

... Or Just a Sloppy Mess?

Facts Speak for Themselves but Stone Doesn't Seem to Know Them

By George Lardner

THE BEST thing that can be said about Oliver Stone's letter is that he is not a careful reader of *The Washington Post*. He accuses us of still believing the Warren Commission down the line, of standing by "in silence" while agencies we cover for the public "allowed evidence of a crime and historical documents . . . to be stolen or destroyed." Since Stone offers no particulars, it is impossible to tell what he means. The only incident that comes to mind is the time a CIA officer rifled through files of the House assassinations committee. But I disclosed that episode in *The Post* in 1979.

Stone complains that his film has to rely on "bits and pieces of information" because so much is locked up. This is silly. Warren Commission records began to be made public in the mid-'60s. Hundreds of thousands of pages have been released since then. These included records that, *The Post* reported in 1977, showed the FBI to be "more interested in investigating the motives and affiliations of its critics than in pursuing contradictions offered by the evidence at the scene of the crime."

After noting darkly that I have "covered government intelligence activities" for *The Post*, Stone says I "admit" in the *Outlook* article "to obtaining a confidential first draft of the script." The script is about as confidential as a press release. My copy, as I wrote, came from Harold Weisberg, a longtime critic of the Warren Commission. As Stone should know, many copies are floating about. One reporter told me he got a copy from a New York literary agent.

Let me take his other points one at a time:

■ *David Ferrie's death*: Ferrie, a target of former New Orleans DA Jim Garrison's investigation, was found dead in his apartment on Feb. 22, 1967 around 11 a.m. I was probably the last man to see Ferrie alive. Is Stone suggesting that I interviewed a dead man? In fact, the coroner originally said Ferrie died around midnight, then redid that aspect of the autopsy after I told him he was wrong. "This man died a natural death," the coroner, Dr. Nicholas Chetta, declared several times in concluding Ferrie, who suffered from hypertension, died from a cerebral hemorrhage.

It is, of course, true that the House assassinations committee may have "heard testimony" about Ferrie and the CIA. It may also have "heard" that Kennedy was killed from a UFO. Ferrie was involved in anti-Castro activities, a fact widely reported at the time, but there is no proof that he worked for the CIA.

■ *The Shaw verdict*: Stone maintains that "the larger accomplishment" of the Clay Shaw travesty was that the jurors were convinced there had been a conspiracy to kill the president. Who needed a trial for that? A Harris poll almost two years earlier showed that two of three Americans believed the same thing. As for Shaw's "associations" with the CIA, he was a widely traveled businessman who had occasional contacts with the CIA's Domestic Contact Service. Does that make him an assassin?

I never suggested that Perry Russo was "the only witness to link Shaw, Ferrie and [Lee Harvey] Oswald." I said he was Garrison's key witness for a conspiratorial discussion the trio allegedly had and that Russo dragged Shaw into it after prompting by a hypnotist. Stone's script, at least the one he started with, eliminates Perry Russo. I'm not surprised.

■ *The hobo photos*: As for the so-called "tramps," Weisberg points out that two independent investigations, undertaken in 1968 to establish the facts of the tramps' apprehension, showed that they had taken refuge in the boxcar to get drunk and that the only reason they were photographed in front of the Book Depository was that it was the only way for police to walk them out of the yard without heisting them up to a loading dock behind the Central Annex Post Office. Stone's account of Sgt. D.V. Harkness's testimony is wrong; Harkness told the Warren Commission nothing about when and where in the railroad yard the "tramps" were picked up. Stone sees "no justification" for the failure of the Dallas police to get the men's names. But even if they had, conspiracy theorists would just insist the men had lied about who they were.

■ *Vietnam policy*: Stone, in his script, has Lyndon Johnson meeting with his Vietnam advisers two days after the assassination, countermanding JFK's order to withdraw 1,000 military personnel from Vietnam by the end of 1963. I called the scene "nonsense" and said the LBJ memo after the meeting ordered the withdrawal to be carried out. Let me quote from NSAM No. 273: "The objectives of the United States with respect to the withdrawal of U.S. military personnel remain as stated in the White House statement of Oct. 2, 1963 [approving among other things 'plans to withdraw 1,000 military personnel by the end of 1963.']" Historian Gibbons told me the withdrawal did take place and was offset in succeeding months.

"Kennedy, if he had carried it out, would have done it just as Johnson did it," Gibbons said. He added that the withdrawal "was never more than a device . . . a way of putting pressure on the [South] Vietnamese" to take up more of the burden. "Any thought that it had anything to do with getting out, withdrawing entirely," Gibbons said, "is absurd."

■ *Pershing Gervais*: Garrison's book "demonstrates" nothing but a facility for gothic fiction. Gervais, incidentally, says he would be "delighted" to take a polygraph test on whether he tried to frame Garrison—and on any other points in dispute.

■ *Where Oswald was*: Stone did change his response on this after I pointed out errors in his original reply, but he still misinterprets a descriptive paragraph in my May 19 article as an assertion as to where Oswald was, or wasn't, at the time of the shooting.

■ *Acoustics evidence*: Acoustics experts for the House assassinations committee found six impulse patterns that could have been rifle shots because they passed "preliminary screening tests." Stone transforms this into proof positive. "Certainly, nothing I ever did or said would have supported his [Stone's] certainty," one of the experts, James Barger, told me. The experts concluded that there were four shots: three from the Book Depository and one from the "grassy knoll."

It is typical of Stone's confusion that at one point he accuses us of adhering to the Warren Commission and later says my *Outlook* article was "the first time *The Post* has printed that there were four shots." I reported on that finding in several front-page stories in 1978; it was subsequently the subject of numerous stories in *The Post*, including articles highlighting the committee's finding that Kennedy was "probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy."

On a more personal note: My acknowledgement that a probable conspiracy took place is not an acknowledgement that Garrison's investigation was anything but a fraud. And no amount of screenwriting can change that fact. Stone claims an interest in history. Why is he so sloppy with it?