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Kennedy 'Conspiracy' Garrison's Evidence Appraised: Is Flimsy

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NEW ORLEANS — For a nation — and a world — still distressed by the assassination of John F. Kennedy, a new and dismaying chapter is being written here in the murder of the young President.

The central figure is Jim Garrison, political ambitious district attorney of Orleans parish.

He is an enormous man who has a basso profundo, robusto voice and an investigative technique to match. At times, he looks and acts much like the late Sen. Huey P. Long whose Roman circus talents still are remembered fondly in some areas of the state.

Garrison's evidence comes in part from some of the seamiest sides of the New Orleans demi monde. It includes witnesses bedeviled by booze, pills and psychoneuroses — people who believe society has wronged them since birth.

The district attorney's firm intention is to prove that Kennedy's death was planned in New Orleans by anti-Communists, American and Cuban, in retribution for the botched-up Bay of Pigs invasion and for the President's failure to pull down Cuban Premier Fidel Castro.

Garrison's investigation produced its first arrest Wednesday night. Clay Shaw, 54, former managing director of the International Trade Mart at New Orleans, was charged with participating in a conspiracy to murder President Kennedy.

The nature of Shaw's alleged conspiracy was not disclosed, but Garrison promised more arrests would follow.

Whether Garrison can prove his overall case is another matter. At this point, it seems doubtful that the investigation and promised court trials will produce much more than the fact that some Cubans in New Orleans in 1962-63 and some American oddballs did indeed speak wishfully of seeing Kennedy killed

Garrison hopes to prove that Lee Harvey Oswald sat in these sordid councils before going to Dallas where Kennedy was slain. That would be contrary to the Warren Commission conclusion that Oswald was the sole assassin and was not involved in any conspiracy, foreign or domestic.

ANOTHER GUN

Garrison does not believe this. He believes there is a good chance Oswald "didn't kill anybody"; that at most, Oswald may have fired the shots that wounded Gov. John Connally of Texas and hit Kennedy in the throat, but that the killing shot came from another gun, another assassin.

With all respect to the hard-driving, hard-living 45 year old District Attorney, his case so far must be described as flimsy.

In his currently powerful position, he can arrest almost anyone for anything. But proof will come harder, particularly considering the credibility of some of his sources.

EXHAUSTION

Having to work with such informants does not dismay Garrison. He has pushed himself almost to the point of physical and mental exhaustion to complete what he considers a durable case. And he believes he has it.

I spent hours talking with Garrison — in a dignified old restaurant nestled in the city's famous French Quarter and in the book-lined study of his spacious home.

Sipping an incredible mixture of cream soda and gin, the District Attorney seemed wracked by exhaustion and spoke of getting away for a few days to sleep and sunbathe.

If he has any inner doubts about the strength of has

case, he doesn't show it. He exudes scorn for his detractors, of whom there are many in New Orleans.

"We have definitely found out how they killed President Kennedy and we're going to prove it," he told me.

Reminded of his oft-stated promise of forthcoming arrests and convictions, he was asked about timing.

"I'm not going to be stampeded into it," he said. "I'm interested in gathering facts and proving them in court, not in getting premature headlines.

"I'm going to get every last man involved in killing President Kennedy and a number of other persons who, in my judgment, are accessories after the fact."

POLITICAL FORTUNES

History may not be changed appreciably by the Garrison investigation, but it could influence his own political fortunes.

There is considerable talk his friends may push him for Lieutenant Governor this fall. Of such talk, Garrison says, "I couldn't care less."

For those who do not understand the argot of politicians, this is an understatement.

Garrison, who fought this town's criminal court judges to a landmark decision by the U.S. Supreme Court and won, is not overly impressed by the fact that the Warren Commission, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Secret Service and hundreds of state and local police investigators believed Oswald acted alone.

THE COMMISSION

The district attorney is convinced, as are many private citizens here and abroad, that the commission stopped far short of a full inquiry and thus missed the truth.

