

**JOHN
PILGER**



Death in Dallas

Rightwingers plotted to kill JFK, a new film says

Five years after the assassination of John Kennedy, I had dinner in New Orleans with Jim Garrison, then the city's district attorney. Garrison had gathered enough evidence to persuade three judges and a grand jury to indict a New Orleans businessman called Clay Shaw for conspiring with at least two others to murder the president.

Garrison's case contradicted the findings of the official Warren Commission, which in 1964 handed down 26 volumes of patently inconclusive reassurance that Lee Harvey Oswald, the accredited assassin, had acted alone. The commission's report has since been largely discredited, not least by the US Congress whose House Assassinations Committee in 1978 found that "President John F Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy." Every opinion poll has indicated that most Americans agree.

However in the late 1960s Garrison was a lone voice, and a courageous one. Established forces, including Kennedy's successor Lyndon Johnson, had backed the Warren Commission; and Garrison himself was a prominent public official in a conservative southern city whose burghers did not mourn Kennedy. His life was also threatened as a matter of routine; yet he was respected as a remarkable investigator who marshalled his evidence with care and tenacity; and he was incorruptible.

Garrison believed that Oswald was telling the truth when he announced to the world's press, shortly before his own assassination in the Dallas police headquarters, that he was a "patsy". "Actually," Garrison told me, "Oswald was a decoy who never knew the true nature of his job. He never expected to die. There were about seven men involved in an old-fashioned ambush of the president. Shots came from the three directions and the assassination team didn't leave the scene until well after they had done the job. They were fanatical anti-Castro Cubans and other far-right elements with connections to the Central Intelligence Agency."

Garrison's theory was that Kennedy had been working for a peaceful détente with Castro and the Soviet Union and had been already thinking ahead to an American withdrawal from Vietnam. Carl Oglesby, whose lobby group successfully urged the setting up of the Congressional Select Committee on Assassinations, recently wrote that Garrison, now a judge, believed that Kennedy was killed and Oswald framed "by a right-wing

'parallel government' seemingly much like 'the Enterprise' discovered in the Iran-Contra scandal in the 1980s and currently being rediscovered in the emerging BCCI scandal".

Almost 28 years after Kennedy was shot, Jim Garrison is back on the American stage: put there by the Hollywood director Oliver Stone, whose latest film, *JFK*, is based substantially on Garrison's 1988 memoir *On the Trail of the Assassins*. Although he has not finished filming, Stone has found himself increasingly under attack. The established press, which greeted the Warren Commission's report and barely acknowledged the congressional findings that undermined it, has let fly at Stone on the basis of one leaked first-draft script.

In the *Washington Post*, the reporter who covered the Warren Commission, George Lardner, was given a page to mock Stone and Garrison. Referring to Garrison's suggestion that as many as five or six shots might have been fired at Kennedy, Lardner wrote, "Is this the Kennedy assassination or the Charge of the Light Brigade?" The Congressional Assassinations Committee found that at least four shots and perhaps as many as six were fired. Two-thirds of the eyewitnesses reported a number of shots that came from in front of Kennedy and not from behind, where Oswald was hiding.

When I first went to Dallas in 1968, I interviewed five people who clearly remembered hearing shots that came from the bridge under which Kennedy's motorcade was about to pass. The trajectory path of a bullet was still engraved in the pavement in Dealey Plaza; it could not have been fired by Oswald from behind.

One of the witnesses I spoke to was Roger Craig, a Dallas deputy sheriff on duty in Dealey Plaza as Kennedy's motorcade approached. He said that not only did the shots come from in front of Kennedy, but he saw Oswald getting into a waiting station wagon in Dealey Plaza 15 minutes after the shooting. Craig later identified Oswald at Dallas police headquarters. He said Oswald remarked, "Everybody will know who I am now." According to the Warren Commission, Oswald was nowhere near the police station when Craig saw him. After he repeated his evidence to Garrison, Craig was shot at in a Dallas parking lot. When I met him, he and his family were being constantly followed and watched.

That was 1968, only five years after the assassination, during which an estimated 35 to 47 people connected with it had died in

unbelievable circumstances. Two Dallas reporters, who were at a meeting with night club owner Jack Ruby the night before he killed Oswald, died violently: one when a revolver "went off" in a police station, the other by a "karate chop" in the shower at his Dallas apartment. The well-known columnist Dorothy Kilgallen, the only journalist to have a private interview with Jack Ruby during his trial, was found dead in her New York apartment after telling friends that she was going to Washington "to bust the whole thing open". A CIA agent, who had also told friends he could no longer keep quiet about the assassination, was found shot in the back in his Washington apartment. David Ferrie, a pilot, was found dead in his New Orleans home with two suicide notes beside him. Four days earlier Ferrie had told reporters that Garrison had him "pegged as the get-away pilot in an elaborate plot to kill Kennedy".

Midlothian is down the road from Dallas. When I met Penn Jones, the editor of the *Midlothian Mirror*, his offices had just been firebombed. Every day Penn Jones devoted space in his paper to evidence that the Warren Commission had ignored or dismissed out of hand. He showed me a pirated copy of the famous "Zapruder film", shot by a passer-by in Dealey Plaza and the only detailed record of Kennedy being shot. It shows Kennedy and Texas governor John Connolly, who was seated in front of Kennedy, clearly being struck by separate bullets—once again, contradicting the Warren Commission. Time-Life bought the film for \$25,000 but refused to release it for public viewing until Garrison subpoenaed it.

