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The Furor Over  
"JFK"

**Oliver Stone  
Defends His Movie**  
*by Jennet Conant*

**The Real Jim Garrison**  
*by Nicholas Lemann*





# The Man Who Shot

# "JFK"

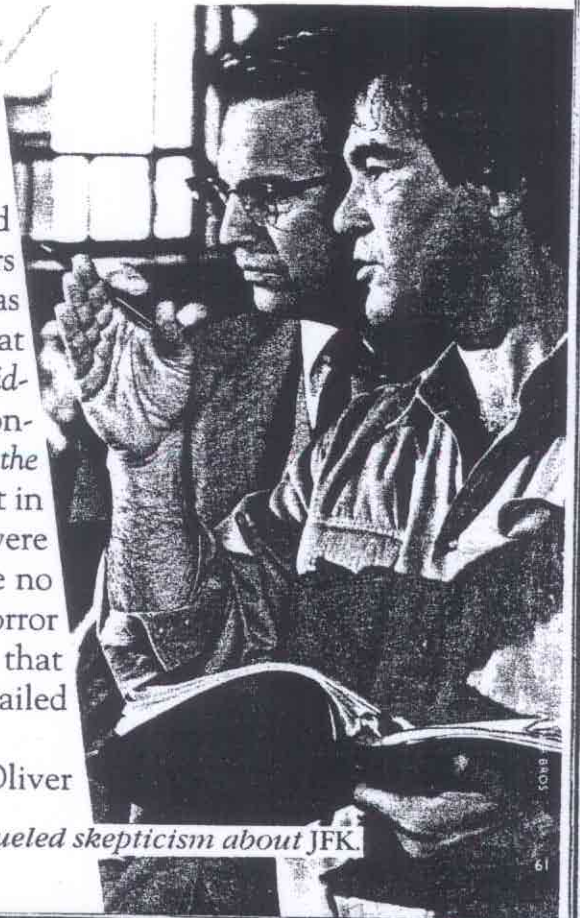
Director Oliver Stone turns his obsession with all that is shameful and unresolved in American history to the mysteries of the Kennedy assassination  
By Jennet Conant

When Pauline Kael, the legendary critic for *The New Yorker*, announced her retirement last year, she listed as one of her reasons for leaving that she couldn't bear to watch another Oliver Stone film.

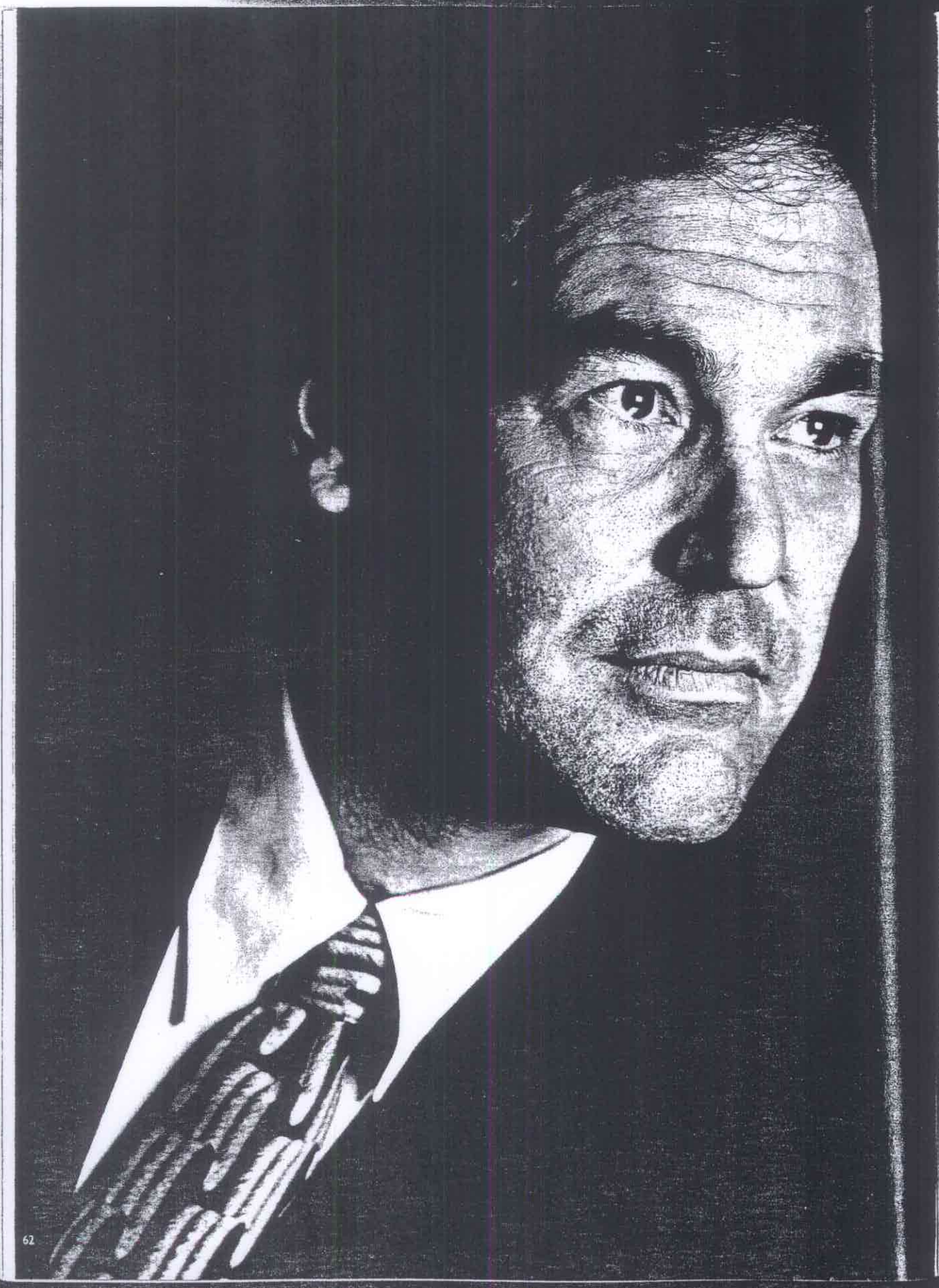
She hadn't even seen *The Doors* yet.

