

On the Set: Dallas in Wonderland

*How Oliver Stone's Version
Of the Kennedy Assassination
Exploits the Edge of Paranoia*

By George Lardner Jr.

DALLAS—The presidential motorcade is revving up on Main Street. The crowd outside the Texas School Book Depository gets ready for another round of cheering until the gunshots ring out. John F. Kennedy is about to be killed in Dealey Plaza again, and again, and again.

The director's instructions bark out over the walkie-talkies, making sure his sharpshooters get the message.

"I said, 'all five shots.' All right. Everybody in position now. Ready to fire."

Five shots? Is this the Kennedy assassination or the Charge of the Light Brigade?

Film maker Oliver Stone seems unperturbed. The controversial, Oscar-winning chronicler of the 1960s and the war in Vietnam ("Platoon," "Born on the Fourth of July") is in the midst of a \$35- to \$40-million production about the murder, tentatively titled "JFK." His hero: former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison whose zany investigation of the assassination in the late 1960s

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has almost faded from memory. Garrison, now 69, has pronounced himself well-pleased with the script, written by Stone and Zachary Sklar, who was editor of "On the Trail of the Assassins," Garrison's 1988 book. He should be more pleased with the casting: Kevin Costner plays him.

The script is a movieland equivalent of Top Secret, and at Stone's Camelot Productions, everyone hired has to sign a confidentiality agreement about "the Project." Though Garrison, too, was sworn to secrecy, he told the New Orleans Times-Picayune that it was "a magnificent job." And he allowed that it "closely follows" his book.

What that means is that Oliver Stone is chasing fiction. Garrison's investigation was a fraud.

Stone has said that he considers himself "a cinematic historian" and has called the assassination "the seminal event of my generation." But Harold Weisberg, a longtime critic of the FBI and Warren Commission investigations of the assassination—and who has little patience for many of the conspiracy theories that keep popping up—protests: "To do a mishmash like this is out of love for the vic-

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tim and respect for history? I think people who sell sex have more principle."

"An interview with Oliver Stone?" his chief publicist, Andrea Jaffe, said. "What kind of a story are you writing? . . . A news story?" she said with a touch of caution, if not distaste. Two days later, the word came back: Stone wasn't talking.

A copy of the original script was obtained by Weisberg and made available to The Washington Post. And while there isn't space to list all the errors and absurdities, large and small, some are deserving of special mention.

The Man in the Red Wig

For this reporter, one of the most interesting flights of fancy involves the death of David Ferrie, one of Garrison's prime targets. I was probably the last person to see him alive.

In reality, in the wake of JFK's murder, authorities began receiving a wild batch of second-hand reports about Ferrie, a vain, nervous flight school instructor based in New Orleans: that he knew Lee Harvey Oswald and might have hypnotized him, that he might have gone to Dallas as a "getaway pilot" for a presidential assassin. Dismissed from Eastern Airlines in March 1963 because of a record of homosexual arrests, Ferrie had been interrogated shortly after the assassination by Garrison's men, the Secret Service and the FBI (which found nothing). But Ferrie became a Garrison target when the DA decided in the fall of 1966 that the "truth" about the assassination remained untold by the Warren Commission, but was still within his grasp.

Ferrie denied knowing Oswald. In any case, he had an alibi. Employed as a private investigator for attorneys of reputed Mafia kingpin Carlos Marcello, Ferrie had been sitting outside a federal courtroom in New Orleans waiting for the verdict in a case against Marcello (not guilty) until several hours after Kennedy was killed. Then he went to Texas for a weekend trip with two of his ever-present, always-changing young companions. But they went to Houston and Galveston, not Dallas.

On Feb. 22, 1967, five days after the New Orleans States-Item disclosed Garrison's probe, Ferrie was found dead in his apartment.

Garrison promptly pronounced him "one of history's important individuals" and claimed that he had been about to "arrest" Ferrie on unspecified charges. "There's no question about the fact that it's a suicide," the DA said.

