

an amusing - if less
than honest memoir.

Was Sirhan Sirhan on the Grassy Knoll?

by Tom Bethell

My most vivid recollection of Jones Harris is that he always wore a straw hat. Even indoors he seemed to prefer to keep it on. That, and the fact that he never would write anything down on paper. On that score, I remember D.A. Jim Garrison, my boss, once saying that we didn't even have a sample of Jones' handwriting.

This disinclination on Jones' part to write anything down was most uncharacteristic of conspiratorialists—a deliberately convoluted word I have coined—most of whom were, as far as I could tell, highly prolific memo and letter writers. And working for Jim Garrison, as I then was, on his ill-fated Kennedy assassination investigation, I met most of the conspiratorialists of those years. Jones Harris was one who remains in my mind.

That was in 1967 and 1968. Now, seven years later, there seems to be a widespread return to the same vein of conspiracy thinking, mostly dealing with the possibility that one or another of the assassinations in recent years was committed at the instigation

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of conspirators who (we are led to suppose) did not have the best interests of the United States at heart.

"Slaying, Watergate Link Claimed," says a headline in an issue of last month's *Dallas Times Herald*. The slaying is that of John Kennedy, and the "link" is alleged by members of something called Assassination Information Bureau, "based in Cambridge, Mass." "Who Shot Robert Kennedy?" *Harper's* inquires on its cover, and the accompanying article by Betsy Langman and Alexander Cockburn suggests that the answer may not be just old Sirhan Sirhan. The Martin Luther King case has received the attention of Ron Rosenbaum in *The Village Voice*, in an article devoted primarily to expounding assassination buff Harold Weisberg's view that James Earl Ray was "framed."

The Realist, a once-amusing monthly put out by Paul Krassner, devotes an entire issue to Mae Brussell's "Conspiracy Newsletter" (How I do remember her from my Garrison days!). And interviewed in a recent issue of *Rolling Stone*, Norman Mailer says: "I have come around again to the thesis that Marilyn

[Monroe] was murdered." This supposed murder, Mailer believes, might have become "larger in its seeming implications than Watergate"—had it been discovered. Mailer's explication of what the motive of the murderers might have been is as convoluted as the word conspiratorialist.

I will cite just one other example—an article by Gore Vidal in the December 13, 1973, issue of *The New York Review of Books* about the writings of E. Howard Hunt. Somewhat presumptuously, I feel, Vidal asks at one point: "Since it is now clear to everyone except perhaps Earl Warren that Oswald was part of a conspiracy, who were his fellow conspirators?" Vidal's article makes for amusing reading, but it is clear that he, too, is enmeshed in the nets of conspiratorialism.

Reading through all this and other material—some of it by, or dealing with, the same people I knew back in my Garrison days—has brought to mind some of my weird experiences with the Jolly Green Giant, as Garrison was called by friend and foe. Perhaps, by saying something about my memories of when I was connected with this bizarre investigation, I can shed some light on the apparently revived interest in conspiracies.

Making the Simple Complex

First a word about how it all ended for me. Garrison saw Kennedy assassination conspiracies high and low. After a while it became clearer and clearer that he had no case at all against Clay Shaw, the man he had charged with conspiracy to assassinate the President (Shaw, incidentally, died of cancer in New Orleans last year); and I ended up betraying Garrison to Shaw's attorneys.

There is no "discovery law" in Louisiana, which means that the prosecution (us) can introduce surprise witnesses into the trial without forewarning. In this instance, Garrison was preparing to put on the stand a

witness who, apart from testifying that he had heard Shaw discussing assassinating Kennedy, was under the impression that the government stole into his house from time to time and substituted "dead ringers" for his children, who then spied on him. (To foil the government, he periodically fingerprinted his children.) Needless to say, Garrison's people were not anxious for the man's eccentricity to emerge in testimony, and thus wanted the defense to have as little time as possible to uncover it. When I discovered that Garrison was indeed planning to put this man on the witness stand (as he in fact did, indicating better than anything else the shortcomings of his case), I decided that the time had come to turn the necessary information over to Shaw. For my perfidy I was charged by Garrison with "unauthorized use of movable goods," a charge that was never brought to trial and has since been dropped.