Ending a twenty-three-year career rates as a mild reaction compared to the effect two or three hours alone in a dark room with an Oliver Stone film has had on some folks: The Turks reviled him for what they perceived to be the negative stereotypes in *Midnight Express*. Chinese-Americans organized nationwide protests and boycotts over the racism in *Year of the Dragon*. And the Cubans put out the unwelcome mat in Miami due to the sadism in *Scarface*. And those were just his screenplays. His early directorial efforts were no more popular—1981's *The Hand* was a low-budget horror pic about a severed mitt with murderous tendencies that one critic found so offensive, he immediately hailed Stone as the Antichrist of moviemaking.

Ten years, six movies and three Oscars later, Oliver Stone with Costner, whose casting as Jim Garrison has fueled skepticism about JFK.









Stone is still the auteur everyone loves to hate. No matter that *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* made Vietnam vets cry and put the country on the couch for some collective-guilt therapy. To his critics, Stone is dangerous to the public health—a gonzo crusader with a talent for tapping big, messy emotions. He keeps poking into the Pentagon's past, getting the national psyche all hot and bothered about things best left to the shredder. Now, with *JFK*, his dramatic three-hour-long, \$40 million reexamination of the Kennedy assassination that stars Kevin Costner and a cast of hundreds, Stone has historians, pundits and pols from the Left and the Right foaming at the mouth, accusing him of being "morally repugnant" (*Chicago Tribune*) and seeing "conspirators hiding under every bed" (*Time*).

These days, everybody hates a liberal, but a righteous reformer from LaLa Land—especially one who's been caught with powder up his nose and his trousers down—now that they really can't stand. Stone, with his party-hearty past and Hollywood hubris, is a big target. The prevailing disdain for Stone's restaging of the Kennedy killing was probably best expressed by former *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee, who turned to Frank Mankiewicz, a former press secretary for Robert Kennedy who has been recruited to do damage control on *JFK*, at a recent Washington function and demanded "Who the hell does this young punk think he is, anyway?"

"I don't know why, really, they get so hysterical," says Stone softly, sounding almost hurt. "I suppose I do provoke very strong reactions in people."

It may be the first and only time Oliver Stone could ever be accused of understatement.

For several weeks now, Stone has locked himself in a suite of sleek offices,

in the same building as Skywalker Sound, in Santa Monica, California, where he and four editors are working around the clock to cut *JFK* in time for Christmas. Standing in a narrow hallway, Stone seems to loom larger than his six-foot frame. The man, like his movies, comes on way too strong. "He's very big, like a giant grizzly bear," says actor Terence Stamp, who was in *Wall Street*. "He's gentle, but from a base of power. He exudes charisma, a kind of really positive masculine energy."

"Like the old Brando image," says Stone's pal Chuck

Pfeifer, "Ollie's very much the sensitive brute."

It's almost spooky how much Stone recalls Brando's beefy, brooding longshoreman in *On the Waterfront*, all raw animalism and barely contained contradictions. He has broad shoulders and no neck, the thick hands and stubby fingers of a boxer, and a gap between his front teeth that seems to confirm a pugilistic personality. Stone can be roguishly handsome, with a great bulldog smile, but his good looks are offset by the naturally sulky cast of his features. With his coal-black hair, heavy brows and inky eyes, he seems to be in mourning for mankind's lost innocence.

The reason for today's tragic mood, of course, is his Kennedy movie, which is being assailed on all sides months before its release. Several publications, most notably *Time* and *The Washington Post*, went so far as to obtain copies of the unfinished script for their unfavorable advance reviews—something Stone finds grossly unfair. "It's premature, it's precensorship, it's precriticism," he rails. "In my opinion, it's just immoral."

Kevin Costner, who plays the controversial New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison, loyally defends Stone. "To grab his script and leak it borders on being a kind of criminal act," says Costner. "It's so out of bounds. And it's mean. It's been hard for Oliver to work when he's under attack and being turned into a cartoon."