The moving spirit behind this new investigation is, in fact, highly anti-Washington except for Garrison's warm attitude toward Sen. Russell Long (D-La., whom he says encouraged him to undertake the inquiry.

Garrison would like nothing better than to show up the commission and particularly the FBI, for which he worked as an agent four months in 1952.

FORGETS GUN

The six-foot-six district attorney who packs a revolver under his coat (sometimes he forgets the gun and wears only the holster), refuses acidly to share his inveytigation with the FBI or any other federal agency which failed to turn up the evidence he now has.

"I see no reason to delay this investigation another three years," he said.

What makes Garrison so confident of arrests and convictions in the relatively near future? The Iowa native and 1950 law graduate of Tulane University says his files are overflowing with evidence.

It must be noted, however, that much of this evidence is based on the words and deeds of men and women of known instability.

STOOL PIGEONS

District attorneys, of course, must listen endlessly to stool pigeons, drunks, dope-heads and downright nuts.

Most criminal investigations, however, feature one or more witnesses of reasonable stability whose versions can be used to measure or evaluate evidence offered by others.

If Garrison has any such witnesses, he has kept it a close secret.

Across town from the court house, in a quiet 11th floor office, sits Aaron Kohn, also a former FBI agent who for more than 20 years has specialized in investigating police departments and local law enforcement.

DISLIKE EACH OTHER

Garrison and Kohn have no use for each other. Garrison says, "if there is any organized crime in New Orleans, it is the metropolitan crime commission."

The commission's board of directors includes some of the biggest names in town — from the world of banking and finance, business and education.

Kohn in 1963 wrote to Garrison, suggesting that some of the men who now figure in the district attorney's investigation be placed before a lunacy commission and committed, if possible, to mental hospitals.

The crime commission director feels even more strongly today. As I sat in his office where he had just heard Garrison say in a radio interview that the case was "solved" and arrests would be made shortly, Kohn paced worriedly behind his desk.

Merriam Smith, White House reporter who won the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Kennedy assassination, went to New Orleans last week to look into charges that the murder of the young President involved a conspiracy spawned in Louisiana. Following is his report.

"All tthrough this thing," he said, "there is a pervasive ingredient that needs more attention (at this point) than the assassination of President Kennedy, tragic as it was. And that is emotional illness.

"We treat the victims of this sort of illness like we used to treat cancer. We try to pretend it isn't there."

Shortly after Kennedy was killed, Kohn made a report on certain aspects of the case. His board of directors though so much of it that it was printed in pamphlet form for public distribution. It made this point:

"In New Orleans, as in every major city, there is a lunatic fringe, combining intelligence with distorted emotions. Some of them became identifiable through active evidence of destructive hate. Which of them is incapable of duplicating the shocking acts of Oswald and (Jack) Ruby?"

Kohn also has his detrac-

tors. He has stepped on a number of well-polished toes. Also, there have been times when he seemed to support Garrison, or remained silent when Garrison did something with which prominent members of the community disagreed strongly.

DISAPPROVAL

There is no question today, however, of Kohn approving of anything Garrison does, particularly in connection with his current investigation.

What about Garrison's future?

During these hectic days, his admirers express confidence he will make it all the way to the governor's chair in Baton Rouge.

Some 50 or more prosperous businessmen, largely in oil and automobiles, are collecting a special fund with which Garrison can finance his investigation without using public money.

They call it "Truth and Consequences, Inc."

More enthusiastic Garrison people see beyond the governorship.

WHALE-MAKER

In any case, it is difficult to be coldly objective about Garrison's current activities. He says himself that minnows become whales as one source or another breaks into print with an allegedly new development. Whatever his intentions, Garrison is something of a whale-maker himself.

Almost daily, Garrison vows to say nothing more for publication until he is ready to present an iron-clad case. And almost daily, he has something more to say.

He admits this with a chuckle.

He alternates in praise and criticism of the FBI and the Warren Commission.

Meantime, the case has a long way to go if Garrison is to be hailed as the man who revised history. He might be able to make some relatively minor arrests and get relatively minor convictions.