The coroner, Dr. Nicholas Chetta, held flatly that Ferrie, 49, died of natural causes despite several undated notes found in his apartment that suggested suicide and unrequited love for a man named "Al." Chetta said death was due to a cerebral hemorrhage. Ferrie, he declared, could only have killed himself by worrying himself to death under the "stress and strain" of Garrison's investigation.

Stone gives Ferrie's demise a different spin, at least in the script he started with. In a scene labeled the "NIGHT BEFORE," Ferrie runs into the toilet, looking terrified, chased by two Cubans known as "Bull" and "the Indian." They catch Ferrie at the sink, "yank him back by the hair," and start forcing medicine down his throat. Moments later, they are busy typing a note, perhaps trying to force Ferrie to sign it as "he convulses, dies."

Strange. I used that same bathroom a few hours later, in the course of a four-hour conversation with Ferrie (he said he was convinced Garrison's investigation would turn out to be a "witch hunt"). Ferrie was very much alive when we walked downstairs at around 4 a.m. I didn't see any Cubans—or anyone else.

As for Ferrie's hair, there was none to yank him back by. The grotesque-looking wretch wore a red wig that, which seemed to be cut from a rug, and penciled-in eyebrows. He didn't have a hair on his head or anywhere else, as reporters later confirmed on visits to the morgue. And there wasn't a mark on his body to suggest rough handling by any "Bull" or "Indian."

Two days after Ferrie's death, with the in-

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ternational press snapped to attention, Garrison announced that he had solved the assassination "beyond any shadow of a doubt." Not a conspirator would escape, Garrison declared. "The only way they can get away from us is by killing themselves."

The Hypnotized Witness

It was only after these surreal pronouncements that Garrison stumbled across his star witness, a 25-year-old salesman named

Perry Russo. Russo knew Ferrie and, after prodding under hypnosis, claimed to have been at a party in September 1963 that wound up with Ferrie, Oswald and a New Orleans businessman named Clay Shaw discussing an assassination plot. The name "Clay" was first mentioned to the hypnotized Russo by the hypnotist.

On this flimsy pretext, Shaw was arrested on a charge of conspiring to kill Kennedy and, 22 grueling months later, brought to trial. It lasted 34 days and contained numerous embarrassments for the prosecution. Chief among them was Charles I. Spiesel, a New York accountant presented by Garrison's men as a surprise witness. He told of a June 1963 party in the French Quarter where, he said, Ferrie and Shaw talked freely about why Kennedy should be killed and how it could be done.

On cross-examination, it turned out that Spiesel, a short balding man in his fifties, had filed civil suits demanding millions of dollars from New York police, the Pinkerton detective agency, a psychiatrist and others, for conspiring to keep him under hypnosis and torture him until confidential information had been extracted. He estimated that 50 to 60 enemies had hypnotized him in the past few years, planting wild ideas in his head. It took jurors less than an hour to find Shaw not guilty.

How does Oliver Stone explain this and still make it a heroic Garrisonian struggle against the feds? Well, for one thing, the script eliminates Perry Russo; he doesn't exist. That is certainly a convenient device. I can remember conversations with Russo in June 1967. He invited me to bribe him to disclose "weaknesses" in his testimony.

"If you say anything about this," Russo added, "I'm going to have to call you a liar." I wrote a story about it anyway. Garrison showed no interest in it, at least none that I know about. But some two weeks later, he accused Walter Sheridan of NBC of "public bribery" for what appears to have been a similar set of conversations with Russo. Of course, nothing ever came of the charges.

For Stone, the dilemma is clear. The Shaw trial was a disaster, so the movie needed a villain to explain it away, a double agent on the DA's staff. Get ready to meet Bill Boxley, a very strange case indeed. He is also conveniently dead. He can't sue.