Back in the trenches, Stone sounds embattled, embittered and, as far as that goes, pretty much in his element. His voice drops to a low whisper, presumably exhausted from the constant effort expended in defense of his craft. "It's taken a lot of time and energy not only to make the movie but to defend my right to make it while I was shooting it," he says.

When it comes to moral indignation, Stone's a champ. There are so many people on his list of Public Enemies that he can't possibly mention them all by name. "I don't have that much faith in the Older Generation, having been raked over the coals by them," he starts ranting again. "I don't have faith in Ben Bradlee. No faith. I have no faith in the Establishment, the more I get to know them. . . ."

When was the last time anyone you know used terms like "the Establishment" and "the Older Generation" in serious conversation? College? Stone has about him the impenetrable melancholia of sophomore year. And the same us-kids-against-them mentality. But he's hip enough to love it when critics accuse him of still working through some post-adolescent rebellion. "I like that, yeah, that's a compliment," he says, grinning. "To be called an adolescent at the age of 45. . . to be a man-child. . . ." He gets a faraway

"I suppose I do provoke very strong reactions in people," says Stone.



look, as if he's savoring some blinder-and-flashlight fantasy, when suddenly his eyes snap back and he adds with great solemnity, "But it's a compliment only if I believe I have something to be truly rebellious about, and I believe I do."

Such intensity is hard to resist. Back in college, guys like Stone were called *deep*. They'd walk around quoting Blake, Nietzsche and the Old Testament, mumbling "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil" before they went home for the holidays. Pfeifer, an advertising executive turned actor who has appeared in three of Stone's movies and is the godfather of his 7-year-old son, Sean, says, "Ollie is out there. His politics can be ludicrous at times. And he makes these outrageous fucking statements. But 'brilliance' is a word I don't throw around in a foolhardy manner, and I think he's a true genius."

"He's a very volatile, passionate guy," explains actor Willem Dafoe, who appeared in *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*. "One of his talents is instilling in everyone a certain excitement and a sense of mission. He's very ambitious, very driven. He wants to make things happen. He's always upping the ante. With Oliver, the stakes are always very high."

Stone's films are the sort of tortured, symbol-laden, autobiographical works psychiatrists like to call "a cry for help." He is the first to admit that he identifies wholeheartedly with his macho heroes—usually outwardly ass-holic but intrinsically good fellows—who are at war with pretty much everything: themselves, their fathers, authority, the system and, not infrequently, the Vietnamese. They suffer through rites of passage that end up being more painful than profound. The cynical Boyle (James Woods) in *Salvador* and the wet-behind-the-ears recruit Chris (Charlie Sheen) in *Platoon* are so dim that they're half-dead before the bulb finally lights up in their head: *War is hell*.

It's virtually impossible to miss the point of Oliver Stone's pictures, which are rooted in the tradition of cinematic overkill handed down from Cecil B. De Mille to Brian De Palma. At the heart of every film is the same showdown at the O.K. Corral: good versus evil, truth versus corruption, the individual versus society, the PTA versus the CIA, etc. Stone is preoccupied with the idea that the bad guys are the ones wearing badges. The biggest villains commit crimes in the name of God and country.

"There are no gray areas with Oliver," says New York actor Michael Wincott, a buddy of Stone's who has been in three of his movies. "He is never hesitant to grab people by the throat. He has a healthy amount of disgust for the way things are, and unlike most people in his field, he doesn't think we are at a time in this nation or this world when we can afford the luxury of pandering and trivializing."

It's Stone's best defense: He's either courageous or a crackpot—or both—but at least he's not making *Home Alone 2*.

"As my dad always used to say, 'Don't tell the truth; it will get you into trouble,'" Stone says, laughing caustically. He shakes his head, letting out a long, heavy sigh. "That's the idealism in me. My God, you've got to tell the truth. The little boy in me: *You've got to tell the truth.*"

He's in character again, Oliver the Outraged, a Don Quixote off to slay the biggest hypocrites in the land.

"The guy is struggling with demons," says Dafoe. "He's conflicted. It gives everything he does a certain kind of drama, a certain passion. He's not at peace."

## When Stone first headed down to New Orleans, in the late summer

of 1990, to meet Jim Garrison, he wasn't absolutely sure the big, brash Louisiana lawyer was his kind of hero.

After all, Garrison has gone down in history as a cheap, headline-hunting demagogue of the Huey Long variety. In



Costner with Tommy Lee Jones (*Clay Shaw*) and Michael Rooker (*Garrison's assistant Bill Broussard*); with movie wife Sissy Spacsek; with Joe Pesci (*David Ferrie*).

1969, Garrison, then New Orleans's district attorney, put a local businessman named Clay L. Shaw on trial for conspiring to kill President John F. Kennedy and wound up creating a national scandal that embarrassed himself and the whole city when the jury acquitted Shaw in an hour. At the time, there were dark suggestions about Garrison's being connected to the Mob—including an indictment for allowing payoffs on pinball gambling (he was later acquitted) and allegations that he was a stooge for a notorious gangland figure named Carlos Marcello.

