

This appeared last week.

London

Sunday Times 24/11/91.

Kennedy murder film attacked as a 'TV lie'

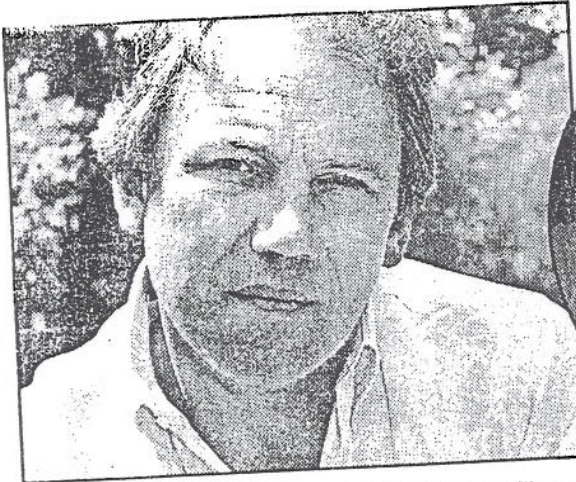
by James Dalrymple

ONE of Britain's biggest ITV companies has been accused of "gross cynicism" for re-screening a television investigation into the murder of President John F Kennedy that was later shown to be based on a lie.

Central Television sold the documentary, which the company must have known was based on false evidence, to America's public service broadcasting channel. It was screened earlier this month, repeating once again the unfounded claims.

Other previously unbroadcast material from the discredited documentary project, estimated to have cost Central more than £1m, was shown in Britain on ITV last week, but without fanfare and in the middle of the night. The original programme, entitled *The Men who Killed Kennedy*, was first broadcast in 1988. During the two-hour, prime-time show, it named three Frenchmen who were supposed to have gone to Dallas to carry out the contract-killing of Kennedy in November 1963, for shadowy figures in the United States.

Within days of trans-



Who killed the truth over Kennedy's death? Peter Sissons, left, protested about 'whitewash' after a

mission, Central was accused of fantasy and distortion. A team of its own reporters and researchers, sent to France to recheck the story, told the Midlands-based company that the allegations were "total nonsense" dreamt up by an "amateurish" American author from underworld gossip.

Three weeks later, amid public ridicule and revolt from within the company, Central was told by the Independent Broadcasting Authority to mount a discussion programme from America which ended up as a studio

crucifixion of Nigel Turner, the documentary's director and producer. He was shown new film proving the alibis of all three Frenchmen, and proof from his own Central colleagues that the "French connection" was bogus. Turner's three other proposed programmes on the assassination were thought to have been shelved in embarrassment.

After Central won its new franchise for just £2,000, however, executives decided to recoup some of the huge investment. All four parts were

shown in the United States two weeks ago, repeating the unfounded claims against the Frenchmen. The three previously unseen parts were shown in Britain in early-morning scheduling. The discredited documentary containing the French connection was not repeated.

Last week Central denied that the American showing was, at best, a piece of bare-faced cheek, and that the parts shown in Britain had been deliberately "buried" for a scant audience. "The American transmission was very

well received, and it was always planned to show the three follow-up programmes in Britain. Nobody sued us. And that's significant, isn't it? The only network slot we could get was in the early hours," said a spokesman.

Secret documents prepared by the company on the 1988 transmission and its aftermath, seen by *The Sunday Times*, show the extent of concern within Central. Legal memos, researchers' interviews and notes made during rows between senior officials reveal evidence from Central

reporters that the company had accepted half-baked theories from an American author who heard a story from a known liar trying to talk his way out of a jail sentence.

There is also evidence that Central's lawyers tried to influence the format of the discussion programme, ordered by the IBA, in an attempt to lessen the damage revealed by the company's reporters sent to France to test the allegations. At one point Peter Sissons, now a BBC newsreader, who presented the programme, became so enraged



Central Television documentary named Saverio Pironti, centre, as one of three Frenchmen involved in the Dallas assassination, right

by what he saw as a "white-wash" that he threatened to quit unless he was given complete freedom to present the powerful evidence against the conspiracy theory.

"We destroyed the allegations concerning the Frenchmen within a few days," said one of the team sent to France.

The Frenchmen, all petty criminals, named in the programme by Steve Rivele, an American author, were Saverio Pironti, Roger Bocognani and Lucien Sarti. Sarti was dead, but his family proved that at the exact time of the Kennedy shooting he was undergoing serious medical treatment in France. Bocognani was missing in South America, but his lawyer showed official documents proving that he was in prison on the day Kennedy died.

Most damning of all for Rivele and Turner was the tracking-down of Pironti. His military service record showed that on the day they said he was in Dallas he was in navy barracks with dozens of witnesses.

In a memo to Central officials, Peter de Scliding, a reporter sent to Marseilles, wrote that the programme "sullied the reputation of a serious broadcasting company". He added: "Ten days of reporting . . . have turned

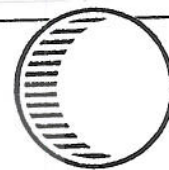
up no evidence supporting the programme's accusations against the three men. On the contrary [it] has produced evidence that leaves the programme's conclusions in a shambles."

He criticised Turner and Rivele for relying on the word of obscure criminals to construct a conspiracy theory and accuse three hapless men of carrying out one of history's greatest murders. "It makes one tremble for the profession of journalism," he told his

bosses at Central. "As an example of how to engineer responses, how to turn testimony by small degrees until it can be made to mean almost anything, it is a marvel."

A week after these words were written, the discussion programme was set up to be beamed from Washington. Rivele refused to appear; Turner was ordered by his bosses to do so. Central lawyers, now in possession of the reports from France, flew in by Concorde and demanded that the focus of the discussion be shifted by Sissons away from the allegations against Pironti.

Yesterday a member of the Washington production team



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‘Nobody sued us. And that’s significant, isn’t it?’

said: "It was a piece of cynical cowardice. They knew they had made a blunder of massive proportions, but they were trying to slide out of it. Three years later they are still at it. They were forced to show the follow-up programme, and if it had not been for Peter Sissons's threat to report them to the IBA unless they allowed him to get at the truth, the follow-up programme might have been a pure cover-up."

Last week Turner, "working on something" in America, was unavailable for comment.