell his incriminating story, and then only after he had been rendered semiconscious with sodium pentothal and instructed by a hypnotist to imagine that he was watching an important discussion "about assassinating somebody."

Second, there were inconsistent identifica-

FERRIE'S LAST INTERVIEW

	In Actuality	In JFK
Ferrie is:	At home, relaxed	In a hotel suite, in panic
With:	Reporter Lardner	D.A. Garrison and assistants
Ferrie:	1) Denies knowing Oswald 2) Never mentions Shaw 3) Does not discuss the CIA 4) Denies knowing of a plot	1) Admits training Oswald 2) Admits Shaw controls him 3) Admits being in the CIA 4) Describes plot details Says Oswald and Shaw are CIA Talks of trained shooters
Death:	Ruled natural	Ferrie shown murdered by Cuban associate of Shaw's

tions. According to the statement from his first interrogation, Russo, when shown photographs of Shaw, said that he had seen him from afar but had never met him. Subsequently he changed his story to say that he had met Shaw at Ferrie's apartment. Later he told a homicide officer that he was not sure the man he had met was Shaw.

Third, there was his misidentification of Oswald. Russo claimed that the man introduced to him as "Leon Oswald" had a beard in September of 1963 and was Ferrie's roommate. Oswald was clean-shaven at that time, and the roommate of his wife, Marina. (Ferrie's roommate at the time did have a beard.)

Whereas Garrison was stuck with this contradictory testimony, Oliver Stone was not. He simply substituted Willie O'Keefe, who had none of the real witness's deficiencies.

Unlike Russo, a heterosexual with no plausible means of access to Shaw's secret life, O'Keefe is fashioned as a handsome male prostitute who has been Shaw's lover and drug partner for more than a year. Moreover, he is a fascist and a Kennedy-hater—a political stance that might explain why he would be privy to a discussion on a topic as sensitive as the assassination plan. Also unlike Russo, who popped up only after Ferrie's death, seeking publicity on local television, O'Keefe contacts Garrison before Ferrie's death—even before Garrison's investigation has become public—from state prison. He is serving time for prostitution, and he offers to cooperate with Garrison (whom he finds physically attractive) because he has "no reason to lie" and presumably because doing so might lead to a reduction in his prison sentence.

O'Keefe displays no memory lapses requiring drugs or hypnosis. He voluntarily relates a coherent story: Ferrie introduced him to Shaw in the summer of 1962, and Shaw immediately hired him to participate in elaborate orgies with him and Ferrie. In the course of this relationship O'Keefe met Shaw's associates, such as Oswald, whom he has no problem identifying as beardless, and the anti-Castro Cuban mercenaries, including the bald one who murders Ferrie. At one late-night meeting in

Ferrie's apartment, after the Cubans depart, Ferrie, Oswald, and Shaw discuss the plan for killing Kennedy, including the "triangulation of crossfire."

The fictional O'Keefe's story is supported by Ferrie's fictional confession, which is then given weight by Ferrie's fictional murder by the fictional bald Cuban introduced in O'Keefe's story. Since Oliver Stone's audience is not apprised of the substitutions of fiction for fact, this cross-corroboration makes the New Orleans plot plausible.

THE NEW ORLEANS CONSPIRACY IS A RELATIVELY low-level one, involving homosexuals, anti-Castro Cuban killers, Oswald, and CIA employees. To link it to the central conspiracy in Washington, D.C.,

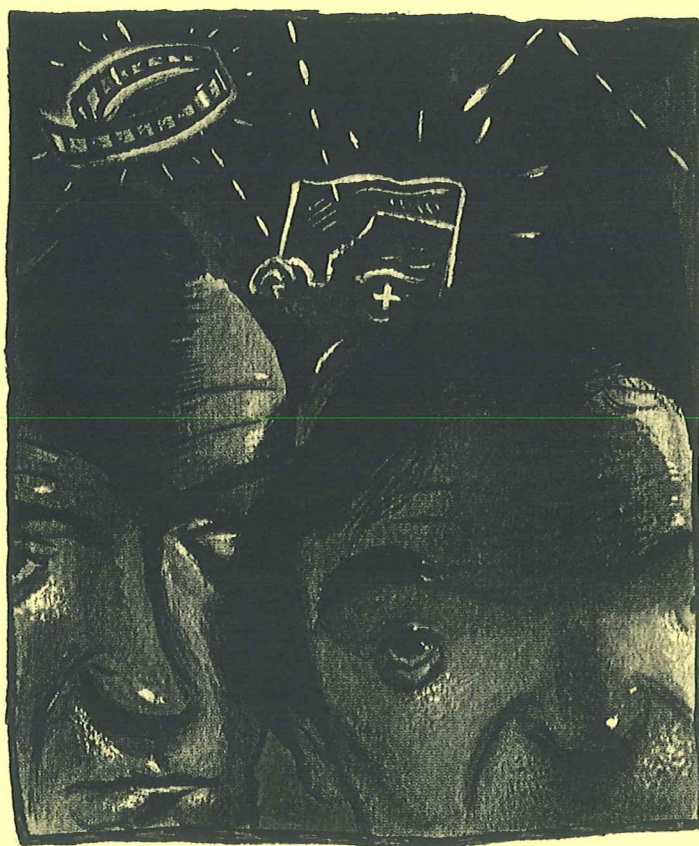
Oliver Stone resorts to a *deus ex machina*: a fictional Deep Throat-style anonymous source who meets with Garrison and identifies himself only as "X."