Stone became intrigued by Garrison's bizarre saga in

# The best defense of Stone as a or a crackpot—or both—but at least he's



# Garrison has gone down in history as a cheap, headline-hunting demagogue.

1988, after reading his newly published memoir, *On the Trail of the Assassins*. The intervening years had done nothing to dull the prosecutor's zeal for his investigation, and he laid out a compelling—if self-serving—Dashiell Hammett-style account of his efforts to build a case against several men he suspected to be conspirators, and of how he was thwarted at every turn by the local and national media, government officials, the CIA and the FBI. Garrison, recently retired from the Louisiana court of appeal, detailed not only the existence of an elaborate conspiracy to eliminate the president but also a massive cover-up, an organized

book-lined chambers, Stone threw everything at the judge—all the old accusations that he was nothing but a self-aggrandizer, a corrupt prosecutor, a front man for the Mob. Garrison, a once physically imposing man worn down by illness, calmly listened. (He later told a friend that the encounter had mightily taxed his patience.)

Finally, after some three hours of questions, Garrison looked at the director and inquired "Are you finished?" When Stone nodded, Garrison continued, "Good. Now, young man, why don't you take your people up north, where Carlos Marcello is in jail, and go ahead and make



effort to discredit anyone who did not corroborate the "official story": that a disaffected ex-marine named Lee Harvey Oswald did it with his mail-order rifle and World War II-issue ammo. Garrison's chilling conclusion: Kennedy's killing was tantamount to a coup d'état in our own country, a political murder carried out by anticommunist foes.

It's heady stuff. Stone read the book three times and optioned the story for \$250,000. For him, the tale of one man's battle against the Establishment had immediate resonance: Here was another Capraesque underdog, like *Born on the Fourth of July's* Ron Kovic. Garrison had pursued his beliefs down a dangerous, disastrous course, was publicly ridiculed and lived to write about it twenty years later. In Stone's tough-guy vernacular, "Jim stood by his guns."

But before he committed to a movie glorifying Garrison, Stone needed to confront the 71-year-old crusader mano a mano. In their first long session together, in Garrison's

your movie about Carlos Marcello."

"Do you mean that?" an incredulous Stone asked.

"I certainly do," the old man said and got up and walked out.

It was love at first fight. According to one member of the JFK crew, Stone called Garrison the next day to set up a second meeting, but the interrogation phase was over: "Garrison had told him to go to hell. He's a no-bullshit, macho guy. From then on, Oliver was convinced he was for real."

Slumped in a black swivel chair, a small white notepad in the palm of one hand, Stone is taking copious notes on our conversation in his blunt, stabbing scrawl. A leather-cased tape recorder is also documenting the interview for his "protection" (all that precensorship, precriticism business has made him a little nervous).

As a filmmaker is that he's either courageous or he's not making *Home Alone 2*.



Despite Garrison's god-awful reputation, Stone stands by his man. "Jim never pandered to me," he says respectfully. "He never wanted to get the movie made." Stone even went so far as to give him a cameo role, rich in irony: Garrison gets to play his old foe, Chief Justice Earl Warren.

"Jim was twenty-three years in the military, he was second in command of his region for the National Guard, he was a pilot in World War II, three times district attorney, an ex-FBI agent, appellate judge, and he's written books," Stone recites. "He's not the loony tune that I had pictured as a kid."

Since the conventional wisdom on Garrison is that he represents the "far-out fringe" of conspiracy theorists, Stone prepared for the onslaught of criticism from recognized Kennedy scholars and the so-called "assassination community": every historian, journalist and conspiracy buff who has made a living out of trying to resolve the Kennedy murder mystery. "We use Garrison, in a sense, as a metaphoric protagonist," explains Stone. "He stands in for about a dozen researchers, and in that sense we take liberties and make his work larger, and make him more of a hero. I know I'm going to get nailed for that."

Stone has already been nailed for casting America's favorite nice guy as Garrison (Sissy Spacek plays his long-suffering wife), but he insists that using Costner doesn't mean he's glossing over Garrison's shortcomings. "Garrison, I admit, made many mistakes, trusted a lot of weirdos and followed a lot of fake leads," concedes Stone. "But he went way out on a limb, way out. And he kept going, even when he knew he was facing long odds." And if there's one quality Stone admires in a man, it's stubbornness.

"This is a man without fear," agrees Costner, who says he read up on the period but felt "at a certain point, you've got to go with the script." Costner met with Garrison several times and studied his mannerisms and accent. "He was a very commanding presence, a man who was made to look foolish by history and given ulterior motives," says Costner, who tries, in the film, to obscure his handsomeness behind nerd glasses and Brylcreem'd hair. "In the end, it's very difficult to know the truth. What I believe is the emotional truth of the movie, the aspects above and beyond Garrison."

Both the star and the director maintain that Garrison comes across as the deeply flawed man he really is. Costner cites a speech (since deleted from the finished film) that sums up Stone's view of the infamous prosecutor. Garrison compares himself to the old fisherman in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*: "The old fisherman manages to catch this great fish, a fish so huge, he has to tie it to the side of the boat to get it back in. But by the time he reached shore, the fish had long since been picked apart by sharks, and nothing was left but the skeleton." "It's all about his obsession," says Costner. "Here's a man who was willing to take everybody down, and at great risk to himself."

