

Is Garrison Faking?

The DA, the CIA and the Assassination

by Fred Powledge

New Orleans

It was eight days after the assassination of President Kennedy that I overheard, in Brennan's restaurant in the French Quarter, the conversation of two middle-aged ladies at the next table.

"I'm so sorry it happened," said one of them.

"I am, too," said the other. "But I'm so glad it happened in Dallas and not in New Orleans. It seems like they try to blame everything on New Orleans."

Three and a half years later, there is a six and a half foot tall district attorney who says most of it did happen in New Orleans. If he's wrong, the city may assume the blame for electing one of the most cynical law officers in history.

To many people – and I suspect they constitute a majority among those who know Southern politics and its illogical conclusion, Louisiana politics – it is not important to think of the Garrison investigation even in terms of right or wrong. With these people, it is strictly a question of the man's political motives, nothing more.

The man sitting across the aisle on the plane down to New Orleans was one of these. "I know some of the people involved," he volunteered after the stewardess had delivered the second drink. "I've lived there some time, and I would guess that Garrison, without the slightest doubt, wants very badly to become governor of the state of Louisiana."

And a young man from New York, an Orleanian who knows the city well and who had returned to his parents' home for a few weeks, said a day later in Galatoire's: "I think you'll find that the interest in connecting the investigation with the actual Kennedy assassination, at least among the people I know, is rela-

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tively slight." The people he knew, he said, were socially and financially secure. "What's interesting people – what's alive in this investigation – is the credibility of the Warren Commission report, which equals the federal government, which equals the Supreme Court. What Garrison is promising people is the discreditation of federal power."

Then, I said, the investigation must be a hoax. "No," he said. "There's the possibility of disproving the Warren report and, lately, of exposing the intervention of the CIA in local affairs. The big issue among the people I know is whether or not some authority like the CIA which nobody can recognize and control, can willfully conceal the lie of the Warren Commission – that it has devoted its efforts to concealing the errors of the Commission."

How could the CIA do this? "By killing all these people," he said with a sardonic smile. "That's the feeling here in New Orleans."

So, there were people who thought Garrison was perpetrating a hoax, and a good many others who thought he had only a scintilla of evidence that he was trying to compound into real political capital.

I was going to New Orleans to judge for myself, and I already had made up my mind. I believed the conclusion of the Warren report. At least I faintly distrusted anyone who didn't believe it. I remember a cocktail party I attended in New York in December 1963, having just returned from three weeks of writing newspaper stories in Dallas and New Orleans. Most of the people at the party were young activist types, intensely interested in the assassination. A friend of mine asked what I really thought, and I replied without hesitation that I thought Oswald did it and did it alone. That friend, and other friends, drifted off. If we couldn't agree on that. . . .

I was willing to admit that the Warren Commission had done less than a thorough job. Still, I believed Lee Oswald pulled the trigger and only he had done it.

Furthermore, I was prepared to agree with most of what I had read about the New Orleans investigation and the man running it. Garrison probably was "a bit

paranoiac," as David Chandler suggested in *New Orleans* magazine, the Chamber of Commerce publication; the legal aspects of the investigation constituted a "Roman circus," as the American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana put it, and a "travesty of justice," as Hugh Aynesworth wrote in *Newsweek*.

Most of all, I was skeptical of the quality of the witnesses and principals Garrison had named in connection with the case. There was Clay Shaw, a retired businessman whose private life certainly made him vulnerable. There was Vernon Bundy, said to be an important witness (he testified that he saw Shaw and Oswald together), but a man who also is said to be supporting a four-capsule-a-day heroin habit. There was the late David Ferrie, whose interest in homosexuality led him to shave off all his body hair.

There was Perry Russo, said to be one of Garrison's key witnesses, who required hypnotism and truth serum to get his entire story out. There was Dean Andrews, a lawyer who was said to have been in touch professionally with a mysterious homosexual "queen bee," named Clay Bertrand, who was supposed to have been a link between Oswald and the anti-Castro adventurers who, Garrison says, actually killed the President. Andrews, Garrison thought, could recall that Bertrand and Shaw were the same man. (Andrews could not make any such recollection, and the New Orleans grand jury recently indicted him on two counts of perjury. I asked Andrews the other day if he could identify Bertrand if he saw him now. He said he doubted it. "I saw Bertrand one time," he said, "in '56 or '57 or '58 or '59, at a fag wedding reception. You ever go to a wedding reception that long ago and remember anybody you saw there?")