I promptly fell into disfavor with Jones Harris and other conspiratorialists. Some of them, I later heard, automatically relegated me to CIA status. Nevertheless, I always considered Jones a charming fellow, and he demonstrated the first quality of conspiratorialists that I want to bring out: their love of complexity.

Jones Harris, the son of Broadway producer Jed Harris and actress Ruth Gordon, seemed to know personally everyone you had ever heard of in New York, and it was through him that, in swift succession, I had lunch with *New York Review* editor Robert Silvers, dinner with Norman Mailer, and tea with Lady Jean Campbell, Lord Beaverbrook's granddaughter and Norman Mailer's third wife. Later I read in *The New York Times* that Jones married a Vanderbilt and at the reception described himself to a *Times* reporter as a "freelance researcher." That is exactly what he was when I first met him.

He had arrived in New Orleans on one of his frequent investigative jaunts with Richard Popkin, professor of

philosophy at the University of California in San Diego and the author of a highly implausible book called *The Second Oswald*, which may be briefly summarized as follows:

In the course of its investigation, the Warren Commission produced evidence that Lee Harvey Oswald was in two places at once—manifestly impossible. Although most, if not all, of this contradictory evidence was either fleeting observation or from unreliable witnesses, and thus could be dismissed as cases of mistaken identity (it would be surprising if some such evidence did not emerge in the course of so wide-ranging and well-publicized a case), Popkin chose to postulate that there were two Oswalds.

No matter. I remember once having dinner with Jones in the Pontchartrain Hotel in New Orleans and outlining this and other difficulties concerning the “second Oswald” theory. Jones replied perfectly seriously, “There were three Oswalds, you know.” My mouth must have fallen open. “And two Jack Rubys,” he added for good measure. I think it must have been around that time that I began to give serious consideration to the possibility that Oswald shot the President all alone and unaided.

The Round Earth Conspiracy

The extraordinary complexity involved—three Oswalds!—is a fundamental characteristic of conspiratorial reasoning. Philosophers like to point out that any belief, more or less, can be sustained if the believer is willing to encrust his belief with enough assumptions; the only problem is that the resulting theory starts to look very complicated compared to much simpler alternatives readily at hand. It is an important principle of philosophy (although one little valued in assassination conspiracy circles) that the simple explanation should be preferred to the complicated one.

The paradigmatic base is that of

the two rival models of the solar system: do the sun and planets go around the earth? Or vice versa? Because there is no absolute and fixed point in space, it is possible to argue the question. But the description of the paths followed by the planets if they encircle the earth is very complex; whereas the Copernican model—ellipses—is simple. Thus, it is argued, the Copernican model is true. In this instance the criterion of simplicity acts as a final court of appeal in the establishment of truth.

Consider another famous case. Is the earth round or flat? It is possible to argue that it is flat and yet maintain an appearance of rationality. I once went to a lecture given by a member of the Flat Earth Society, and it was surprising how similar his reasoning was to that of the various conspiracy theorists I have known. A Flat-Earther, for instance, is likely to tell you that the moon landings never really took place, that NASA is collaborating with the CIA to deceive the Russians and the American people. . . . Sound familiar? To believe the earth is flat one must also believe that a large number of people are working assiduously to deceive our minds, and it is, in the end, just so much simpler to conclude that this conspiracy does not exist.

But your average conspiratorialist sees little merit in the argument from a standpoint of simplicity. To accept the simple explanation, he feels, is just simple-minded. Somehow conspiracy theorists seem, above all, determined never to be accused of being naive. Gore Vidal gives this impression in his condescending reference to “most Americans being quite at home with the batty killer who acts alone in order to be on television.” Jones Harris, rather than drop back down to the simple and perhaps rather “naive” hypothesis of one Oswald, tries to rescue the shaky two-Oswald theory by adding on another Oswald.