## That speech, of course, could also apply to Stone. On the set of *JFK*, "Oliver

was possessed," says Gary Oldman, who plays Lee Harvey Oswald. "He brought a sense of urgency and aggression to it. I likened it to being in the army. When we were rehearsing, it was like 'Let's synchronize our watches.'"

*JFK* took Dallas by storm. The front line featured a staggering array of big names: Walter Matthau, Jack Lemmon, Donald Sutherland, John Candy, Kevin Bacon, Joe Pesci, Ed Asner and Tommy Lee Jones. Oliver's army descended and, with its cinematic imperative for historical accuracy, spent \$4 million and employed nearly 800 locals to turn back the clock at the old Texas School Book Depository, in Dealey Plaza. The director donated \$50,000 to the Dallas County Historical Foundation for permission to use the sixth floor of the depository so the sight angles on the rifles would be just right. He had billboards removed. Storefronts repainted. Traffic rerouted.

Then, as Stone gave the signal, that familiar motorcade of open-air Lincoln limousines started slowly down the roadway. There was Jackie in her pink pillbox hat. Then came the shots: one, two, three, four? five?

With everyone busy dodging all manner of bullets, things were bound to be a bit dicey on the set. "Everybody could feel the tension," recalls Costner. "We came very close to disaster."

Stone was shooting a scene in Dealey Plaza with about a hundred extras assembled right below the fateful sixth-floor window of the depository when a big sheet-glass window came loose and hurtled to the ground. "It was coming straight down like a guillotine," says Costner. "It would have cut some people right in two. But at the last minute, the wind caught it, and it fell in the middle of nothing. It was remarkable. We were all shaken. As the shattered glass was swept up, I just projected that it was the blemish on American history and those who didn't want the movie to go forward."

Many in Hollywood believe that *JFK* will be Stone's *Apocalypse Now*, a monster of a movie that will be debated and dissected, loved and hated. (In a preemptive move, Stone has commissioned a documentary about the research behind the movie, produced by filmmaker Danny Schechter and scheduled to air on HBO this month. An annotated version of the complete *JFK* script will be published by Warner Books.) Stone's detractors, however, dismiss the movie as another *Mississippi Burning*—a supposedly fact-based film that turns out to be rotten fiction, where the "good guys" are, in reality, the bad guys.

In truth, the Kennedy assassination remains one of the murkier chapters of American history. Almost all the cru-

# "I'm more concerned with why Kennedy was killed than who or how."



cial "facts" are open to dispute, with everyone from coroners who were on the scene to forensic specialists from across the country arguing over the veracity of the autopsy photos and the correct interpretation of Abraham Zapruder's horrifying 5.6-second film of the mortal wounding of Kennedy. Much of what passes for evidence—such as the "magic bullet" that struck Kennedy, changed directions twice and then hit Governor John Connally Jr., who'd been sitting in front of Kennedy—defies logic.

Depending on whose "expert testimony" you care to listen to, Kennedy was killed by three, or as many as seven, shots fired by one or more gunmen positioned at the Book Depository and/or across the street, on the now-historic grassy knoll. If there was more than one shooter, there was a conspiracy of some kind, and consequently also a cover-up. The whos and whys are awfully iffy. But Stone isn't the only one persevering in this tangled terrain: A recent five-part documentary on the A&E Cable Network, *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*, and several forthcoming books claim to shed new light on who assassinated Kennedy and why.

It would seem that just about the only Americans with any faith in the Warren Commission's 1964 report concluding that Oswald had acted alone were the seven members of the commission, and even that's questionable. A poll of the Clay Shaw jury in 1969 found that the majority believed that there had been a conspiracy but just didn't think Garrison had the goods. In 1979, a House investigation committee concluded that Kennedy was "probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy" and that further inquiry was merited, but its recommendation was never followed up. Harrison Livingstone, coauthor of two recent books about the Kennedy assassination, has summed up the situation this way: "Both Stone and Garrison are well-meaning men bringing charges without the evidence. They're trying to tell the truth, but the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

"Some people will say we're fiction," grumbles Stone. "I would have avoided all this bullshit if I'd said this is fiction from the get-go." It makes critics queasy when Stone says his composite characters and condensed chronology are "faithful to the spirit of events." But as Zachary Sklar, the editor of Garrison's book and the coauthor, with Stone, of the JFK screenplay, argues, "Since nobody agrees on anything, nobody is distorting history. The only official history is the Warren Commission report, and that nobody believes."

Stone, an expression of exquisite pain on his face, patiently defends his methods. No, he is not going to stamp all over the Kennedy legacy in his combat boots. In fact, he is going Zen, using an open-ended technique called Rashomon, after the Japanese film classic that juxtaposed different scenarios of the same event. It's a subtle, suggestive approach, with the speculative sequences set off in sepia tones, theoretically leaving the audience to arrive at its own conclusions. But then again, subtlety is not this guy's strong suit. Stone drops some heavy hints about who Kennedy's murderers might have been: high-ranking members of the CIA, the military-industrial complex and the Pentagon. In



*The man's man at rest: Stone with his wife, Elizabeth, and their son, Sean.*

the final scenes, he chases his government-conspiracy theory all the way to the Pentagon, suggesting that Kennedy had been assassinated so that war could be waged in Vietnam.