And there was Gordon Novel, 29, the former owner of a bar in the French Quarter who was questioned a few times by Garrison's men, but who then left town in a hurry. Garrison got a warrant for Novel's arrest, swearing before a judge that he had "good reason to believe" that Novel was a "most important" witness.

Garrison also wanted to bring Novel back to face charges of conspiring to burglarize a munitions bunker at Houma, Louisiana, in 1961. The burglary, newsmen around New Orleans believe, was part of an attempt to get ammunition to use against Castro. Another man named by the district attorney's office as having taken part in that burglary attempt was David Ferrie.

Garrison accused Novel of having been an employee of the CIA at the time of the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. After the DA's warrant was issued, Novel disappeared for a while, then turned up in McLean, Virginia, where a wire service quoted the operator of a lie detector machine as saying Novel was telling the truth when he called Garrison's case a fraud. The story, as printed in *The New York Times*, described McLean as a "Wash-

ington suburb." It also is the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency. Novel later appeared briefly in Nashville, where he was allegedly shot at by a sniper or snipers unknown.

The list of witnesses and principals – the people on whom Garrison was building his case – seemed like characters out of Bob Dylan's *Desolation Row*. Reeling, as some of them were, under doses of Sodium Pentothal and hypnotism, and fearing, as some of them did, that their private lives would suddenly become public, they seemed totally unreliable. And so did the whole Garrison case, or at least incredible. The best I could do would be to summon as much fairness as possible; objectivity was out of the question.

The Louisiana Gamble

New Orleans calls itself "the City that Care Forgot," and you still can get some of the finest food in America there, but when you aren't hungry it can be a drab and phony town. It is supposed to be wicked, but it isn't. The strippers on Bourbon Street display little that is of interest; the most disillusioning thing about each of them is the complete predictability of their pasties and G-strings. A man loose on Bourbon Street can drink the thin liquor all night without getting tipsy, and before long he may start cataloging not wickedness but the number of appendectomy scars, varicose veins, Band-Aids and tattoos that he sees on those gum-chewing girls dancing on the back bar.

There is a shop in the French Quarter whose sign advertises "Antiques – Weapons – Bric-a-Brac," and there are souvenir shops that sell white supremacy license plates, and there is the complete and badly weathered cinder block sterility of the rest of the city. But New Orleans is still the only place in the world where a city slicker can really be comfortable and see Southern rural politics at the same time.

Everybody in New Orleans is a gambler, and everybody gambles on something far more exciting than horses or the egg futures. They gamble on politicians, judging every contestant against memories of Huey and Earl Long, the way a horse gambler remembers Man o' War. It is a game which assumes that every player is dishonest, and, unless you're one of the few local disciples of "good government," dishonesty doesn't count against a politician. It is tolerated, even celebrated as part of the game.

There is a bridge across the Mississippi River that has toll gates on one end that collect no tolls. Governor John McKeithen, one of his supporters explained, promised during his campaign to eliminate the toll, and he did. This, I thought, may be an act unique in American politics. Imagine: a toll bridge that no longer collects a toll! But the joke, if that's what it is, doesn't

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stop there. One of McKeithen's critics points out that the extravagant campaign promise has kept other, badly needed bridges from being built. "That's Louisiana politics," he said. "They give you a nickel and steal a million from you at the same time. But if you quote me by name on this I will call you a crocus sack full of crawfish." Then he said mysteriously: "The object of the entire caper's for white trash to run the world. If the caper's pulled off, it's George Wallace for President and Garrison for Vice President, with Russell Long getting an act passed to make it easier for Wallace to run.

"You go dig on that theory and you'll come closer than anybody else. Do you know who the White Roach is? He's the key to the whole deal. He's the one who'll set Wallace up for presidential candidate. Go check Russell Long out. Put two and two together and you will see that the man named the White Roach creeps through all of these people. Now it's up to you to find out who the White Roach is."

