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The Kennedy Case

Flamboyant Jim Garrison: What's Behind the Furor in New Orleans

NEW ORLEANS.

A playwright could not have created a character more appropriate for his role. Standing six feet, six inches tall, weighing 220 pounds, wearing size 14 shoes, and packing a pistol beneath his vested, conservatively cut suit, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison is a fitting vortex for the maelstrom he has created.

Mr. Garrison gained world-wide attention last week when he vowed he could and would prove that President Kennedy's assassination was part of a conspiracy that was hatched in New Orleans. He said he would disprove the Warren Commission, which concluded after an exhaustive investigation that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing the President and that there was no credible evidence of conspiracy.

Then Mr. Garrison went irretrievably out onto a limb that many felt was already no thicker than a reed. "I have no reason to believe," he stated, "that Lee Harvey Oswald killed anybody in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963."

His First Statement

When the story first broke Mr. Garrison said arrests were imminent and that "convictions will be obtained." He later re-trenched, saying premature newspaper publicity about his investigation had endangered some witnesses and made arrests unlikely for months. Still later, using the word for the first time, he said his staff had "solved" the case weeks ago. "We know the key individuals, the cities involved, and how it was done. . . . The only way they are going to get away from us is to kill themselves."

Interest in the story had begun to wane by Wednesday. Then a police call from a disheveled New Orleans apartment revived and reinforced it: There, amid a clutter of books and pill bottles, police found the body of a pathetic figure named David Ferrie. Nearby was a note saying death would be welcome.

Ferrie had been arrested three days after the President's assassination on the suspicion that he was to have piloted a plane to get Oswald out of Dallas. At one time Ferrie had been a commercial airline pilot but he was fired; in his youth he was dismissed from a seminary in Ohio; he was twice arrested on morals charges in New Orleans, but never convicted.

To Mr. Garrison, Ferrie suddenly became—after his death—"a man who, in my judgment, was one of history's most important individuals. . . . Evidence developed by our office had long since confirmed that he was involved in events culminating in the assassination of President Kennedy."

The district attorney and his aides had decided Wednesday morning to arrest Ferrie this week and put him in protec-

tive custody, Mr. Garrison said, but "apparently we waited too long." An autopsy showed that Ferrie, who had high blood pressure, died of natural causes when a blood vessel ruptured at the base of his brain.

The man who told the Warren Commission that Ferrie and Lee Oswald were co-conspirators later admitted he had lied. Ferrie himself denied knowing Oswald, and two investigators said they were satis-



Mr. Garrison: On a limb.

fied Ferrie's plane was not flyable the day the President was killed.

Why, then, does Mr. Garrison consider Ferrie so important in the face of the contrary opinions from the Warren Commission and others? Mr. Garrison did not explain, any more than he has explained his other purported evidence.

And yet it is hazardous to dismiss Mr. Garrison outright. He is flamboyant, stubborn, politically ambitious. He is at once a publicity seeker and a newspaper baiter; he is secretive but he is also a good district attorney, with a reputation for honesty and for accomplishing what he sets out to do.

Mr. Garrison says privately that he wants to be a U.S. senator some day. He had planned, before the New Orleans States-Item smoked out his story, to have it come out in a national magazine under his own byline; political gossip here was that he hoped the byline would propel him into candidacy for national political office in 1968.

Whatever his ambitions, Mr. Garrison

has laid them all on the line in this, the latest and by far the biggest of his crusades. If he falls now, after the world's attention has been centered on him, his career is over.

Clearly he does not expect to fail, despite the lack of credence given to his allegations by those who believe the Warren Commission reached the only plausible conclusion regarding President Kennedy's death.

Mr. Garrison brushed aside a suggestion by Rep. Gerald Ford, Michigan Republican, who served on the Warren Commission, that he turn over his findings to Federal authorities. "I am running this investigation, not the President, not the Attorney General," snapped Mr. Garrison. "I do not propose to let it be taken over by any other jurisdiction and be converted into a colossal fact-finding enterprise in which relevant leads become lost among truckloads of trivia."

At least two theories have grown out of Mr. Garrison's actions. The first holds that he is seeking world-wide publicity and political gains through the emotionalism that still surrounds President Kennedy's assassination; the second is that Mr. Garrison has the case he says he has, and that he will disprove the Warren Report.

A Plausible Answer

Another alternative is, of course, plausible: That there was a plot in New Orleans to kill the President, but that it either did not involve Oswald or, if it did, that it collapsed and Oswald went through with the assassination alone; or that a plot existed quite apart from what actually happened in Dallas. The Warren Commission did not flatly say there was no conspiracy; it said it could find no credible evidence of one.

Whether he succeeds or not, Jim Gar-

rison received assurance at week's end that he is not alone in his interest. After the New Orleans paper published vouchers showing where his investigators had gone and where they had spent \$8,000 in public funds, Mr. Garrison announced that he would carry on henceforth with private donations or loans, thus avoiding public-record laws. Following this, several New Orleans businessmen pledged to finance Mr. Garrison's investigation.

"We are prepared to back Jim Garrison all the way," said Joseph M. Rault, Jr., president of the Rault Petroleum Corp. "It can be a year—or five years if necessary—and we'll provide whatever he needs. No questions asked."

—JACK WARDLAW