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HD: CIA: ANGEL OF DEATH?

LD: EVEN WHEN he is talking to a newspaper reporter, Mark Lane drops explosive little comments into his conversation, remarks that would be just right for television sound bites.

""The best way to commemorate the Bill of Rights is to disband the CIA and put everyone in jail that did wrong.""

""The first shot of the Vietnam War was fired not in Southeast Asia, but in Dallas.""

""Oliver Stone (director of 'JFK,' a new movie about the assassination of President Kennedy) was frightened off the truth by attacks from CIA sympathizers in the press.""

It's not so much that Lane is glib, but that 30 years as one of America's foremost conspiracy theorists has given him an encyclopedic knowledge into the assassination. Efforts to portray him as an irrelevant fringe figure have always failed because of those pesky facts and the compelling circumstantial evidence he keeps coming up with.

What began as a quest to uncover the truth about Kennedy's death has, in later years, become a crusade against the CIA. In his new book, ""Plausible Denial"" (Thunder's Mouth Press, \$22.95, 352 pages), Lane details a 1985 Miami civil trial in which he successfully defended a libel suit by asserting that the CIA masterminded the assassination.

In 1978, the Liberty Lobby, a far-right political group, published a story in its weekly newspaper by a former CIA agent who asserted that E. Howard Hunt had been present in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. Hunt, a career CIA agent and a Watergate criminal, sued for libel and was awarded \$650,000 in damages.

Hiring Lane, a best-selling author and celebrity lawyer, the Liberty Lobby appealed. The first verdict was thrown out and a second trial ordered in 1985. Lane jettisoned the original ""absence of malice"" defense, and set out to prove that the CIA had killed the president.

""This was the first people's jury to consider the facts,"" Lane says. ""Our whole defense was that the CIA had assassinated Kennedy.""

The trial gave Lane his first opportunity to subpoena and depose CIA officials, and he took full advantage of it. In addition to Hunt, he called to the witness stand CIA figures Stansfield Turner, Richard Helms, G. Gordon Liddy, James Jesus Angleton, David Atlee Philips and an obscure CIA agent named Marita Lorenz.

Hunt was unable to confirm his alibi, that he was with his children in Washington, D.C., at the time of the assassination. Lorenz testified that she accompanied Frank Sturgis (later a Watergate burglar), along with two carloads of guns, to Dallas. There, she said she saw Hunt paying off other operatives -- including Jack Ruby, who later killed Lee Harvey Oswald.

Lorenz, a one-time lover of Fidel Castro and part of a failed CIA conspiracy to kill the Cuban dictator, became nervous and told Sturgis she

wanted to withdraw from the operation; she still did not know its objective. He agreed and drove her to the airport.

Later, she testified, Sturgis told her, "'We killed the president that day. You could have been part of it -- you know, part of history. No arrests, no real newspaper investigation. It was all covered, very professional.'"

The jury believed Lane's version of events, and acquitted the Liberty Lobby of the libel charge. The jury was out only two hours. Afterward, according to Lane, the jury foreman said that Lane had been asking a lot of the jury -- to conclude that the government killed the president. But the evidence was convincing.

Lane became interested in the assassination immediately after Kennedy's death. He had known the president, had worked in the Kennedy presidential campaign in New York. He later was elected to the New York state legislature, largely on the basis of the president's endorsement.

"'We chose a president and the lights began to burn at night in the White House for the first time since before the eight years of the Ike Age,'" Lane says. "'It was not like now, when life is dominated by greed. Kennedy was saying, 'Ask not . . . ' And a few guys in Langley, Va., (where the CIA is headquartered) were able to cancel the election.'"

THE REASON the CIA killed Kennedy, Lane says, is that the president planned to disband the agency in 1964 and create a new intelligence organization with Robert Kennedy at its head. Furious with the incompetence of the CIA in the Bay of Pigs invasion, Kennedy also planned to withdraw all American advisers from Vietnam and to pursue relations with Castro.

"'The CIA saw Kennedy destroying everything it had worked for,'" Lane says. "'For 10 years, Vietnam had been its personal playground.'"

When news of the assassination began coming, Lane was immediately alerted by the inconsistencies between the known facts and the official pronouncements from police and federal authorities. Most striking was the insistence that Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone assassin, even though no investigation had yet taken place. Authorities claimed Oswald shot the president from behind, but doctors who operated on Kennedy said the bullet hole at the front of his neck was an entrance wound.

Today Lane believes there is no evidence that Oswald was involved in the assassination at all, but that he was set up in an elaborate ruse to be the fall guy.

Lane pursued a wealth of such details. He testified before the Warren Commission, and later published "'Rush to Judgment,'" a book that compared the inconsistencies between the commission's one volume conclusion -- that Oswald acted alone -- and the 26 volumes of evidence. Lane claims the CIA and FBI blocked publication of the book, intimidating 16 major publishers into dropping it, before it was brought out by Holt, Rinehart in 1966.

While also working as a successful, high-profile attorney (he helped free James Richardson, a Florida man wrongfully convicted of poisoning his seven children), he continued to investigate not only the assassination of JFK, but also those of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. His other books include "'The Strongest Poison'" (1979), which asserts CIA involvement in the Jonestown massacre; and "'Code Name Zero'" (1977), which claims FBI complicity in the King assassination.

Lane was also an adviser to Jim Garrison, the New Orleans prosecutor and hero of the new Oliver Stone film, "'JFK.'" Garrison tried to convict businessman Clay Shaw as a conspirator in the Kennedy assassination, but lost. Shaw was acquitted, and Garrison was held up to national derision. Nonetheless, he was elected to the state appeals court and enjoyed a successful judicial career from which he has recently retired.

LANE HAS NOT yet seen "'JFK,'" but he has read the shooting script. He says it is more fiction than fact. The reason: Stone backs off from implicating the CIA, instead spreading the guilt around so widely that it leaves no one really responsible.

"'I was with Garrison all the way,'" Lane says. "'He said the CIA killed you

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president. Now you can say Garrison was right or wrong, but you can't accurately tell the story without saying that he blamed the CIA."

Shaw was acquitted largely because Garrison could not connect him with the CIA. However, in the Hunt trial, Lane asked former CIA director Richard Helms who Shaw was; Helms identified him as a contract CIA agent.

Stone, Lane believes, originally planned to finger the CIA, but was intimidated into backing off by attacks and intimidation by the CIA and its stooges in the press. (Lane doesn't have a high opinion of the press, ever since reporters lapped up the official line in the aftermath of JFK's death).

Nonetheless, Lane says the Stone film, along with "'Plausible Denial,'" will bring the assassination back to the forefront of the American agenda. Though published by a small house, Lane's book sold out of its first printing in one day; some 120,000 copies are currently in print.

Few Americans believe Oswald acted alone, Lane says. A head of state can be assassinated in a democracy, and the event won't undermine the system, Lane says. But when the president is killed by the government and no one is prosecuted, "'the soul of the nation is in doubt.'"