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Memo to Ben Bradlee, Meg Greenfield

From George Lardner

Re Oliver Stone Missive

May 23, 1991

¶Oliver Stone asserted in a cover note to Ben Bradlee that in my article last Sunday, "Dallas in Wonderland," I had tried to "ruin[his] reputation as a serious filmmaker." Nothing could be farther from the truth. If he feels his reputation is in jeopardy, it is a self-inflicted wound. I didn't tell him to use Jim Garrison's investigation, or his book, as the basis for a movie. Garrison titled his book, "On The Trail of the Assassins." That was one trail he never took.

¶The best thing that can be said about Stone's letter is that he is not a careful reader of The Washington Post. He accuses us of ^{still} believing the Warren Commission down the line, of supporting a Commission decision to suppress its own records, of standing by "in silence" while agencies we cover for the public "allowed evidence of a crime and historical documents...to be stolen or destroyed." On one page, he says we believe only three shots were fired. On another page, he says last Sunday's article represented "the first time The Post has printed that there were four shots."

¶Simply put, Stone is, throughout the letter, tediously, repetitively wrong.

¶He says he is using the Garrison investigation "as the vehicle to explore the various credible assassination theories, and incorporate everything that has been discovered in the twenty years since Garrison's efforts." Garrison's investigation was incredible and no amount of screenwriting can change that fact.

¶Stone says his film is being forced to rely "on bits and pieces of information" because The Post "and the Warren Commission urged that the Commission's material be sealed and kept from the public until the year 2039."

¶This is silly. Warren Commission records, except those withheld under

existing law and regulations, began to be made public in the mid-60s. Some materials were withheld on the grounds that they might defame people, but that was a standing rule applicable to all Federal agencies. Other materials were withheld on grounds of national security, but that was a decision usually made by government agencies, not the Warren Commission, and the courts have usually upheld those claims, no matter how flimsy. The Post reported frequently on legal efforts to obtain the records and was one of the few news organizations to buy and write about the tens of thousands of pages released by the FBI in the late 1970s.

¶Those records showed, as The Post reported on Dec. 8, 1977, that the FBI "seemed more interested in investigating the motives and affiliations of its critics than in pursuing the contradictions offered by the evidence at the scene of the crime."

¶Even before the Warren Commission began its work, the Post gave front-page prominence to a story by its medical writer, the late Nate Haseltine, that proved to be more accurate about where the first bullet hit Kennedy than the Warren Commission turned out to be. In 1966, The Post gave banner headline display to an article about two books highly critical of the Commission's work, "Inquest" by Edward Jay Epstein and "Whitewash" by Harold Weisberg.

¶By now there are literally hundreds of thousands of documents available. Weisberg, for one, has more than a quarter of a million pages in his basement. He says he told Stone's organization they could make copies of whatever they wanted, but they haven't asked for a single page. The House Assassinations Committee did bury many of its records under a time seal, but that bit of maneuvering was disclosed years ago in an article I did for The Post.

¶Stone doesn't know whether to be "shocked or amused" over the fact that that I, a reporter who he notes darkly "has covered government intelligence activities," would find his movie so important as to "admit in his article obtaining a stolen first draft of our script."

¶In fact, most of my writing about government intelligence activities has

concerned its misdeeds and missteps. In any case, my article admitted no theft. I was unaware that any had occurred. I didn't steal the script. I got a copy from Weisberg, as I stated in the article. He says he didn't steal it either. There are, Stone should know, copies floating about all over the country.

¶As for the importance of the movie, I think it's safe to say that more and more Americans are getting their notions of history from movies and TV. Stone calls himself "a cinematic historian," but he has also said that he feels free to change the facts so long as he doesn't "violate the spirit" of a real event (Mother Jones magazine, March/April 1991). The "spirit" as divined, of course, by Oliver Stone.

¶"I'm not doing a school lesson here," he told the Dallas Morning News last month, "and I don't have a documentarian's responsibilities. I have a dramatist's responsibility to an audience. I consider myself a person who's taking history and shaping it in a dramatic way. Like Shakespeare shaped Henry V..."