I ventured the name of a colorful Louisiana politician and racist. "God damn," exclaimed my informant. "You've got it. You've got nine-tenths of it right now."

Rubin and Bringuier

Steve Rubin, a young English teacher who is a Louisiana national board member for the American Civil Liberties Union, was stopped outside his home by a neighbor, a pleasant, drawing man who wanted to know if Rubin had noticed the frequency with which telephone repairmen had been climbing poles around the house.

"I think my phone is being tapped," said Rubin, whose organization has been critical of Garrison's methods. "Some of this is paranoia, of course. But I get clicks and echoes and disconnects."

Inside, over a cup of coffee, Rubin gave his impressions of the New Orleans situation. "The typical New Orleans answer to the thing," he said, "is to say, 'Damn, it stinks, but Garrison wouldn't be doing it if he didn't have something'. A good many people who bet on it hedge their bets because they say Garrison has never lost yet. He's on to *something*, and I would italicize the *something*. Whether he's on to a conspiracy that really resulted in the death of President Kennedy is problematical. I've gotten increasingly skeptical of his case as it went on."

Carlos Bringuier, who is the New Orleans delegate to the Cuban Student Directorate, an anti-Castro organization, was visited by Lee Oswald in the summer of 1963. Oswald said he wanted to help fight Castro, but he looked fishy to Bringuier. A few days later, Bringuier saw Oswald handing out Fair Play for Cuba leaflets and he got into a fight with him. When

I first saw Carlos Bringuier, it was a few days after the assassination. We were drinking Cuba libres. Bringuier, who was a criminal court secretary in Havana before his exile, was making a little money managing Casa Roca, a dry-goods store, and coordinating anti-Castro efforts at the same time. He was, and still is, one of the few people involved in any of this mess who sound honest when they say they are not employed by any spy agency.

Now he runs his own store, Casa Cuba, two doors away from Casa Roca. He started the business on \$300. He has a fine home in Gretna, across the Mississippi, a beautiful wife, a flock of children, and two cars. On one of the cars is a bumper sticker supporting the war in Vietnam, and on the other is a decal depicting a caterpillar holding a Cuban flag in one hand and a shotgun in the other, with the proclamation, *Vol-veremos* ("we shall return"). Bringuier also has a complete set of the Warren Commission reports, and he is writing a book that argues that Lee Oswald was, indeed, the assassin.

"Oswald did it, and he did it in the way that the Warren Commission said," he argued one night. "But I differ with the Warren Commission on the motivation. The motivation was that he was at least influenced by his commitment to communism, or he was ordered to do it by the Castro government."

As for Jim Garrison, he said, "I think he needs psychiatric treatment."

"As a matter of fact, there is more of a basis for the idea that Garrison knew Oswald before the assassination than there is any connection between Oswald and the CIA or anti-Castro Cubans or with David Ferrie." He plucked Vol. XVI of the Warren report from the shelf, turned to Exhibit 93, and quoted from a memorandum Oswald had written about his own background: "I infiltrated the Cuban Student directorite and than harrassed them with information I gained including having the N.O. city attorney general call then in an put a restraining order pending a hearing on some so-called bonds for invasion they were selling in the New Orleans area." [Sic.]

Bringuier said this meant that Oswald had somehow got in touch with Garrison, who would be the "N.O. city attorney general," and gotten Garrison to put an end to the bond drive. New Orleans authorities, he said, *did* stop the sale of the invasion bonds. "There is more solid information to link Oswald with Garrison right here," said Bringuier, snapping his thumb against the book, "than there is to link him with anyone else."

On May 21, Garrison went on television and said something publicly that, according to the local reporters, he had been saying off the record since last winter. He said that Oswald had not killed anybody in Dallas,

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THE NEW REPUBLIC

and that the assassination had been the work of anti-Castro adventurers.

WWL-TV's programming department declined to let me listen to a tape of the program because, according to a young woman there, "this is a commercial venture with us, and we're selling it. We're not giving this valuable property away."

A few days later, Garrison told the Associated Press the same thing. He said the assassins were former CIA employees who were angered at President Kennedy's posture on Cuba following the Bay of Pigs disaster, and that the CIA was frustrating his investigation, although the agency knew the whereabouts of the assassins.

