

12 May 1968

Dear Philippe,

LABRO

New York is grey, wet, and hushed this Sunday morning—a good moment in which to give you a leisurely account of recent events and, by thinking aloud (so to speak), to clarify my own thoughts. It is four years and six months since the Dallas assassination, and it is five weeks and three days since the Memphis assassination. Such enormous and sensational events must, of course, attract all manner of opportunists, egocentric paranoids, and outright charlatans; as well as they preoccupy those who are sober, conscientious, and scrupulous in the attempt to discern that which is true as well as to denounce the demonstrably false. To me, one of the saddest phenomena of this long, long travail has been to witness the transformation of the honest and honorable critics into sycophants and disciples of an arch-charlatan, even into his accomplices in dirty forays into entrapment and railroading of "suspects."

I had a wire, about two weeks ago, from the managing editor of Ramparts, inviting me to serve on a committee of inquiry into the murder of Martin Luther King and asking that a reply be sent as soon as possible by telegram. My earlier experiences with Ramparts gave me great hesitation about accepting this invitation. Early in 1966 Ramparts had written to all the critics of the Warren Report announcing that henceforth, and until the case was finally solved, the magazine would publish critical work every month and thus provide a forum for the researchers to reach the public. Little came of this except a sensational story built around Penn Jones and the "peripheral deaths" together with a "book review" which in reality was a parody of Weisberg's work but which was so deceptive as to be taken literally by a major (but gullible) critic like Salandria, as well as by some pseudo-critics who made laughing-stocks of themselves by incorporating into their published work serious references to the mythical "Leboeuf." Somewhat later, Ramparts did publish one excellent scholarly work ("The Case for Three Assassins"), only next to become an outright press-agent for Garrison. So intense its partisan efforts on behalf of the New Orleans D.A. that Ramparts did not even review my book or Thompson's, but reserved all space on this subject for ludicrous anthologies of far-fetched rumors and conjectures, structuring colossal theories on little but overheated imagination.

With this history in mind, I had little expectation that the committee of inquiry could be serious, and considerable suspicion that it was only another gimmick for the greater glory of Ramparts and/or Garrison. Still, I wired back a conditional acceptance, asking for full details of the membership and plan of action before making a definite decision. You will not be surprised to learn that almost two weeks have gone by, without any further word from Ramparts—which I take as a confirmation of my scepticism.

Meanwhile, I have learned at first hand some details of the events that led up to the arrest and indictment of Kerry Thornley for perjury. You will remember that Thornley served with Oswald in the Marine Corps. One of the California critics sought Thornley out, about 2 or 3 years ago, hoping to get from him information or insight which might have been overlooked by the Warren Commission lawyer who took his testimony. Eventually, it came about that Thornley remembered that Oswald and another Marine had conversed in Russian almost every morning, and that in his effort to recall the identity of the other Russian-speaking Marine, he became convinced for a time that he was John Rene Heindel—whose nickname was "Hidell." The critic in great excitement communicated this information to Garrison, and then put him into direct contact with Thornley. At this point, Garrison worked out a plan to call Heindel before the grand jury, and when he denied that he had conversed with Oswald in Russian during their Marine days, to call Thornley and have him testify that Heindel was the person in question. Then, Heindel would be charged with perjury and, of course, subjected to far more serious suspicion in terms of the assassination

of Kennedy and the framing of Oswald. All this, on Thornley's belief that it was Heindel with whom Oswald had chatted in Russian! At this stage, Garrison was actually visualizing the headlines--not to say, lusting for them. My colleague puts it in these words:

"Garrison would talk about the great news stories that would develop, should such an arrest be made. He would say: 'John R. Heindel, alias "Hidell," was today arrested in New Orleans in the conspiracy investigation being conducted...etc.' "

(At this same time, my colleague raised questions about a different piece of "evidence" claimed by Garrison to constitute a link between Oswald and Ruby—the existence of the same telephone number (Pe 8 1951) in both their papers. My colleague pointed out that it was the number of a Fort Worth television station, protesting that as such it could not constitute a link between Oswald and Ruby. Here is how he reports it in his own words:

"David, stop arguing the defense," (Garrison) would say, raising his voice in a threatening manner. "But what does it mean, Jim? Is there someone at the TV station whom you can prove knew both men?"

"It means whatever the jury decides it means," he would say, with considerable annoyance. "But what do you think, Jim? What is the truth of the matter?"

And then came the shocker, for in reply to that, he stated, with considerable annoyance and contempt: "After the fact, there is no truth; there is only what the jury decides." )

Returning to the Thornley/Heindel affair, with the benefit of Garrison's self-confessed statements about truth as opposed to verdicts, the plan for the entrapment of Heindel suddenly collapsed: upon seeing photographs of Heindel, Thornley realized that he was mistaken and that this was not the Marine with whom Oswald had conversed daily in Russian. At this time, or soon thereafter, Garrison apparently adjusted his scheme so as to make Thornley himself, instead of Heindel, the victim. Harold Weisberg seems to have been instrumental in the new plan, for he was seen in the company of a New Orleans woman who later gave testimony which led to Thornley's indictment for perjury. Barbara Reid, a local "character" said to practice witchcraft and voodoo, testified that she had seen Oswald and Thornley together in a bar or cafe in New Orleans, in the summer of 1963. Thornley denied this (entirely truthfully, in my opinion). And the trap was sprung.