Some time after this meeting with Jones, I asked him what he was going to do when the Kennedy assassination

mystery began to pall on him. (I did not imagine he would want to go on maneuvering Oswalds and Rubys around in his mind indefinitely.) His answer was illuminating. "Oh," he said, "I expect I'll go back to my earlier studies." What were they about? I asked. "The argument about who wrote Shakespeare's plays," he replied.

I am persuaded that most conspiratorialists share this love of puzzles, conundrums, mysteries, and the unexplained. It's certainly in my background (by the time I was 16 I had read just about all there was to read about the Loch Ness Monster, for example), and it no doubt contributed to my interest in the Kennedy assassination. Other assassination buffs I know have flying saucers as a second string to their bow.

Somewhat to my surprise, I recently heard from a reliable source that Jones Harris is still at work on assassination theories. He is reported to be wrestling with a sort of "unified field" theory, linking most of the assassinations of recent years. Such a unified theory would, of course, not only represent a great breakthrough but would constitute, in a sense, a move in the direction of greater simplicity: instead of four loners, we would have one mastermind. One fears, however, that, just as Einstein discovered insurmountable obstacles in his efforts to unify the theories of gravity and electromagnetism, the obstacles in Jones' path will ultimately prove impossible to overcome.

Maybe They're All In It Together

Another common feature of conspiratorialist thinking is that their theories are, one way or another, irrefutable. I have right-wing friends, for example, who discuss their all-encompassing conspiracy of the Elders of Zion like that. Absolutely anything that happens tends to confirm their belief that the conspiracy is working. Nowadays, I notice, left-wingers discuss the conspiracy of the Rockefeller

family in the same way; and for those who believe in an all-pervasive CIA conspiracy, the fact that the CIA itself is presently being investigated by government agencies is bound to become an integral part of the conspiracy itself.

Vidal, in his discussion of E. Howard Hunt's writings, demonstrates this tendency. At one point he argues that Arthur Bremer's diary was not written by Bremer because it is too literate. Awkward fact that, because much of the diary is illiterate. *That*, of course, is all a part of the scenario: "they" did that, too. Thus both literacy and illiteracy tend to confirm the theory. What, then, could disprove it?

How much appeal these arguments have to Bob Silvers, the editor of the journal in which both Vidal's fairly recent article and Richard Popkin's "Second Oswald" theory were published, I have no way of knowing. But I do know that not long after Jones Harris mentioned his "Three Oswald, Two Ruby" theory, he took me to lunch at P.J. Clarke's in New York, where the big event was to meet and lunch with Bob Silvers.

I should explain that I was not entirely looking forward to this encounter, because by this time Popkin had published in *The New York Review* a second and, I thought, untenable article, which sought to still the raging press criticism of Garrison on the grounds that Garrison had not yet had his day in court. Popkin argued that Garrison *might* have something, so let's wait and see. I was therefore worried about what to say to Silvers if—as I expected—he leaned across to me during lunch and asked me in a "between you and me" sort of way: does Garrison really have anything or not? I imagined Silvers might be concerned to know whether his splashy cover story on Garrison was on target—or all wet.

As it turned out, my fears were groundless. Silvers was a perfect gentleman and didn't ask me any

embarrassing questions. The lunch went off smoothly, with the whole topic of the assassination—perhaps on the “don’t-let’s-talk-shop” principle—rather pointedly ignored. (I am inclined to think as a result of this one encounter, and reading his magazine, that Silvers himself is not a conspiratorialist.)

