

Jim Garrison; D.A. Challenged JFK Assassi

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Jim Garrison, the single-minded district attorney whose theories about the assassination of John F. Kennedy produced a bizarre trial and inspired a successful film, died Wednesday in New Orleans.

The 24-year veteran of the Louisiana legal community—first as New Orleans district attorney and later as an appellate court judge—was 70.

His death at his New Orleans home was announced in the 4th Circuit Court of Appeal where he had served for 12 years. The cause of death was not listed, but heart trouble forced Garrison to leave the appeals court Nov. 1, 1991, three weeks before his 70th birthday and mandatory retirement age.

In the late 1960s Garrison was hailed as a fearless prosecutor and chastised as a publicity hound for maintaining that the Central Intelligence Agency killed President Kennedy. This was long after the Warren Commission ruled that a single gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald, was the lone assassin.

Years after Garrison's theories had faded from view, Oliver Stone decided to produce a film based on one of Garrison's books, and the imposing 6-foot, 7-inch prosecutor was cast as Earl Warren, the U.S. chief justice who chaired the assassination committee.

Stone's 1991 film, "JFK," was faulted for what critics and historians said were inaccuracies, but was a box office success. It was based on Garrison's third book on the subject, "On the Trail of the Assassins," and featured Kevin Costner as Garrison.

"Jim Garrison was a great American who will be recognized as such in time," Stone said in a statement released by his publicist Wednesday. The Oscar-winning director is currently making a film on location in Thailand.

Dist. Atty. Harry Connick Sr., who unseated Garrison in 1973, said there were strong similarities in the way Stone and Garrison looked at the assassination.



Associated Press

Jim Garrison in 1989

"Stone was either unaware of the details and particulars of the Clay Shaw investigation and trial or, if he was aware, that didn't get in his way of what he perceived to be the way the case should have been," said Connick, father of the entertainer Harry Connick Jr.

Shaw, a New Orleans businessman, was acquitted in 1969 of conspiracy to murder Kennedy.

"That was sort of the aura about Garrison—'We don't care whether there's any evidence or not, it makes a good story,'" Dist. Atty. Connick said. "That's a sad thing."

For three decades Garrison had maintained that the Warren report was put together in haste and was aimed at soothing the American public. Garrison said citizens would have revolted if the truth had been told.

Garrison said Oswald was just one of several "false sponsors"—

people set up in advance of the Kennedy murder to divert attention from the CIA.

The CIA, Garrison contended, wanted Kennedy killed because he was planning a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. Garrison, in a 1989 interview with the Associated Press—the first interview he had granted in nearly 20 years—said he thought Vietnam was a "bad war."

But Garrison never tried to locate any of the "sponsors," saying it would have been a waste of time because they all had pseudonyms.

His interest in the Kennedy killing was sparked, he said, by a deep respect for the President.

"He had ideals. He inspired dreams," Garrison said, adding that he still got tears in his eyes when he read Kennedy's speeches.

Garrison, who had been district attorney in New Orleans for one year when Kennedy was slain Nov. 22, 1963, in Dallas, determined that Oswald had an office in New Orleans near offices of U.S. intelligence agencies.

He began an investigation on the strength of that information, which led to the infamous trial in which Garrison charged Shaw with conspiracy to murder the President.

It was a farcical trial.

Garrison's star witness died under mysterious circumstances. Another of his witnesses, a psychologist, said under cross-examination that he fingerprinted his daughter each time she came home from school to make sure that a spy hadn't taken on her identity. Others refused to say on the stand what they had told investigators.

After 34 days of trial, the jury took less than an hour to acquit Shaw, retired head of the New Orleans International Trade Mart.

Shaw, whose alleged links to the CIA and Oswald were never estab-

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lished, later sued for \$5 million in damages, but it is unclear whether the action came to trial.

Garrison, after his courtroom defeat, turned to writing. The first of his three books, "Heritage of Stone," was a summation of all his assassination theories. His second, "Star-Spangled Contract," was a fictionalized account of conspiracy. His third became Stone's film and placed Garrison, for a time, back in the public eye.

Despite the setback with Shaw, Garrison easily won reelection to a third term.

He was first elected in 1962 as a reform candidate. His poise and confidence coupled with a dominating voice made him an impressive television candidate. Once in office he capitalized on that magnetism by taking TV camera operators and reporters with him on his frequent raids of French Quarter vice palaces.

In 1972 a federal grand jury accused him of taking bribes to protect illegal pinball machines. He

defended himself at his trial and was found innocent, but blamed the case for his defeat when he lost a bid for his fourth term to Connick.

Garrison also lost his next election bid, a campaign for the Louisiana Supreme Court. In 1978, however, he won a seat on the appeals court and was reelected 10 years later.

The son and grandson of lawyers, Jim Garrison was born in Dennison, Iowa, attended public

schools and joined the Army before Pearl Harbor. He flew light planes over Europe during World War II, spotting enemy artillery.

After the war he settled in New Orleans, earned a law degree at Tulane University and went into private practice before becoming an assistant district attorney for New Orleans in 1952.

He is survived by his wife, Leah, whom he married in 1957, and their five children. He is also survived by a sister and a grandchild.