Dead Man on the Grassy Knoll

In Oliver Stone's script, Bill Boxley is depicted as an insidious insider who keeps scoffing at the idea of a conspiracy on the part of intelligence community. At one point, Boxley tells Garrison he could buy the idea that the Mafia did it "a hell of a lot easier," then walks out when Garrison insists that "this was a military-style ambush from start to finish... a coup d'etat with Lyndon waiting in

the wings."

"You're losing your marbles, chief," screenwriter Stone has the faithless Boxley saying.

Boxley's real name was William C. Wood, a gun-toting, former CIA officer who was forced to leave the agency in 1953 because of alcoholism. A sometime journalist, salesman and private detective, he became interested in the investigation as an editor of a Texas weekly and was eagerly signed up by Garrison in May 1967 as a special investigator. Garrison gave him the alias of Boxley "to keep it quiet that we had a former agency man aboard." He saw in Wood/Boxley a chance to understand the "mentality of the agency."

The two grew quite close, but about 18 months later, Garrison fired him. The DA attributed Boxley's abrupt dismissal in a press release to "evidence recently developed by the District Attorney's staff [that] indicated cur-

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rent activity by him as an operative of the Central Intelligence Agency."

What Garrison didn't say then, or in his book, was that he was, with Boxley's help, about to indict for Kennedy's November 1963 murder a man who had committed suicide in August 1962.

That's right. Garrison, in his Alice-in-Wonderland world, was convinced that a construction worker named Robert L. Perrin was "the man on the grassy knoll" who really shot JFK. He just wouldn't believe that Perrin was dead, even though a Louisiana state police employee who knew Perrin identified his arsenic-laden corpse. The dutiful Boxley dredged up some downstairs neighbors who had never had a close look at Perrin to say they didn't recognize the morgue photo.

From there, the plot thickened. Neighbors identified one of the men in the celebrated "tramp photo" as someone who lived right across the hall from the man who was—or wasn't—Perrin!

Every student of the assassination knows about the three "tramps," probably local winos. They may have been guilty of mopery, but they had nothing to do with the assassination. They were found in a boxcar three blocks away, still hanging around 90 minutes after Kennedy was killed, and then were marched by police across the tracks in front of the Book Depository. They have been suspects ever since—"positively" identified as anyone and everyone from Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt to LBJ's farm manager. "You have no



MARTIN KOZLOWSKI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

idea of what's happened to those three poor men," says author Harold Weisberg.

According to Weisberg, who worked closely with Garrison and his staff until he became disgusted with the inquiry, Garrison was bent on indicting Perrin and the "tramps" on Nov 22, 1968, to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the assassination. The DA's regular staff, alarmed that their boss was about to blow himself out of the water, tried to talk him out of it, but all they could do was win a delay and appeal to Weisberg for help.

"Almost all of Boxley's nuttiness was feedback," Weisberg says. "He'd go out and make up the evidence to suit Garrison's theories."

Weisberg flew to New Orleans, holed himself up in the DA's office and wrote a lengthy report demolishing Boxley's claims. He also brought with him Philadelphia lawyer Vincent Salandria, an assassination critic full of far-out theories whom Garrison regarded highly. While Weisberg worked, Salandria met with Garrison to convince him that Boxley was "sent in by the CIA to destroy Garrison."

"I would see anybody trying to destroy Garrison as a CIA agent," Salandria recalled in a recent telephone interview. "In fact, I saw CIA when Oswald was killed by [Jack] Ruby. Even before. That weekend, I said if a Jew comes in and kills Oswald—and I'm not being antisemitic, I'm married to a Jew—but if a Jew comes in and kills Oswald, then it's CIA."

"I never met Boxley," Salandria told me. "I based my conclusions on standard operating procedure for intelligence agencies."