Three Gunmen on the Grassy Knoll

About this time Jones also introduced me to Lady Jean Campbell, then a New York correspondent for the London *Evening Standard*, who, shortly after the assassination of President Kennedy, had traveled on investigative expeditions to Dallas with Jones Harris. A week or two after having tea with her and Jones Harris in her East Side apartment (was there some arcane Shakespearean talk over tea? I believe so, but I can't be sure), she came to Washington, where I was then staying, and we went off together on our rather hilarious (as it now seems) trip to West Virginia in fruitless search of Kennedy's killers. In retrospect, its denouement was enlightening. The background was this:

Jim Garrison was by this time getting hungry for arrests, an appetite which was then being encouraged by a Philadelphia lawyer named Vincent Salandria. Shortly before the West Virginia trip Salandria came to New Orleans and in front of Garrison's entire assembled staff—and to their dismay—urged the D.A. to go on making more and more arrests before “they” took over the country entirely.

Shortly thereafter Garrison did in fact arrest one Edgar Eugene Bradley on the West Coast, charging him with the same crime as Clay Shaw's—conspiracy to assassinate the President. It was never entirely clear to us in the D.A.'s office whether this was meant to be the same conspiracy as Shaw's or a separate one. Had two entirely separate gangs opened fire simultaneously in Dealey Plaza? That

was unlikely, we decided, although it remained difficult to discern one scrap of evidence on which Bradley had been charged with the crime of the century. (All's well that ends well, however. Later I heard that Garrison and Bradley became good friends, and the D.A. would visit him on his frequent peregrinations to the West Coast—a curious turn of events, but *c'est la vie*.)

Garrison, I think, was annoyed by how little notice the press took of the Bradley arrest, and so, like an addict who finds his previous dose insufficient, he demanded more. I was dispatched to West Virginia to interview—and above all to photograph—one Jack Lawrence, who had been in Dallas on the day of the assassination. He had also worked in the automobile dealership where the “second Oswald” put in one of his ghostly appearances. Lawrence had left work early on the morning of the assassination—he told the FBI he had gone home to rest—and had even parked his car somewhere in the area of the now-infamous “grassy knoll” bordering Dealey Plaza. Some of the salesmen at the automobile agency had told me they thought Lawrence had mentioned something about having been in New Orleans at some point. The plan, therefore, was to get pictures of Jack Lawrence to show to our witnesses in New Orleans (some of whom were remarkably adept at making identifications, especially if they had narcotics or other charges hanging over their heads), and then—who knows—a third conspiracy to assassinate the President might well be in the works.

Before leaving D.C. I rented a camera. It was one of those affairs with a telescopic lens about a foot long. My knowledge of how to use it was only approximate, and, as I fiddled about with the contraption trying to make it work, I remember thinking how sorely I lacked the expertise of the “Agency” boys over at Langley whom Garrison was always expatiating on, and who, no doubt,

have been laboring for months, or years, in her Carmel retreat, for she arrived loaded with weighty parcels and packages of documents precariously knotted together with string, and she proceeded to unfold a chart that more than covered my entire desktop. It delineated in copious detail the relationships among the White Russian community in Dallas. (Oswald had been befriended by one of its members, a geologist named George de Mohrenschildt—suspicious! And don't forget Oswald's wife was Russian.)

Mrs. Brussell reminded me of Margaret Rutherford playing amateur detective in a British thriller; she was obviously proud of her comprehensive and multi-colored chart—which at first (and subsequent) glance seemed to link everyone together like those flow diagrams showing the hierarchies of power in a complex General Motors.

Directory Assistance

In assassination circles, one of the main linkage factors is what Garrison loved to call "propinquity." If two people live near one another, say within four or five blocks, it's suspicious. If they live closer, they are "linked." If they live at opposite ends of the city, get a list of friends of each. Two such friends are almost bound to live in the same block, or even know each other. Presto! The link.

City directories are indispensable tools for conspiratorialists; Garrison would spend hours poring over the New Orleans phone book, totally absorbed by it. One day he looked up at me from his city directory and said: "Sooner or later, because people are lazy, you catch them out on propinquity." He also wrote two memos entitled "Time and Propinquity, Factors in Phase Two," which are, I should think, classics of their kind.