Now, within the last week or so, the same California critic who provided me with a detailed written account of the Thornley affair, has obtained a copy of a letter written on the official stationery of the District Attorney of New Orleans and bearing the official seal. The letter is addressed to a photographic artist and/or designer in Los Angeles. It encloses photographs of Kerry Thornley, and requests that the photographer should experiment with airbrush and other devices and alter Thornley's features to make him look as much as possible like Oswald! This letter is not signed by Garrison: it is signed by a critic who devoted the whole of this third book to an indictment of the Warren Commission and its lawyers for the alteration, cropping, and other trickery with photographic evidence--by Harold Weisberg, author of Photographic Whitewash.

Weisberg no doubt is acting on motives that seem to him to be of the highest and most "moral" character. But the same thing may perhaps be said for some of those who were instrumental in the production of the Warren Report.

Weisberg is by no means the only first-rank critic who has gradually slipped from a high standard of investigative work, and high ethical precepts, into a grey area where reality merges with fantasy and where "ends" are invoked to justify increasingly dubious means. Again, I quote from my California colleague:

Certain critics have apparently egged Garrison on in his venture against Thornley...I recently had a conversation with a critic who is an ACLU attorney on occasion. I pointed out that there was absolutely no "beyond-a-reasonable-doubt" type evidence indicating Kerry's involvement in anything. "Don't give me that civil liberties bull shit," he replied. "We're going after the assassins of President Kennedy."

This man who doesn't want to hear "that civil liberties bull shit" is Vince Salandria, whose pretensions to strict morality and whose excessive goody-goodness caused his merely mortal friends to call him, affectionately, "St. Vincent." Salandria has written to J. D. Thompson recently (Thompson wrote Six Seconds in Dallas, as you know, which argues that JFK was shot in a cross-fire in a carefully planned conspiracy) that he suspects him of being a Government agent and that although he may be doing him an injustice, he will continue to warn others against Thompson. Salandria justifies his course of action by saying, "We live in times which are cruel and likely to get crueler." (letter dated March 22, 1968.)

To go from the serious to the merely ridiculous, have you seen Mark Lane's new book, A Citizen's Dissent? In one chapter, he presents as his own work a critique of a broadcast by Louis Nizer which I sent him when I heard that he was to debate Nizer, on the apparently mistaken premise that Lane was the lesser evil of the two, and for which he thanked me cordially in a letter in which he also promised that my critique would be put to good use. In another chapter, he presents as his own work a similar critique I did of a broadcast by lawyer Jenner, which was published in the March 1967 issue of the Minority of One. When Lane was to tape a TV debate with Jenner and Nizer, he asked me to be present in the studio to advise and assist him, which I did--again on the basis of "lesser of two evils." My presence in the studio together with my niece that evening is reflected, in Lane's new book, in a footnote in which we are described as "members of the studio audience."

I am not going to make any protest to Lane of his pirating of two pieces of my work (which he was careful to alter sufficiently to obviate any charge of literal pirating). But I am writing to him to compliment him on these two sections of his book, saying that they are brilliant and by far the best examples of scholarly analysis to be found in his published work.

Lane's reckless association with Garrison has puzzled many of us who know Lane's alertness to his own interests and wonder why he should risk his reputation by an alliance with such a charlatan. It is not, apparently, from any illusion on Lane's part that Garrison in fact has anything resembling a case. In conversation with another person about the need to guard Garrison's files from outsiders' inspection, Lane winked and let it be clear that he understood that the files had to be protected not because of what they contained, but because they contained nothing. And the remark was made during the same conversation that if anyone should see the files and notice that they contained no evidence, the explanation would be given that the important papers were locked in a safe--again, with winking and conspiratorial laughter. I cannot vouch for this--it was told to me by a person who was present at the time, and it certainly rings true.

Where Lane is concerned, I don't believe that there has been any deterioration of character or investigative intelligence—I have believed for a long time that he is a low creature, though gifted with shrewdness and considerable plausibility. My failure to admire Lane and my refusal to acknowledge his "leadership," in pre-Garrison days, was resented by some of my closest colleagues of that time. They found it possible to condone Lane's liberties with the truth—one even told me (with some affectionate amusement) that after Lane had been told and had acknowledged that the argument about stress signs on the back of the Stemmons road sign in the Zapruder film was invalidated by the recently-established fact that the stress marks were on the film, and not on the road sign, Lane continued to include the alleged phenomenon in his public lectures, on the ground that the audience would not know the difference.

But where others are concerned—Weisberg, Penn Jones, Bill Turner, Salandria, Marcus, Maggie Field, Dick Sprague—how is it possible to understand their tacit or open support of and assistance to a transparent demagogue and persecutor of the innocent like Garrison? I find it impossible personally to understand such wild misjudgment and/or such willing acceptance of methods that are dirtier even than those of the Warren Commission.

Critics of the Warren Report have been maligned as money-grubbers and neurotics and demonologists, by apologists for the Warren Report who could not overcome the critics' charges against the Report and could only resort to malicious slanders by way of counter-attack. I think these charges contemptible and utterly unfounded, for the critics were always transported by strong emotional and intellectual intolerance of the Commission's clumsy lies and its attempt to pervert history. They were remarkably unselfish and unstinting of their money in order to conduct their research or to share information with their colleagues.

The charges that must now be made against most of the first-generation critics are far more serious and more tragic than the ugly insinuations of scavenging made by creeps like Schiller or his housebroken counterpart Sparrow. The charges now are participation in deliberate entrapment, and complete annihilation of all standards of logic and evidence, in service of a ridiculous phoney who could not deceive an intelligent 12-year-old.

Well, dear Philippe, the rain has stopped, and it is time for me to stop, too. Let me hear from you. This letter is purely personal and I hope that you will treat its contents with discretion—as "leads" but not as material for publication.

Yours ever,