X is a cynical man of military bearing (played by Donald Sutherland). He meets Garrison just after Ferrie's death, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. When asked by Garrison whether he is with the CIA, X refuses to identify the agency he represents but tells Garrison he is "close—closer than you think."

After describing the Warren Commission report as "fiction," X launches into a remarkable fifteen-minute exposition of the assassination. He discloses that Kennedy was executed

by a device "as old as the crucifixion—a military firing squad." It was not some low-level plot but a full-blown "coup d'état." Its purpose was to prevent Kennedy from withdrawing from Vietnam and ending the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Since the military-industrial complex could not afford to lose the business from both conflicts—"a hundred billion dollars" in war contracts was at stake—it ordered the assassination. The secret team of generals and officials who carried out this coup also arranged the cover story that framed Oswald as the lone assassin, and they sabotaged the telephone system in Washington after the assassination so that no news would leak out. "Nothing was left to chance," X adds.

X explains that two weeks before Kennedy was due to



arrive in Dallas, X was ordered by his superior, "General Y," to accompany a group of officials on a trip to the South Pole. If he hadn't been sent away, he would have had among his "routine duties" that of arranging "additional security" for the President in Dallas—which would have made the assassination impossible. When he returned and realized what had happened, he deduced that there could have been only one reason for Y to send him away at this critical time: to prevent him from interfering with the assassination plan in Dallas. X tells Garrison that he cannot publicly reveal these secrets, because before he could testify he would be "arrested and gagged and maybe sent to an institution, maybe worse," but he urges him to "make arrests" anyhow. With the New Orleans conspiracy now connected to the Washington conspiracy, Garrison returns to New Orleans and arrests Clay Shaw.

In reality Garrison never met such a source. Rather than going to Washington, D.C., he spent the week between Ferrie's death and Shaw's arrest filling in the lapsed memory of the new witness, Russo. Even though the original Garrison never met X, Oliver Stone, the new Garrison, retained X as one of his technical advisers for *JFK*. This supersource, whose story was anachronistically slipped into *JFK*, is based on Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty. Before his retirement from the Air Force, in January of 1964, Colonel Prouty worked in the Pentagon in the Office of Special Operations—which provided planes and other equipment for covert activities. In November of 1963 Prouty was sent to the South Pole, but here the similarity between the real and the fictional X ends.

Unlike the character in the film, Prouty did not count among his duties providing "additional security" for the President's motorcades—according to the Secret Service, which did have that responsibility. There is no record that he served as a liaison with the Secret Service. In his essay "The Anatomy of Assassination," in *Uncloaking the CIA* (1978), edited by Howard Frazier, Prouty alleged that the President's security had been withdrawn not because he had any personal knowledge that it actually had

been but simply because the Secret Service had failed to make sure, as is required by its "manual," that all windows on the parade route were sealed and to post countersniper teams on the roofs. The Secret Service also neglected, according to Prouty, to maintain the speed of the President's car at "the usual 44 miles per hour." In fact these procedures were not required by the Secret Service, the CIA, or the Air Force Military Police. And X's logic that there was a connection between his pre-retirement trip and the events in Dallas has no apparent basis in reality.

Aside from advising Oliver Stone, Prouty has maintained extremely active involvements with other conspiracy-hunters. He has served, for example, as a consultant to Lyndon LaRouche's far-right National Democratic Policy Committee, at a conference of which he provided a presentation comparing the U.S. government's prosecution of LaRouche (for conspiracy and mail fraud) to the prosecution of Socrates; as a board member of the Populist Action Committee, where he joined Robert Weems, a former activist in the Ku Klux Klan, and John Rarick, a prominent figure in the White Citizens' Council; and as a featured speaker for the Liberty Lobby, the anti-civil-rights organization whose founder, Willis Carto, also set up the Institute for Historical Review, which has disseminated books and videotapes alleging, among



other things, that the Nazi death camps in Europe were fictions devised by Zionist propaganda to justify the donation of tax money to Israel. (It also distributes Prouty's own book, *The Secret Team: The CIA and Its Allies in Control of the United States and the World*.)