¶I thought it was important, for real history's sake, to take a look at what Stone was doing.

¶Stone claims that "The Washington Post, and Lardner in particular, have stood by in silence, while agencies you cover for the public (the CIA and FBI) have allowed evidence of a crime and historical documents significant to our history to be stolen or destroyed."

¶Hogwash. Since Stone offers no particulars, it is impossible to tell what he's talking about. Perhaps he could tell us what was stolen. The only incident that comes to mind is the time a CIA officer rifled through files of the House Assassinations Committee, including autopsy photos of the head shot that killed Kennedy? Apparently nothing was taken, but the episode did involve a surreptitious entry. Surely, Stone can't be talking about that incident. I disclosed it in The Post in 1979.

¶My article didn't ridicule Garrison for thinking the Warren Commission failed to tell the "truth" about the assassination, but for insisting that it was within his grasp. And it did not depict Weisberg as "anti-conspiracy." Weisberg thinks there was a conspiracy, but, as I reported, he has "little patience for

many of the conspiracy theories that keep popping up." Stone confuses the question of whether or not there was a conspiracy with the question of who the conspirators were and how they did it. Stone calls Garrison "a protagonist of merit," but his biggest accomplishment was to give criticism of the Warren Report a bad name.

¶Now to my presentation of "the facts":

¶Stone says that I was "the last man we know of" to see David Ferrie, a target of Garrison's investigation, alive. He was found dead in his apartment on Feb. 22, 1967 around 11 a.m. Stone says that I "claim" to have left Ferrie's apartment around 4 a.m., then notes that the coroner claimed Ferrie had died before that.

¶I'm not sure what Stone is saying here. Is he suggesting that I interviewed a dead man? In fact, the coroner originally said Ferrie died around midnight, then redid that aspect of the autopsy after I told him he was wrong. Stone makes much of the 15 bottles of medicine Ferrie had around his flat, but the coroner said they were examined thoroughly and no signs of them were found in tests of Ferrie's blood, urine and lip tissue.

¶"This man died a natural death," the coroner, Dr. Nicholas Chetta, declared several times in concluding Ferrie, who suffered from hypertension, died from a cerebral hemorrhage. "I sound repetitious. I mean to be."

¶Of Ferrie, Stone also writes that the House Assassinations Committee "heard testimony that Ferrie worked for the CIA." It may have "heard testimony" that Kennedy was killed from a UFO, too. Ferrie was involved in anti-Castro activities, a fact widely reported at the time, but there is no proof that he worked for the CIA.

¶Stone seems to see some significance in the fact that I described Ferrie las Sunday as a "vain, nervous flight school instructor," but told Garrison's office back in 1967 that he was "an intelligent, well-versed guy on a broad range of subjects." The two descriptions are not contradictory. I also described Ferrie 1

years ago (Outlook, April 2, 1967) as--guess what?--"a vain, nervous pilot."

¶ Casting aside the not guilty verdict in the conspiracy case Garrison brought against New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw, Stone maintains that the "the larger accomplishment" of that travesty was that the jurors were convinced there had been a conspiracy to kill the President. Shaw didn't need to be put through the grinder of a 34-day trial for that. A Harris poll almost two years earlier showed that two of three Americans believed in a conspiracy, in large part because of Garrison's loud--and baseless--claims that he had "solved the assassination of President Kennedy beyond any shadow of a doubt."

¶ "If Garrison had brought anything to light that was factual, he might have performed a public service," says Weisberg who worked closely with Garrison and his investigators until he became disgusted with the inquiry. "But taking to court a case so barren it took the jury less than an hour to issue a unanimous verdict hardly represented service to the American people or to history."

¶ Stone faults me for "ignoring" Shaw's "associations" with the CIA and questionable connections in Europe. Former managing director of New Orleans International Trade Mart, Shaw was a widely traveled businessman who had contacts from time to time with the CIA's Domestic Contact Service. So what? Does that make him an assassin? Stone also accuses me of suggesting Perry Russo was "the only witness to link Shaw, Ferrie and [Lee Harvey] Oswald." I suggested no such thing. I said that he was the Garrison's key witness for a conspiratorial discussion the trio allegedly had and that Russo dragged Shaw into it after prompting by a hypnotist. Stone's script, at least the one he started with, eliminates Perry Russo. I'm not surprised.