In the script, Garrison gets the news about Boxley from one of his prosecutors with the Shaw trial about to begin: "He [Boxley]'s working for the federal government," the aide tells Garrison. "It means they have everything, Jim. All our witnesses, our strategy for the trial." This serves as the excuse for the disastrous testimony of Charles Spiesel. "He was one of Boxley's witnesses, Chief," the Stone script quotes one of Garrison's prosecutors as saying. "I'm sorry. He was totally sane when we talked."

In fact, Boxley had nothing to do with Spiesel or his comeuppance. And there is no evidence that Boxley was working for the feds. But for Garrison, facts were irrelevant once he seized on an idea, as he demonstrated for his staff the day after Boxley was fired.

"It was a bizarre scene," Weisberg recalls. "Salandria was making a speech about how Leon Trotsky was killed. Garrison had a blackboard. He drew a map of the United States on it and gave a geographical dissertation on 'the seats of the conspiracy.' Up in the Pacific Northwest, he had a mark for the Boeing Co. Then there was Dallas for [oilman] H. L. Hunt. In New Orleans, there was the Michoud plant [Chrysler Aerospace]. Then there was Marietta, Georgia, for Lockheed."

They All Killed JFK

So who killed Jack Kennedy according to Oliver Stone? And why?

The script mentions a variety of scenarios, but the one given the most weight turns on a crossfire of five or more shots from the Book Depository, the rooftop of the County Records Building, sometimes the Dal-Tex Building and, of course, "the grassy knoll."

The fatal shot is the fifth one, fired not by Lee Harvey Oswald, but from the knoll by a uniformed Dallas policeman, standing behind a picket fence. "Badgeman!"

"Possibly, 'Badgeman's' been infiltrated from military intelligence into the Dallas Police Department," the screenplay for Kevin "Garrison" Costner says at one point. "Or maybe he was just a fake cop, who knows?"

Oswald doesn't pull a trigger. He's putzing around at the Coke machine in the second-floor lunchroom of the Book Depository.

So who's upstairs in the sixth-floor sniper's lair? Some Cubans, it seems. "One of them is Bull," seen earlier muscling some medicine down Ferrie's throat. "Indian," the other fragment of the Ferrie attack, is on the rooftop of the County Records Building. Then there are the "grassy knoll shooters," setting up a triangle of fire.

In some takes, there are as many as seven shots tossed in as Costner-Garrison intones, "it's possible even a sixth shot takes the president in the rear of the head... a seventh shot hits Connally again."

The plethora of bullets comes as a surprise to the acoustics experts who studied a police recording of the noises in Dealey Plaza for the House Assassinations Committee in 1978. In findings that were later disputed by the FBI, the Dallas police and a panel of the National Academy of Sciences—but that still seem more plausible than any of the criticisms—the experts concluded that there was indeed a fourth shot from "the grassy knoll." Trajectory and other tests indicated strongly that it

missed the presidential limousine.

"There is absolutely no [acoustical] evidence of a fifth shot," says Mark Weiss, one of the acoustics experts.

"The likelihood of there being five shots was so small that I didn't count it," said James Barger, another House committee expert.

The idea of a police officer firing from the knoll, hit or miss, stems from a picture taken from the other side of Elm Street by a bystander, Mary Moorman, just as the fatal bullet blew the president's head apart.

In the background, behind the picket fence, the picture fades into foliage that looks like an ink blot. But if you look closely at blowups developed by two assassination researchers, Gary Mack and Jack White, and stare long enough, you can make out what could be a face, a light spot that could be a puff of smoke, and even what might be—keep staring—part of a shoulder patch.

The trouble is, this spot is too far away from the point at which the House acoustics tests place the "grassy knoll" shot.

In Stone's script, however, nothing succeeds like excess. He not only has "Badgeman" killing Kennedy, he has him handing off his rifle to someone else who hands it off to someone else who—gasp!—"looks like one of the hobos" who puts it in a tool box.