Bern Rotman, the news editor of the rival (and much more professional) WDSU-TV, commented a couple of days after the WWL-TV interview:

"Garrison's always left himself an out, and in fact many of his critics are saying he's developing his out right now, by bringing the CIA in. How can the CIA protect itself? He is saying in effect that unless they come up with the answer and give information that he says exists, they are obviously withholding information and stymieing the whole investigation. How can he lose that way?"

Aaron M. Kohn, the managing director of the Metropolitan Crime Commission of New Orleans Inc., and a good government man, is no friend of Jim Garrison's. "What you're looking at," he said, "is a budding new Huey Long, a man who once sat there across the table from me and said to me that Huey Long was the man who had all the political answers.

"If you study Huey Long, you see many of the same things at work. Garrison never lets the responsibilities of being a prosecutor interfere with being a politician. His primary asset is being a calculated, deliberate, self-conscious showman, and he really believes his showmanship is what attracts support from the people, and that they do not evaluate what he actually does."

Garrison, he said, has assumed "the classic stance of the demagogue." He is appealing, said Kohn, to a prejudice that he knows burns brightly in his constituents - hatred for federal authority.

"No matter how his investigation turns out," said Kohn, "I'm no longer interested in whether he's right. His course is a destructive one. The only issue now is the integrity of the criminal justice system."

A friend of Garrison's, Pershing Gervais, his former chief investigator, a man who now describes himself as a civil bondsman, investigator and consultant (which means, he said, "kicking doors, kicking asses and squeezing a ball or two"), blames the news media and the Washington Establishment for much of Garrison's trouble. "The Establishment," he said, "has the same attitude that the mob has: 'We must never blow the

whistle on one another'. Garrison just won't play ball with them the way most politicians play ball. He does not adhere to the rules of the secret brotherhood. He is obnoxious to them."

What Garrison Says

Jim Garrison's office is at one end of the second floor of a horrible-looking building on Tulane Avenue. Once past the receptionist's desk, a visitor goes down a long hallway, past rooms where young men in short-sleeved shirts and with snug pistol holsters sit listening to tape recordings.

A friend had warned me to be careful when Garrison stamped his foot down on the floor behind his desk. That would mean he was switching on a concealed tape recorder. I didn't recall hearing his foot stamp down, and the district attorney let me set up my own recording machine on his desk.

I asked him what sort of a man he thought he was. He hesitated a long time. Then he said: "The people seem to understand, when there's a fight, that I'm fighting for the principles involved, but I find that many people in public life tend to regard it cynically. Again, that's their prerogative, but I am conscious of the fact that I can feel very strong and refuse to compromise when a principle that is meaningful and important to me is involved.

"I can't explain why, and I'm not trying to describe myself as virtuous, because on balance I think I'm very much like other people. But in this area I won't even consider compromises. I never consider the consequences."

He talked about his cleanup of whores, hustlers and B-girls on Bourbon Street a few years ago, a cleanup that some of his critics maintain did little good but which, an empirical examination shows, was *bona fide* to the point where the street is less interesting now than most television commercials.

During the course of talking about Bourbon Street, Garrison stood up behind his desk, and all of a sudden he became six feet, six inches tall. The pistol on his hip looked out of place in the same office with the 13 antique volumes of Shakespeare on his desk, but so did *An ABZ of Love* that was on another desk.

Bourbon Street, he said, worked "because we would not compromise. And this investigation is going to be a complete success for the same reason. They can only delay it; they can't prevent it."

I asked who "they" was; this sounded like an opportunity to document those allegations of paranoia. Garrison's reply sounded strangely right: "They" were the CIA, some newsmen who were overzealous in questioning witnesses, and other newsmen who were trying outright to change the witnesses' minds. "The

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interference with witnesses on the part of some elements of the press, and especially the national government, is reaching the point of being historic," he said.

"But I would say that in spite of that, this investigation is going to reach a successful culmination. I don't think anything in the world can stop it. We know that we can demonstrate to the satisfaction of every rational individual on this earth not only that Lee Oswald did not shoot the President, but that he was shot by individuals connected with the - Cuban adventurers, at an earlier stage, and also, at an earlier stage, connected with the Central Intelligence Agency."