¶ A character named "Bill Boxley" was depicted in Stone's script as a villainous insider who is secretly "working for the Federal government" and undermines Garrison's case. This struck me as unfair to the real-life Boxley, an ex-CIA agent whom Garrison hired in May 1967 to help him understand "the mentality of the Agency" and who dutifully tried to find evidence supporting

Garrison's outlandish theories. Garrison fired him in December 1968 because of "evidence" he was still working for the CIA. There were rumors, groundless ones, but no "evidence." Boxley's sins consisted of working up a case for Garrison that the DA's regular staffers realized was completely untenable.

¶Stone now informs us that his Boxley character has been renamed "Broussard" and is actually "a composite of several characters." But that was no "composite" who was fired by Garrison.

¶I wrote that the three so-called "tramps" plucked from a boxcar by Dallas police long after Kennedy was shot "may have been guilty of moper, but they had nothing to do with the assassination." Stone takes issue with that conclusion, "especially as these men have never been identified." He also claims that Dallas Police Sgt. D. V. Harkness puts the hobos' pickup at about 25-30 minutes after the shooting, instead of 90 minutes as I wrote.

¶Harkness did mention any time of arrest in his testimony, but whether it was half an hour or 90 minutes, the fact is that they were not picked up at the scene of the crime or at the time of the crime. What in the world would assassins be doing hiding in a boxcar in a railroad yard three blocks away so long after the shooting? Waiting for David Ferrie to swoop down in a plane and pick them up?

¶According to Weisberg, two independent investigations by Dallas professionals, undertaken in 1968 to establish the facts of the tramps' apprehension, showed that they had taken refuge in the boxcar to get drunk, that it was one in a series of parked cars going nowhere, and that the only reason they were photographed in front of the Texas School Book Depository was that it was the only way for police to walk them out of the yard without heisting them up to a loading dock behind the Central Annex Post Office.

¶Stone sees "no justification" for the failure of Dallas police to get the names of the men. But even if they had, what would that matter to conspiracy theorists hooked on the tramp photos? They would just insist that the men had lied about who they really were.

¶Acoustics evidence. Stone says there were six impulse patterns on the

Dallas police dictabelt of the noises in Dealey Plaza that "could not have been anything else" but high-powered rifle shots. Not so. Acoustics experts for the House Assassinations Committee found six impulse patterns that could have been rifle shots because they passed "preliminary screening tests." Stone transforms this into proof positive.

¶"Certainly, nothing I ever did or said would have supported his[Stone's] certainty," one of the experts, James Barger, told me. The experts concluded that there were four shots: three from the Book Depository and one from the "grassy knoll." Says Barger: "I never said those other two[impulse patterns] were gunshots."

¶Vietnam Policy. Stone accuses me of misinterpreting, "either wittingly or unwittingly," a National Security Action Memo(No. 273), concerning troop withdrawal from Vietnam. It was signed by Lyndon Johnson on Nov. 26, 1973 and it was a followup to decisions Kennedy made on Oct. 2, approving among other things "plans to withdraw 1,000 military personnel by the end of 1963."

¶Stone's script attributes the assassination to Kennedy's Vietnam policy. In the final scene, he has Johnson meeting with his Vietnam advisors, countermanding Kennedy's order by telling them, "Gentlemen, I want you to know that I'm personally committed to Vietnam. I'm not going to take one single soldier out of there till they know we mean business in Asia."

¶I called the scene "nonsense" and said the LBJ memo ordered the withdrawal to be carried out. Stone says "it did not say that." Let me quote from NSAM No. 273.

¶"The objectives of the United States with respect to the withdrawal of U. S. military personnel remain as stated in the White House statement of Oct. 2, 1963."