Key advisers to Stone in the making of the movie are three founding directors of a for-profit assassination museum in Dallas. They seem never to have met a conspiracy theory they didn't like. It was the center that, about a year ago, unveiled the preposterous story of Ricky White, a 29-year-old salesman who claimed that his father, a former Dallas police

officer, shot the president from the grassy knoll on orders from the CIA. White said that in a diary his father kept—later pilfered by the FBI, of course—his father said it was he, and not Lee Harvey Oswald, who killed Dallas police officer J.D. Tippit.

Oliver Stone met with Ricky White last year. Publicist Jaffe insists the story was rejected, but the movie's script offers a scene showing Oswald, Tippit and "Badgeman" riding together in a patrol car. They argue. "Badgeman shoots Tippit. Oswald gets away," the script has Garrison intoning as the scene shifts to the Shaw trial. "I admit it's just a theory, but it gets to the source of some of the confusion here."

Since this is Oliver Stone, the "why" of the assassination should come as no surprise. It's Vietnam, of course. In a peroration that might have been written by Garrison himself, DA Costner assails the murder as "a coup d'etat"—hold your breath—ordered up by "a shadow government consisting of corrupt men at the highest levels of the Pentagon, the in-

telligence establishment and the giant multinational corporations," carried out by elements of the intelligence community and covered up "by like-minded individuals in the Dallas Police Department, the Secret Service, the FBI and the White House—all the way up to and including J. Edgar Hoover and Lyndon Johnson whom I consider accomplices after the fact."

The screenplay ends the Sunday Oswald was killed with a White House scene of Johnson meeting with his Vietnam advisors. "He signs something unseen" and tells them: "Gentlemen, I want you to know I'm personally committed to Vietnam. I'm not going to take one soldier out of there till they know we mean business in Asia."

That is nonsense. In a memo LBJ signed after that Sunday meeting, he explicitly stated that the 1,000 troop withdrawal would be carried out. And it was. There was no abrupt change in Vietnam policy after JFK's death.

Lunch With Kevin Costner

The tab was on Oliver Stone, so Pershing Gervais ordered the most expensive items on the menu. It was late March and Gervais, once Jim Garrison's chief investigator, had agreed to come to New Orleans for a chat with Stone and Kevin Costner.

Gervais says he tried to give Costner some friendly advice. "I told him, 'You look like a nice fella. You got a reputation for being a real good actor. But you're going to have to be superb to play an [expletive] like Garrison.'"

Costner just shrugged. "Costner said, 'Nobody in America believes Oswald did it,' Gervais recalled. "I said, 'I'll show how dumb I am. I think it was him. The first time I saw Oswald's smirking face on television, after he was arrested, I knew it was him.'"

Gervais is in the minority, however, and has been for years. A Washington Post poll this month showed that 56 percent of the American public thinks the assassination was the result of a conspiracy (down from 66 percent at the height of the Garrison investigation). Only 19 percent think Oswald was acting on his own, as the Warren Commission concluded years ago. Of those who thought there was a conspiracy, 36 percent said Oswald fired the shots, while 49 percent said he was set up by others and did not fire any shots at all.

Stone, who is reportedly revising the script as he goes along, will begin filming in New Orleans shortly, taking his star-studded cast with him. It includes Sissy Spacek, John Candy, Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon.

All the hoopla, of course, will obscure the absurdities, and palpable untruths in Garrison's book and Stone's rendition of it.

"I keep remembering, Stone said to me, 'I'm in this to make a buck,'" Gervais declared. "I

thought, "That sounds like an apology."

Longtime Dallas DA Henry Wade, now in private practice, said he thought the Republic would survive in any case. The last movie he saw in a real theater was Mark Lane's muddled stew of fact and fiction about the assassination, "Executive Action," in 1973.

"It was wild as far as the facts were concerned," he said, "and it didn't win any Oscars I've always thought that the public, whether young or old, are smarter than they get credit for."

Staff researchers Cathy Wall and Ralph Gaillard Jr. contributed to this report.