I knew all about propinquity because I had done some so-called investigation in that field during an earlier trip to Dallas. There was

another fellow in the Dallas White Russian community called George Bouhe, who knew de Mohrenschildt, who knew Oswald. . . . A little work with the city directory turned up the fact that Bouhe once lived opposite . . . Jack Ruby. There you have an Oswald-Ruby link based on propinquity.

Would I "check out" this link? The boss was interested, his chief investigator, Louis Ivon, told me. Sure, I said. So I went to the Bouhe address, and there was the house—opposite the Ruby house. (Ruby was dead by this time, and Bouhe might have been too, for all I knew.) I wasn't quite sure if I should hide in the laurel bushes and try to peer into the Bouhe dining room, or what. Eventually I gave up on the whole thing and phoned New Orleans collect.

"Sam Spade here," I said. In the office I was known by the inappropriate code name of Sam Spade—one of Garrison's jokes, I think. Ivon, one of the most laconic and non-committal men I have ever met, answered. "Uh-huh," he said. "Tell the boss I checked out that lead—nothing to it." "Uh-huh." Almost invariably in these cases Garrison would have forgotten all about it anyway and moved on to some other "area", such as the "involvement" of H.L. Hunt (whose code name was "Harry Blue"—for "true blue") in the assassination.

After calling in, my day's work done, I would usually visit my ultra-conservative friends in Dallas—in their case so ultra that they had at one time been members of the Minutemen. Usually they would be in the back room—studying city directories.

This is worth mentioning because it brings out another aspect of conspiratorialism: normal ideological labels do not apply to true conspiracy believers. I know I have spoken here of "left-wing" conspiracies and "right-wing" conspiracies, but this is misleading. True conspiratorialists are on neither the left nor the right, but are united on some other dimension entirely. Garrison was in some ways a

left-wing ideologist (he used to pride himself, for example, on his refusal to discern a Communist conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination, and he mocked J. Edgar Hoover's obsession with Communism, saying that Communists were like unicorns, everyone had heard of them but nobody had ever seen one). Nonetheless he was always on good terms with conspiracy-minded right-wingers, and they with him. When conspiracy discussions really got going, the ideological bent of the participants was cheerfully overlooked; it was unimportant, after all, compared to the joy of discovering linkages, connections, and overlaps. Moreover, in the end all were prepared to agree that the spectral "they" who controlled the nation were inimical to left and right alike.

I think I can hear someone saying at this point, "But sometimes there really are conspiracies." True enough. In fact, a famous conspiracy trial has just been successfully prosecuted in Washington, D.C. The Watergate cover-up was a conspiracy, and has probably occasioned the revived interest in conspiracies, just as the "credibility gap" of seven years ago played a part in arousing interest in conspiracies then. But the point about Watergate is that there was plenty of evidence of conspiracy almost from the word "go." The conspiratoralist, on the other hand, can perceive a conspiracy on no evidence at all. In the most extreme case—the Flat-Earther—the conspiracy is trumped up as a means of enabling him to believe what he wants to believe, namely, the existence of a flat earth.

Putting Together a New Puzzle

In the case of the assassination of President Kennedy there is practically no evidence whatsoever of a conspiracy, and by far the most plausible (and simplest) hypothesis is that a single, unaided assassin—Lee Harvey Oswald—shot the President. Yet the conspiratorialists will believe anything

rather than believe this.

After studying this assassination for a long time an analogy finally occurred to me, but I soon found that it did not appeal to conspiracy theorists. The analogy is that of the jigsaw puzzle.

Reconstructing the assassination, as the FBI did, by interviewing a large number of people, is like reconstructing a picture by putting together a large number of jigsaw puzzle pieces. If one puts these "pieces" together on the hypothesis of a lone assassin, one finds that most of the pieces fit quite well, and only a few pieces have to be discarded (e.g. "second Oswald" pieces.) But, unfortunately, the pieces don't quite fit exactly. There are bad joints here and there (occasioned by faulty memory as much as anything else), and it is these that the conspiratoralist seizes on. He proceeds to discard the entire "lone assassin" puzzle as a result, and proposes a new one involving a conspiracy. His puzzle has, perhaps, the advantage of not having bad joints, but at the expense of the pieces themselves: his puzzle is, in reality, a blank, to be filled in largely by his own imagination.