¶Stone also insists "the withdrawal never happened." But according to William Gibbons, author of a multi-volume history on the war, and Vincent Demma of the U. S. Army's Center of Military History, it was indeed carried out. According to Gibbons, it was counterbalanced in succeeding months by letting strength rebound,

but he adds: "The proposal was never more than a device...a way of putting pressure on the(South) Vietnamese" to take up more of the burden.

¶"Kennedy, if he had carried it out, would have done it just as Johnson did it," Gibbons said. Despite Stone's contentions, he said, there was no abrupt change in Vietnam policy after Kennedy's death. Johnson, like Kennedy, hoped to be able to withdraw most U. S. forces by the end of 1965, but as JFK and his advisors put it in early October, "without impairment of the war effort."

¶Bill Moyers, Johnson's former press secretary, remembers talking to Johnson right after his Nov. 24, 1963 meeting on Vietnam with his national security advisors and the U. S. Ambassador to Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge--the same meeting that Stone's script distorts. Asked if Johnson said he wasn't going to pull out single soldier, Moyers said: "Not only did I never hear that, it sounds totally out of character with those discussions."

¶In fact, Moyers said, Johnson was quite apprehensive about the prospects in Vietnam. In a 1975 column for Newsweek, he wrote how LBJ swiveled back and forth in his chair, looked up at the ceiling, and said: " [R]ight now, I feel like one of those catfish down in your and Lady Bird's country--down there around the old Taylor store."

¶"How's that?" Moyers asked him.

¶"I feel like I just grabbed a big juicy worm with a right sharp hook in the middle of it," Johnson replied.

¶Pershing Gervais. Stone is right on one point: Gervais, once Garrison's chief investigator, is no fan of his. But Stone is wrong on other particulars. Gervais served four years as Garrison's top investigator, not "a brief period of time." And he says he wasn't asked to resign because of conflicts with other staff members. He quit of his own accord in the 1965 campaign, saying he had become a political liability to Garrison in his re-election campaign. But Garrison continued to rely on him for advice, as was widely reported in the

1960s.

¶Gervais, by the way, quoted Stone as telling him a few weeks ago: "I'm in this to make a buck." I didn't notice any denial of that statement.

¶ Stone makes a big deal out of my description of a scene in the script, showing Oswald putzing around in the second floor lunchroom of the Book Depository right after the assassination. The great director misinterprets this as an assertion on my part that Oswald wasn't there and chides me for being "unfamiliar with the evidence."

¶If anyone is unfamiliar with the evidence, it is Stone. He cites several "witnesses," including Carolyn Arnold and Barbara Reid, who "saw Oswald on the second floor immediately after the shooting."

¶Oswald was seen on the second floor after the shooting, but not by Arnold or "Barbara Reid." Arnold, who worked in the Book Depository building, stepped outside about five minutes before the shooting. What's more, she later told the FBI in a signed statement, "I never returned to this building on that date."

¶Barbara Reid could have seen Oswald only in her dreams. A New Orleans resident, she was a confidante of Garrison's. She witnessed nothing in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

¶ The fourth shot. I wrote last Sunday that acoustics experts for the House Assassinations Committee "concluded that there was, indeed, a fourth shot from 'the grassy knoll.'" Stone says this marks "the first time The Post has printed that there were four shots." He again shows himself to be a less than steady reader. I reported on that finding on Dec. 21, 1978; on Dec. 22, 1978, and again in lengthy detail when the experts testified publicly, on Dec. 31, 1978. The finding was subsequently the subject of numerous stories in the Post, including articles highlighting the committee's finding that Kennedy was "probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy." Most of the follow-up stories indicated that the finding of a fourth shot was more plausible than the criticisms leveled against it.

¶Stone winds up his apologia asking "why is Lardner so worried about our

movie?" I might ask, why is Stone so worried about my article? He says he hopes "the free thinkers in the world, those with no agenda, will recognize our movie as an emotional experience that speaks a higher truth than the Lardners of the world will ever know."

And, no doubt, higher profits, too. Stone claims an interest in history. Why doesn't he stick to it? **END OF STORY**