Garrison's efforts to build a case were frequently sabotaged. The extradition of principal witnesses from other states was refused; the FBI refused to cooperate. Garrison failed to convict Clay Shaw, because he could not prove Shaw's CIA connection. In 1975—a year after Shaw died—a senior CIA officer, Victor Marchetti, claimed that both Shaw and Ferrie were connected to the CIA, and that the CIA had secretly backed Shaw against Garrison, who had been right all along.

Perhaps this cannot now be proved; and Shaw, after all, was acquitted by a jury. But whether or not Garrison's version of events is "correct", none of the evidence he assembled is mentioned in the attacks on Stone. Readers of the *Chicago Tribune* have been told that Stone's film will prove "an insult to intelligence" and to "decency". The writer had not seen the script. Still, "there is a point at which intellectual myopia becomes morally repugnant. Mr Stone's new movie proves that he has passed that point . . ."

Garrison has always been cautious about directly implicating the US government, in the form of the CIA, and agrees with the congressional committee's chief counsel who argued that the conspiracy originated in the Mafia. But he sees no logic in leaving it there. The Mafia and the CIA have long had close ties, notably in the infamous "Operation Mongoose", a CIA plot to kill Fidel Castro using Mafia assassins. If the Mafia

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killed Kennedy on its own, Garrison said recently, "why did the government so hastily abandon the investigation? Why did it become so eagerly the chief artist of the cover-up?"

Stone's film suggests that the assassination of Kennedy allowed Lyndon Johnson to escalate the Vietnam war. After winning the presidency in 1964 as a "peace" candidate, Johnson staged the Gulf of Tonkin "incident", a wholly fraudulent tale about North Vietnam attacking American ships—and began to bomb North Vietnam in 1965. The marines were soon on their way. The suggestion that the US did not "stumble" into Vietnam "naively" or "by mistake" is itself enough to enrage the guardians of faith.

Certainly it says much about the control of "mainstream" opinion in the United States that simply exercising the right to challenge an orthodoxy should cause such a fuss. It's the same in Britain; but at least in the US there is a flourishing alternative world of scrutiny and enquiry that opposes the organised forgetting of "unacceptable" contemporary history. For example, a principal source for this piece is the excellent monthly, *Loot*, or "Lies Of Our Times", which was set up "to correct the record" of the establishment media.

Of course nothing is ever absolute. Oliver Stone made *Salvador* for Hollywood. Together with Costa Gavras' *Missing*, it offered a glimpse of how a secret or "parallel" government in Washington dealt with countries that resist the imperial will. Since long before the assassination of John Kennedy, this parallel government has helped to engineer the fall of numerous foreign governments, including those democratically elected. More recently, it ran America's secret and illegal war against Nicaragua; and it was responsible for the Iran-Contra affair, including the bribing of Iran to withhold the release of American hostages so that Jimmy Carter would lose the presidency to Ronald Reagan. When Colonel Oliver North was acquitted the other day on a technicality, George Bush spoke the truth when he said, "It sounds like the system worked real well."

Bush has played a leading part in this secret government. With Bush as director, the CIA intervened illegally in Angola and Jamaica, spending \$10 million to get rid of prime minister Michael Manley. Under Bush, a secret group called "Team B" doctored facts and statistics in order to exaggerate the "Soviet threat".

Bush's current nominee to run the CIA, Robert Gates, promises that the CIA will grow, regardless of the Soviet collapse. Perhaps the difference these days is that the secret or parallel government is secret no more. Bush is president; CIA men are now ambassadors; American covert operations are now overt. Whereas pilots' logs had once to be falsified, this is no longer necessary—as 200,000 dead Iraqis bear silent witness. And neither the Congress nor the media threaten this "new world order". Indeed "preserving order" and "encouraging democracy" have become as sacred in the lexicon as apple pie. But when Hollywood—yes, *Hollywood*—doesn't play the game, something must be done.

Denis Doran/Network

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Harvey Thomas recalls a Tory

The Tories love to hold conferences in big barns by the sea. There are logical reasons: the weather in October is usually cold and wet enough to make the hot sun seem more attractive, most of the presence of bodies for most of the conference sessions; and Disraeli liked it—getting there and back meant a long way from London for four extra hours.

Once you get to the conference, the speakers are important: you should be able to hear the speakers. In 1981, neither was regarded as particularly new. Tory conferences, no decisions were made—at least, none relating to those days the prime objective seemed to be for ageing Young Conservatives to indulge in comparative private debauchery in comparative privacy. Ministers of the Crown to read out, incredibly boring expositions of what they thought was happening in the world—the press. The wording was all carefully chosen and to make quite sure that you would not have to listen to the speeches but not possibly get them wrong if the batim copies were thrust into the press room. For the few people who read the *Times*, the *Telegraph* and the *Sunday Times*, the detailed reporting was of great value, and if *Sun* readers also saw the words of wisdom, that was all to be desired.

In the early 1980s, we had no television, nor satellite television. The BBC, live television watched the retired in their homes, and unemployed in their homes. If a really keen, he or she could just see a person who was speaking from a room surrounding the speaker—none of them realised they were on television and whom managed to pick their noses during some part of the speech. So began the process of sifting out political points, highlighting the important points in the press, acknowledging that we'd read and ignored the rest, and concentrating the minds of viewers on the 90 second message on the news that night.

Conservatives have always aspired to be mostly subconsciously—that became a reality, people will automatically follow them. The idea of wooing people around them to see that the Tories are the best never occurred to most Tory politicians. We in communications quietly started to had to be a slow and tortuous process. The target was someone like me, a reader who hates to read long, but mostly misleading interpretation