"I believe the Warren Commission [finding] is a great myth, and in order to fight a myth, maybe you have to create another one," says Stone. "The Warren Commission [report] was accepted at the time of its release for its soothing Olympian conclusion that a lone nut committed this murder. I suppose our movie is a countermyth: that the man was killed by larger political forces, with more-nefarious and sinister objectives."

He stops short of naming names. "I don't know who did it," he says in a half-whisper. "I have a feeling about what happened. I have a *feeling*. I'm more concerned in a way with why Kennedy was killed than who or how." He pauses before adding "The 'why,' though, is key."

Oliver Stone was 17 when John Kennedy was assassinated, and it affected him profoundly. "The Kennedy murder was one of the signal events of the postwar generation, my generation," he says, lapsing into his pulpit voice. "Vietnam followed, then the bombing of Cambodia, the Pentagon Papers, the Chile affair, Watergate, going up to Iran-Contra in the Eighties. We've had a series of major shocks. And I think the American public smells a rat that's been chewing on the innards of the government for years."

Something much more personal than politics is eating at Stone. "I'm a child of distortions," he says. "I grew up reading fake history. I'm still groping my way, trying to figure it out, to see the truth, to (continued on page 137)



## THE BIG SLEAZY

paid me back, and in this case, it just was a matter of this kid was really trying to put his life together, and I helped him out."

"Did he pay you back?"

"He's attempting to. I have to tell you, I don't personally care whether he does or he doesn't. It's only money."

"Hey, goombah! How ya doin'?" Pellicano had the phone in his ear. Men he barely knew were "buddy" or "pal" or "partner" or "ace." But not all men.

"How ya doin', honey?" Pellicano said to the next caller. He listened. "Yeah," he said, smiling bigger than he had all day, and hung up.

"Who was that?" I asked, figuring it was Kat, Mrs. Pellicano.

"Guess." He was still smiling.

I didn't.

"Okay, I'll give you a hint: Marlon Brando."

"That was Brando?"

He looked at me the way a toll collector looks at an out-of-town driver who pays with a twenty and wants directions.

"Robert Shapiro," Pellicano said. Brando's lawyer.

"What about the 'honey'?"

Calling men "honey," Pellicano said, throws off the eavesdroppers.

I thought about Brando. And about the fact that, without guys like Brando, with problems like Brando's, people like Anthony Pellicano would have problems, and the worst of them wouldn't be eavesdropping. But people like Brando would always have Brando-sized problems.

"If you want, I will let you read a story idea that I've just put together," he said. "Would you like that?"

I said I would.

"Stacey girl!" he called, bringing in a blonde who didn't hurt the eyes and send-

ing her to fetch the document.

"I've got several semi-deals going," he told me while we waited for Stacey to come back. "I'll have a pilot on the air or a series in the works by this time next year." (The project with Michael Mann stalled when Mann went off to North Carolina to shoot *The Last of the Mohicans*.)

Seeing the question coming, he again recited the Pellicano Principle. "For only one reason," he said. "Money. There is nothing else, besides being a drug dealer, that will bring you the amount of money that you can make in the movie business."

Stacey returned. "Let me know when you're done," he said, handing me nine typewritten pages and leaving the room. "Take your time."

It was quite a saga. The story of two boys from the same Chicago neighborhood. They were as close as brothers. One grows up to be an FBI agent, discarding "as much of his ethnicity as possible," including his Italian name. The other becomes a private eye, working for the Outfit. The agent ends up investigating the shamus, old friend versus old friend. Shots are fired amid a Greek tragedy subplot about confused parentage. Gritty, Michael Mann sort of stuff. Aaron Spelling had already read the treatment and liked it. I thought of what Sly had told me, that Pellicano's life "was the kind of a script that can only get better as his experiences grow." One of the characters in this piece had to be Anthony Pellicano, probably the gumshoe, on the right side of the law. I figured the dick was his chum Paul DeLucia or one of the unclean types he'd tracked down.

Pellicano said I was wrong. He said he was both.

*Peter Wilkinson wrote about Patsy Kensit in the October 1991 GQ.*

## OLIVER STONE

(continued from page 67) understand what really happened."

A year before the Kennedy assassination sent the country reeling, Stone's parents' abrupt divorce shattered his world. The only child of a colorful French Catholic mother and a conservative Jewish father, a well-known Wall Street stockbroker, Stone was raised in the same affluent WASP style as his prep-school mates on the Upper East Side of New York. He went to Trinity School and then to the posh Hill School, shared his father's anti-Roosevelt politics and thought he had, in his words, "a happy life."

Then Hill's headmaster called Stone and broke the news that neither of his parents had the courage to tell him. "It was a very sudden twist—my parents had not loved each other and were committing adulteries

on both sides," says Stone. "Later, my father said he was deep in debt from my mother's spending and the divorce. . . . I think I got a sense that everything had been stripped away. That there was a mask on everything, and underneath there was a harder truth, a deeper and more negative truth. And I felt very alone in the world at that point."