Could he prove that, even if the CIA didn't cooperate? (I remembered Bern Rotman's thesis.) "Yes. Even if they don't cooperate. Because we have them by the big toe. I'm sure that they think we can't, but . . . we can, without a shadow of a doubt. It isn't speculation. We have talked to people involved, and the possibility exists now of their becoming state witnesses - an incredibly wonderful development. The only thing that's keeping it from developing, that causes them to be slow and to hold off and just to send initial feelers, is the tremendous pressure coming from some of the Eastern press, especially those with connections with the Administration. . . ."

Garrison listed among those organizations the National Broadcasting Company, *Newsweek*, and, "to a lesser extent, because it doesn't have that much impact, *The Saturday Evening Post*."

I couldn't contradict that. I had known, since the assassination, that the most influential purveyors of news in the nation had gone out of their way to present the Warren Commission side of the story, and to ignore or downplay those who dissented. One organ of communication, I later learned, even sought the CIA's advice on how to treat a story about the investigation. This, if Garrison's allegations of CIA involvement are correct, is roughly comparable to a newspaper's asking "Bull" Connor how he would handle a story on the Birmingham Freedom Ride massacre, and then following his advice.

"A True Picture"

The district attorney reached down below his desk and came up with a long, cylindrical black object. He turned on a switch, and a bright, sharp arrow of light shot across the room and focused on two enormous photographic enlargements of the assassination scene. One was an aerial photograph of the Triple Underpass in Dallas; the other showed the President's motorcade passing what assassination buffs refer to as the grassy knoll. The arrow traced idle paths across the picture as Garrison talked.

"We're interested in developing a true picture. But

in the course of doing that, culpability on the part of one agency has come up starkly clear, and that is the Central Intelligence Agency. We have found *conclusively* that individuals connected as employees of the CIA at an earlier date ended up in Dallas, Texas, with Lee Harvey Oswald, and if the CIA thinks that I cannot and will not prove it, they are going to have the surprise of their life."

Garrison said his investigation had begun with an examination of what Oswald was like, and what he did, while he was in New Orleans prior to the assassination. (The Warren Commission had declared that, "During his stay in New Orleans, Oswald formed a fictitious New Orleans Chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee." His interest in the pro-Castro committee, proponents of the commission view say, was yet another indication that Oswald was a Marxist and that this was a factor in his shooting the President.)

But Garrison said he felt differently. "One of the first things that became apparent," he said, "was that Fair Play for Cuba was a façade, that he was not a communist, and that he was associated, exclusively associated, with *anti-Castro* people. So that there has never been any other basic operating theory for us in this case."

And now, he said, "The only remaining problem as I see it is the matter of gathering together all those essential pieces of evidence which follow an understanding but precede a trial. I feel like we can go to trial tomorrow morning." The case, he said, will be solved "in the course of time, but I'm not going to be rushed into doing it on somebody else's timetable."

His own timetable was uncertain: "There'd be no way for me to know how long it's going to take, now that it is apparent that the Central Intelligence Agency and, with help from other elements in the Justice Department, have decided that this is a fight - a survival sort of fight."

Garrison aimed the lighted arrow at a fuzzy shadow in one of the photographs. "Is that from the Zapruder film?" I asked. "No," he said, pointing quickly to another shadow. "That's Zapruder there. He's holding his camera up, see?"

He swept the beam diagonally across the photograph, from the lower left to the upper right. "They ran up the hill there and threw the guns away." Garrison maintains that at least two pairs of men took part in the shooting, with one pair disposing of the cart-ridges and the guns.

It was as if he was tracing the path of something that was known, that was commonly accepted, something like a planet or a star.

"It's a fact?," I halfway asked, halfway said.

"Yes," he said. "It's a fact."

He drew in a deep breath and added: "The fact is

that of the 19 witnesses, 18 heard the shooting coming from the grassy knoll. That was their original testimony. Lord knows *what* they're saying now."