Prouty has exposed the machinations of putative global conspiracies, too. For example, at the Liberty Lobby's annual Board of Policy Convention in 1990 he presented a special seminar, "Who Is the Enemy?" Prouty laid the blame for the high price of oil on a cabal that had systematically plotted to shut down oil pipelines in the Middle East. "Why?" he asked, and explained to the seminar: "Because of the Israelis. That's their business, on behalf of the oil companies. That's why they get \$3 billion a year

from the U.S. taxpayers." His enemies list also includes the CIA, usurers, school textbooks, the media, political parties, banks, federal crisis-planning exercises, and the U.S.-USSR Trade and Economic Council (which, according to Prouty, stage-managed, along with David Rockefeller, the liquidation of the Berlin Wall to profit from "the rubles and the gold").

This is the intellectual provenance of the man Oliver Stone chose as one of his technical advisers—and of the man called X. In *JFK*, X displays secret knowledge about the ultimate conspiracy behind the Kennedy assassination when he tells Garrison that the "how" and the "who" of the shooting are "just scenery" to hide the "why." The "why" proceeds from the unbreakable rule of the power elite that "the organizing principle of any society . . . is for war." Because Kennedy violated this rule by taking steps to end the war, he had to die.

THE SECRET KNOWLEDGE THAT PROUTY/X HAD about the elite's organizing principle and the "war system" derives from a very special source—a study supposedly suppressed by the Kennedy Administration, which Prouty discussed on the Liberty Lobby's *Radio Free America* on December 14, 1989. He explained then that this study was so secret that the group of "power brokers" who conducted it met "in an underground storage and security area," called "Iron Mountain," in the Hudson Valley of New York. The explosive issue they addressed was: Could America survive "if and when a condition of permanent peace should arrive"? Their conclusion, which X would echo almost word for word in *JFK* two years later, was that "the organization of a society for the possibility of war is its principal political stabilizer"; without a believable possibility that it would engage in war "no government can long remain in power," and consequently "the elimination of war . . . implies the inevitable elimination of national sovereignty." Prouty explained on the radio program and in a subsequent issue of *Spotlight*, the newspaper of the Liberty Lobby, that these conclusions came directly from the report by the Iron Mountain group—of which he had obtained a copy (and which the Institute for Historical Review wanted to sell but couldn't, for copyright reasons). He concluded the program by talking about the "high cabal . . . calling the shots."

Prouty quoted from the *Report From Iron Mountain on the Possibility and Desirability of Peace*—and he failed to realize that it was a complete hoax. There was no group meeting in an underground storage vault in Iron Mountain, no study of the elimination of the threat of war, no report from power brokers. The *Report From Iron Mountain* was a brilliant spoof of think tanks written by the political satirist Leonard Lewin in 1967. Victor Navasky,

then the editor of the satiric magazine *Monocle*, who thought up the idea, persuaded Dial Press to put Lewin's book on its nonfiction instead of its fiction list, a choice that resulted in a front-page news story in *The New York Times* about the "suppressed" report. Subsequently it was revealed by the author for what it was. What neither the author nor Navasky could foresee was that this hoax would re-emerge a quarter of a century later, first in radical-right radio broadcasts and Liberty Lobby publications, and then as the connective logic of Oliver Stone's film.

Not only did Prouty prove unable to distinguish a mirthful hoax from somber reality but Stone himself proved unable to separate the false scenes in *JFK* from the reality of Garrison's case. At a Town Hall meeting in New York in March of last year he again compared himself to Garrison, saying that they were two of four people libeled by the media for representing an "unofficial history" of the assassination (the other two in this quartet are, according to Stone, Oswald and President Kennedy). The panel at Town Hall included Norman Mailer, Nora Ephron, and me, and it was moderated by Victor Navasky, now the editor of *The Nation*. When I pointed out to Stone that his depiction of Ferrie's confession to Garrison was false history, he replied that even though such a meeting never happened, he had "sketched" it into Ferrie's last night because Ferrie was at an earlier point "raving and ranting" to one of Garrison's investigators. Stone saw no problem in having misrepresented fiction as fact in this way in his "unofficial history." A series of seven fictitious scenes in the film depicted someone pasting Oswald's head on a photograph of another gunman's body in order to frame Oswald; to a person who questioned this fiction by meticulously citing the actual photographic evidence, Stone responded, "I don't know where you get your facts." Moreover, he later not only vouched for the bona fides of Prouty but also presented as pure truth X's thesis that the "military-industrial complex" killed Kennedy so that he would not end the war in Vietnam.

Oliver Stone demonstrates yet again how easily pierced is the thin membrane that separates the mainstream media from the festering pools of fantasy on their periphery. What he allowed to ooze into *JFK* from these fringes, with the help of his technical adviser, is the tormenting concept that "secret teams" and "high cabals" fabricated entire historic events to fool Stone, Prouty, and us—a concept that incorporates into its schema even the Iron Mountain hoax. In doing so, Oliver Stone organized a flight from reality. *JFK* thus completes the journey from fact to fantasy that began with the flawed Warren Commission report in 1964. What has been lost en route is the truth. □