Though Stone graduated high school and entered Yale, he once said that during those years he felt as if he'd gone from "the golden boy to the ugly duckling." He dropped out of college and went to Vietnam for six months, to teach English. He drifted into the merchant marines, then in one rage-filled, self-destructive act, enlisted in the army, in 1967. Looking back, he says his parents' betrayal, of each other and of him, "was the beginning for me of the

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## OLIVER STONE

road that led to Vietnam early. I had to get out of America. I reassessed everything. It really darkened my whole world."

By the time Stone returned to the United States, in 1968, he was one of the walking wounded. His reentry into society began with a bust for marijuana possession; his father had to fork over \$2,500 in payoffs to pry him out of a San Diego jail. Stone freely admits he tried to lose himself in a mountain of cocaine.

By 1969, Stone was churning out blood-splattered screenplays and studying with Martin Scorsese at New York University's film school. He was supported by his first wife, Najwa Sarkis, a Lebanese national seven years his senior. His first movie, *Seizure*, which he wrote and directed, died at the box office. What followed was a disappointing, drugged-out decade of scratching together a living as a cabdriver and a messenger. This period was punctuated by the occasional lucrative project, such as *Conan the Barbarian*, which he coauthored. "I was trying to borrow money here and there, hustling, trying to make it as a screenwriter," recalls Stone. His career didn't really take off until *Salvador*, a film he cowrote and directed, in 1986.

He had already begun work on *Platoon*, which would soon establish him as the era's quintessential macho filmmaker. While much has been written about Stone's obsession with war, his rage against authority figures seems more to the point. For Stone, his parents' divorce and the Kennedy assassination were double tragedies. Had neither of them occurred, Stone wouldn't have found himself at war with the world. It is easy to understand his romanticized view of the fallen president. "I don't think Kennedy ever would have gotten into the mess we did in '64," he says passionately. "Not even close. There would have been no Vietnam as we know it."

If Stone is working out the past in his pictures, his body of work is a pretty frightening commentary on his opinion of women. "What would I do with an Anne Tyler novel?" he asks. When pressed about why the years haven't taken the edge off his attitude, he beats a hasty retreat to the door and says with obvious glee "I have to take a piss now." On his return, he explains that he is "still working on" his relationship with his mother, a flamboyant woman who took several lovers after her marriage ended. Stone recalls her as being "a big white-liar; she was white-lying all the time."

Stone says he is attracted to "the opposite type." His second wife, Elizabeth Cox, 42, operates as his de facto manager and is known to hover protectively around him on the set. Stone calls her "a saint," and it's no wonder. Tales about his unbecoming conduct while auditioning starlets for

*The Doors* are collected by certain Hollywood actresses as casting-couch classics.

Stone's friends all stare at the ceiling when the subject of women comes up. "Oliver works hard and he plays hard," says Oldman, a rowdy sort himself. "He's a man's man, really," another actor ventures. "Oliver is like one of those warrior chieftains who feels he has to sleep with all of the women in the tribe, not just the pretty ones."

Stone's habit of clashing with the actresses in his films has gotten him into tabloid trouble. There was the day that, on the set of *Wall Street*, Charlie Sheen stuck a sign on costar Sean Young's back that read "I AM THE BIGGEST CUNT IN THE WORLD." Young was outraged that Stone and the crew colluded with Sheen by not telling her about the sign, and the prank ended with the fuming actress taking off in a car packed with her pricey costumes. When a crew member apprehended her at the pass, she threw the garments at him, stripped the dress off her back and hopped back into the car, buck naked.

"Sean fucking Young," mutters Stone. "She was unbearable, totally unprofessional. I was proved right by the fact that nobody has been able to work with her. She is a monster of major proportions, or else chemically unbalanced."

Young, reached at her Arizona retreat, insists that Stone isn't a misogynist but that he just doesn't deal well with women. "When Charlie put that note on my back and the boys started playing jokes at my expense, it hurt my feelings," she says with uncharacteristic restraint. "Oliver should have stuck up for me, but he didn't. He let me be the butt of the joke. It's what guys do. He had to be one of the bros. They're all part of an old boys' club—[Michael] Ovitz, Kevin Costner, those CAA people. In the old boys' network, women are expendable."

Few of the actresses who have worked with Stone have anything good to say about him. "Yeah, they blacklisted me, those girls, Sean and Daryl [Hannah, who was in *Wall Street*]. They were attacking me in the press, and that set off all this," he says, unchastened. "Madonna, too. She was rapping me because I wouldn't give her the *Evita* role, because I wanted to work with Meryl Streep."

While *Evita* has been scratched, Stone says that he is currently working on a movie with a female protagonist, though he can't talk about it. Stone insists he has a very high opinion of the opposite sex: "I think women are totally equal to men in every way, except maybe upper-body strength."