He picked up one of the Warren Commission volumes and pointed the illuminated arrow at its cover. "I say that because of the presidential seal on the outside of these 26 volumes." The strength of the seal, he said, undoubtedly has influenced some witnesses to tell what they know are "acceptable" stories of what they heard and saw that day.

"We've determined that every attorney in the case, except one, who we're not sure of, who's taken a posture of obstruction, has been paid by the CIA through an intermediary."

Novel and the CIA

Just as he was saying that, one of his assistants walked into the office, smiling and holding high the salmon-colored final edition of the *New Orleans States-Item*. The lead headline said: NOVEL CIA AGENT, ATTORNEY ADMITS.

The story quoted the attorney for Gordon Novel, the witness whom Garrison had termed "most important," as acknowledging that his client had been an agent in New Orleans in 1961. The attorney, Steven Plotkin, said Novel had acted as an intermediary between the CIA and Cuban invaders.

The admission followed the *States-Item's* discovery of a letter it said Novel had written earlier this year, in terribly military bureaucratic language, to a "Mr. Weiss," asking to be taken "out of this thing." The letter said, in part: "This letter is to inform you that District [Attorney] Jim Garrison has subpoenaed myself and an associate to testify before his Grand Jury on matters which may be classified TOP SECRET. Actions of individuals connected with DOUBLE-CHEK CORPORATION in Miami in the first quarter of 1961." (Double-Chek was the code name of the CIA front that recruited pilots and others for the Cuban invasion.) Novel's letter also suggested to "Mr. Weiss," whoever he is, that "Appropriate counteraction relative to Garrison's inquisition concerning us may best be handled through military channels *vis à vis* the DIA man." (DIA stands for Defense Intelligence Agency, which had the job of watching over the CIA after the invasion turned into a fiasco.)

"Garrison is presently colonel in Louisiana Army National Guard and has ready reserve status," continued the letter, which sounded a lot as if its author wanted Garrison's military status reviewed in the way draft-card burners and other dissidents have had their Selective Service status upgraded.

As Garrison read the newspaper story, he smiled, perhaps for the second or third time that afternoon.

"We knew the *States-Item* has the letter," he said, handing me a copy of the document that had been lying on his desk all afternoon. "But it makes us feel good that they finally decided to run it."

Two other assistants burst in with their copies of the paper. "Once in a while," said Garrison, "we expect to see a piece of the truth pop up to the surface. This is one of those times."

There was nothing in what Garrison said, and nothing in what any of his friends said, that might convince a reasonably skeptical man that the district attorney was right. A great deal of Garrison's case, as he himself has pointed out, must necessarily await the trials that he has promised. And even then a reasonable man might not be convinced. The presidential seal on the covers of the 26 volumes is a powerful persuader. It alone might cause a reasonable man to reject a theory that places a group of anti-Castro adventurers on that grassy knoll at a time when so many of us want badly to believe otherwise.

The nature of the people who have aligned themselves with various conspiracy theories, too, might tend to make a reasonable man wary of Jim Garrison and his flamboyant proclamations. And a reasonable man would take into consideration Jim Garrison's own personality. Maybe he does consider himself persecuted, and maybe he does look like a budding Huey Long (although both of these qualities would make him one of our more human elected officials). And the strange collection of witnesses and defendants that has been assembled so far is not a powerful argument for his case, either.

But still, as I left Garrison's office with the final edition of the *States-Item* under my arm, I had the irrational feeling that he was on to something. I had the equally startling feeling that it did not really matter if Garrison were paranoid, opportunistic, flamboyant, or if his witnesses were not candidates for *The Defenders*. Was he right?

It was possible that the Central Intelligence Agency, given what little the public knows of its methods and philosophies, is covering up important information. It was possible (a certainty, in my mind) that the news media, in their haste to protect what they feel is the national security or to keep the nation from getting panicked, have tried so hard to believe the Warren report that they have overlooked their primary news function. (*The New York Times* printed the acknowledgement by Gordon Novel's lawyer that Novel had been a CIA agent, but the story was four paragraphs long, incomplete, unedifying, and under the bridge column on page 44.)

I myself had tried hard to believe the Warren report, and now, against my will and my better judgment, I was powerfully tempted to believe Jim Garrison.