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The Garrison Divertissement

(A review of The Kennedy Conspiracy, by
Paris Flammonde, Meredith Press, 1969)

Paris Flammonde subtitles his book "an uncommissioned report on the Jim Garrison investigation." Uncommissioned it may be; unfavorable, it is not. If Garrison had commissioned a report on his "investigation," it might have turned out a pinch more rhapsodic than The Kennedy Conspiracy; but the only essential difference would probably be found in the motivation of the writer. The uncommissioned book glows with Flammonde's sincere enthusiasm and faith in Garrison and his "case." As a relative newcomer to the ranks of dissenters from the Warren Report, he perhaps has more excuse for gullibility than have the several first-generation critics who, come what may, remain tenacious supporters of the New Orleans District Attorney.

Flammonde explains that, unlike the authors of certain impassioned attacks on or apologies for Garrison, he has tried to be wholly objective, to present the facts clearly and accurately, and to detail all the criticism, positive and negative, of Garrison and his investigation. He fears that "many will view an unweighted presentation as being a favorable one." Undoubtedly his intention was to produce an unweighted presentation; but he failed, and produced one that is totally uncritical. By accepting "facts" that were not facts at all, by equating unsupported or insupportable allegations with demonstrable truth, and by overlooking at times parts of the record which are destructive to his theses, Flammonde has built a structure that leans so precariously toward Garrison and rests on so insubstantial a foundation as to doom it to collapse.

Garrison's charisma seemingly is such that those who come under its influence, however discriminating and sceptical their intelligence, lapse into outright disorder, with all logic, coherence, and method effectively suppressed.

Take, for example, Garrison's absurd remark in his Playboy interview of October 1967 that deLesseps Morrison, then mayor of New Orleans, had introduced Clay Shaw to President Kennedy on an airplane flight in 1963. Obviously President Kennedy was not to be encountered on commercial aircraft during his presidency; nor would a New Orleans businessman, unacquainted with the President, have been a passenger on Air Force One. As Edward Jay Epstein said in his article on Garrison in The New Yorker (July 13, 1968), the statement is a demonstrable falsehood. Flammonde takes issue with Epstein's critique of Garrison, presumably having read it; but his predisposition toward Garrison is such that he faithfully repeats in his book that "Morrison had previously introduced Clay Shaw to President Kennedy on an airplane flight in 1963," seemingly unaware that it is a demonstrable falsehood and that, as I have been told, Garrison has disclaimed ^{it} entirely, ~~the verbatim transcript of his interview in Playboy.~~ ^{although the transcript of his interview in} ~~the verbatim transcript of his interview in Playboy.~~ ^{is verbatim.} ~~is verbatim.~~ Playboy. is verbatim.

More serious is the attempt made in this uncommissioned report to inculcate the late David Ferrie in the assassination of President Kennedy and to demonstrate that the Secret Service (and therefore the federal government) had prior knowledge of Ferrie's involvement. Basing himself on Harold Weisberg's published works, Flammonde points out that the Secret Service asked Marina Oswald on November 24, 1963, if she knew "a Mr. David Farry." (Here he is not faithful to his acknowledged source, which states correctly that the question referred to "a Mr. Farry.") Flammonde argues that the Secret Service question in fact concerned Captain David Ferrie, and that the question was put one day before Ferrie first came to the attention of the Secret Service by reason of his arrest in New Orleans.

The anachronism would be curious, were it real. Flammonde has overlooked one simple fact that removes the incident from the realm of the unexplained and ominous: that a Secret Service report of December 13, 1963 on file in the National Archives states that the Secret Service received a call on November 24, 1963 from an informant who alleged that Ferrie was connected with Oswald and was implicated in the assassination (Richard Popkin, The New York Review of Books, September 14, 1967, page 28, column 1).

The Kennedy Conspiracy unhappily abounds in such examples of incomplete scholarship, as it also seeks to elevate and dignify mere speculation ("it was rumored that he had piloted Oswald...the district attorney's office is supposed to have autopsy photographs...the assertion has been made...it is more than likely that Ferrie could have..." etc.) into an inexorable series of proofs incriminating this or that so-called conspirator accused by Garrison in progressive extravagance (which led a cynical observer to chant, Hey, Hey, Jolly D.A.; how many assassins did you catch today?). All too often, Flammonde tells us that "Garrison has evidence"--evidence which he does not specify, suggest, or vouch for personally. But we have heard from the horse's mouth of that so-called evidence--we have even heard Garrison announce in February 1967 that he had "solved the case" of the assassination --without assuming any obligation to take these boasts as proven. To do so would be the quintessence of folly, given the kind of "evidence" that Garrison has detailed on occasion. His claim that he had decoded a "cryptogram" of Ruby's unlisted phone number in the Oswald and the Clay Shaw address-books (as "PO 19106") disintegrated in the first impact of critical scrutiny and has been characterized, quite justly, as nothing but a variation on the old shall game.

Nevertheless, Mr. Flammonde has devoted four pages of his book to the episode of the so-called code, including a step-by-step guide to the conversion

of "PO 19106" into "Wh 1-5601." Nowhere in those four pages is there a mention of the contention [by critics of the Warren Report who are also critics of Garrison] that the entry in Oswald's book was "DD 19106" (the Cyrillic "D"), that the entry was made while Oswald was in the Soviet Union, years before he could have known Ruby and possibly before Ruby had the Wh 1-5601 phone number. Also omitted are the passages from Garrison's press release on the decoding of "PO 19106" in which he reiterates that the system was rigid and undeviating, although he subsequently used completely different and arbitrary systems to decode the next two alleged cryptograms in Oswald's notebook--the phone numbers of the FBI and the CIA offices in New Orleans. Nor is the fact mentioned that the latter two numbers are published in the New Orleans directory in the first place. This is hardly the promised presentation of "all the criticism, positive and negative" nor is it "unweighted."

If this uncommissioned report has merit, it is found in the reportage of the bedlam of successive events which have ensued since Garrison's activities became known to the public two years ago, and in the sorting out of the bewildering number and variety of characters--usually twice, thrice, or astronomically removed from the actual Dallas tragedy--who have tripped on each other's heels across the stage of Garrison's vaudeville. Even here, there are unfortunate inaccuracies, such as the citation of Senator Richard Russell when it was Senator Russell Long who "expressed grave doubts about the (Warren) Report's conclusions to...Garrison" or the allegation that a slip of paper with General Edwin A. Walker's name and phone number was found in Oswald's possession, when in fact these notations appeared in his address-book.

What is most lamentable about The Kennedy Conspiracy, apart from its infatuation with the fatuous, is that like the Garrison divertissement itself it distracts attention from the genuine problem of what really happened in

Dallas and rechannels energies that should properly be focused there into a dizzying maze of sordid irrelevancies.

The Warren Report was a cunning, sophisticated, ponderous vehicle for falsehood and fraud, whose pseudo-legal and pseudo-scientific pretensions gained it a short-lived credibility. The Garrison "investigation" is a crude parody of the investigative and legal process--blatantly unprofessional, incoherent, blundering, and blustering. An ^{unmesmerized} ~~impartial~~ eye easily recognizes that it is an externalization of megalomania, demagoguery, and frail attachment to reality. But the fact that the Garrison affair is preposterous chicanery in no way invests the Warren Report with validity. Rather, the New Orleans "investigation," by its very absurd and cruel nature, only underlines the urgent need for a responsible, competent, and impartial new inquiry into the unsolved Dallas crimes of November 22-24, 1963.

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