

FIRST DIBS**Before J.F.K. Was Hot, He Wasn't**

With all the publicity surrounding the making of Oliver Stone's J.F.K. assassination movie, a bit of history is in order.

Former New Orleans Dist. Atty. Jim Garrison, the central figure in Stone's "JFK," first sold the rights to his story to the producing-directing team of Jerry Zucker, David Zucker and Jim Abrahams (known mostly for comedies like "Airplane!" and "Naked Gun").

Team Zucker got interested in Garrison's story in the early 1980s,

approached him and subsequently bought the rights to Garrison's life story. The flamboyant Garrison came to national attention when he challenged the Warren Commission's version of events surrounding John F. Kennedy's assassination.

In 1983, screenwriter William Stadiem spent several months with Garrison and wrote a 200-page script (which translates into about three hours on screen) that covered Garrison's investigations and his fall from office. The Zuckers encouraged Stadiem to take an ambitious, serious approach to the project, Stadiem recalls, because the Zuckers were convinced that their success in Hollywood at that point would give them the liberty to make a serious movie with the scale of Stadiem's "Garrison."

Instead, "Top Secret" (1984), a comedy after the hit "Airplane!" (1980), was a disappointment at the box office. "That really shook their confidence to do something so far afield," Stadiem says, adding that their interest in his project sagged.

But Abrahams and the Zuckers—all of whom continue to hold the script in high regard—said they did shop the script around, without success. "Back then, whenever you mentioned the J.F.K. assassination, people's eyes would glaze over," says Abrahams. "Eighty percent of Americans were saying they thought Oswald didn't act alone. But nobody in Hollywood wanted to take it the next step."

This year, when details of Stone's movie surfaced, they were shocked to hear that Garrison (who also plays a small part in the movie) had sold Stone similar rights. But the Zuckers' lawyers said their contract left enough wiggle room for Garrison to also sell certain rights to Stone.

A couple months ago, the Zucker project almost got a new lease on life. Hoping to capitalize on the publicity surrounding the Stone project, TV producer Preston Fischer obtained the Zuckers' permission to shop Stadiem's script to the networks and cable stations. Despite a "very good" script, Fischer says, no one wanted to produce it.

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