That is what is wrong with the Langman-Cockburn critique of the Robert Kennedy assassination as published in *Harper's*. They expect all the pieces to fit perfectly—everyone's recollections to be completely consistent—hardly realistic when one is dealing with humans. The suggestion that the imperfect interlocks—whether of ballistics evidence or eyewitness recollection—in any way imply an assassin other than Sirhan Sirhan is, I feel, remarkably foolish.

Be that as it may, my jigsaw puzzle analogy made little headway with the Garrison and the conspiratorialists in his entourage. For them it was precisely the blank puzzle, the *tabula rasa*—that was so much fun to play around with. How well I do remember the interminable conversations about whether this or that person was "involved."

"Hey, what if so-and-so was involved?" one might say.

"Oh, he was involved all right," another would answer with the same confidence with which one might assert that he had brown hair.

"Had to be," a third would add knowingly.

What If Nixon Were "Involved"?

Garrison had such a vivid imagination that he was the acknowledged master of this type of colloquy. He could all but hypnotize his audience. Once, for instance, he not only entertained the dubious proposition that all the residents of the 4900 block of Magazine Street in New Orleans (where Oswald had briefly rented an apartment) were CIA agents, living in "safe houses" owned by the CIA, but even seemed to convince some of his followers for a while that it was true.

I remember having dinner once with Garrison and a few others at a French Quarter restaurant in late 1967. Surprisingly, his mother was with us at the table. A large and imposing woman, she sat at the opposite end of the table from Garrison; Mark Lane, the author of *Rush to Judgment*, was also present.

"What if Walter Jenkins were involved," Garrison said at one point and then proceeded to elaborate on this scenario. "Perhaps I should arrest him. Can you imagine the headlines..." (holding up his hands to indicate the space they would fill).

"Oh, Jim, I think that's a wonderful idea," his mother said.

By the end of the evening I think Garrison had more or less convinced everyone that Jenkins was involved.

But typically, the next day Garrison had forgotten all about it. By then he was playing around with another scenario, this one involving Allen Dulles, who was thought certainly to be "involved." Garrison's plan was to have Dulles arrested along with Gordon Novel, a former employee of Garrison's who had absconded with

some potentially damaging evidence against his former boss. Both Novel and Dulles smoked pipes, and for some reason, Garrison was amusing himself that day by imagining their photos side by side in the papers—both of them solemnly smoking pipes.

After a day or two of this, Garrison would usually retire into the sauna baths of the New Orleans Athletic Club for several days at a stretch. After one such recuperation he returned to my office with a brief one-act play he had written about a zany king who held court wearing roller skates. I was quite touched that he brought it over for my perusal. For a while I kept it in my big filing cabinet along with the files on Lee Harvey Oswald, Clay Shaw, Robert Kennedy (a suspect until his death), the CIA (always known as "the company"), H.L. Hunt, Paramilitary Organizations, Edgar Eugene Bradley, Jack Lawrence, the Minutemen, LBJ, and many, many others. In the end, I believe, the play was lost; or perhaps Garrison retrieved it.

A lot of people have asked me if I think Garrison was crazy. My answer is that he was no crazier than a lot of other people I've known. He was certainly sane enough at the time when, shortly after losing interest in the Kennedy affair, he was twice charged with federal crimes. He displayed great acumen in wriggling free of both indictments. His pre-trial maneuvering was particularly innovative. At one point he had himself indicted by the Orleans Parish Grand Jury and charged with the state version of the federal crime. His plan was to win a speedy acquittal for himself in a compliant state court and then claim "double jeopardy" when the federal trial began. It raised eyebrows even in New Orleans. In 1973 he ran again for reelection as D.A., but narrowly lost, mainly because he didn't bother to campaign. Today he is doing well as a defense attorney, and I'm sure that the whole subject of assassinations has completely faded from his mind.