Just when you think success and fatherhood might have had a calming effect on him, Stone says something sufficiently out-



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OLIVER STONE

rageous to reassure one that he is still the same raging adolescent. While he's no longer calling the big studios "cocksucker vampires"—he has only kind words for Warner Bros., which is financing *JFK*—it might be because he's too busy hurling invective at the press, dubbing the media "Doberman pinschers" for tearing apart his movie and pitting the public against him before it even gets into the theaters. "Everything I've done, I've done feeling good and clear in my conscience," he says piously. "*JFK* is the most important thing I've ever tried. No matter if the press drives me out of the country and I wind up making movies in England or France, it was damn worth it."

"Jim Garrison had a great line to Johnny Carson when Carson was tearing him up," says Stone, shifting back into rant mode. "He said 'Johnny, you can either make the issue me or John Kennedy, but by making the issue Jim Garrison, you're obviously trivializing it.' Well, if you make the issue Oliver Stone and his filmmaking, then basically you're doing the same work that the apologists for the Warren Commission are doing, which is continuing the lie."

Either way, count on Stone to charge at his attackers. He courts controversy. All this righteous indignation about the evil press is a little disingenuous, considering the media blitz—and the dozen or so magazine covers—he has orchestrated for *JFK*. His future projects will all draw the same kind of fire, given their subjects—from the assassination of gay political leader Harvey Milk to the incarceration of Indian-rights

activist Leonard Peltier, who was allegedly framed for the murder of two FBI agents. Doing daily battle with the powers that be feeds his passion. "The scrapper in him needs it," says Dafoe. "The truth is, he's a major player now in Hollywood. So he can't be the outsider anymore. One of the things he's dealing with is his identity."

It's getting late, and Stone looks bleary-eyed from hours in the editing room. He stands up heavily and starts to gather his things. Reaching into an innocuous-looking cardboard box on the table, he says offhandedly "I bought this today," pulling out a shiny silver-barreled .357 Magnum. Aiming it at the opposite wall, squinting as he lines up the sights, Stone explains that a religious cult near his house in Santa Barbara has been giving him some trouble. "I bought the gun for protection," he says, grinning perversely, "but they're going to say it's because I'm becoming paranoid."

It's Stone's favorite head game. He's throwing down the gauntlet, begging the media to distort his words and portray him as a pistol-packing kook. He's looking for an excuse, any excuse, to lead the next charge against a cruel and corrupt world. With *JFK*, he's pointing his popgun at the Pentagon, challenging it to bring on the heavy artillery. After one last flourish, Stone slips the pistol back into the box, and the last angry man in Hollywood heads into the sunset.

*Jennet Conant last wrote about Warren Littlefield, in the September 1991 GQ.*

A BEAU'S ART

(continued from page 101) of the French Republic.

One afternoon, Antonio found himself standing next to the Baron de Rothschild, holding a silver tray filled with the pins that Monsieur Damien was using in the process of reducing the size of the dinner jacket the baron was wearing. Antonio heard the baron boast to Monsieur Damien that he now had 7,000 sheep on his country estate. Just then, one of the Russian princes arrived and said "On my country estate, I have 7,000 *shepherds*."

The most challenging client for Monsieur Damien to fit properly was France's flying hero, Louis Blériot, who had often been injured in plane accidents and had a disproportionate figure. His hips were conspicuously off-center, and one of his legs was a few inches shorter than the other, requiring that one of his shoes be constructed with an elevated heel. Still, he was a fastidious dresser; favoring pin-striped suits, he ordered several at a time—all of which Monsieur Damien designed and tailored in slightly tilted ways that al-

lowed the material to hang flatteringly on the slanted body of the aviator, achieving an illusion of sartorial symmetry.

At times Antonio accompanied Monsieur Damien in his carriage to private fittings in the Paris homes or apartments of these leading clients, and early one evening, in a grand suite of the Hôtel de Crillon, where an archduke from Hungary was being fitted, Antonio could hear someone playing the piano magnificently in an adjoining room. "The music consisted almost entirely of Southern Italian love songs and the arias that we have grown up listening to," Antonio wrote to Joseph. "The door was slightly open, and as I stood helping Monsieur Damien with the archduke, I felt carried away by the sadness and beauty of the music. Then it stopped, and a lovely woman with blonde hair appeared in the doorway, wearing a long gown and a sparkling necklace. She apologized to the archduke because she did not realize we were there. The archduke introduced her as his wife to Monsieur Damien, who complimented her on her playing. She thanked

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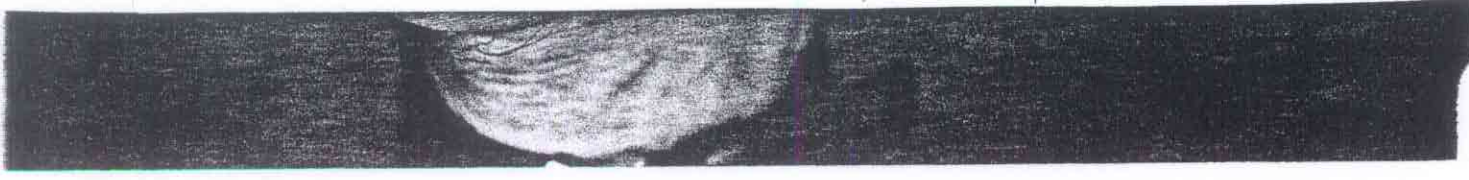
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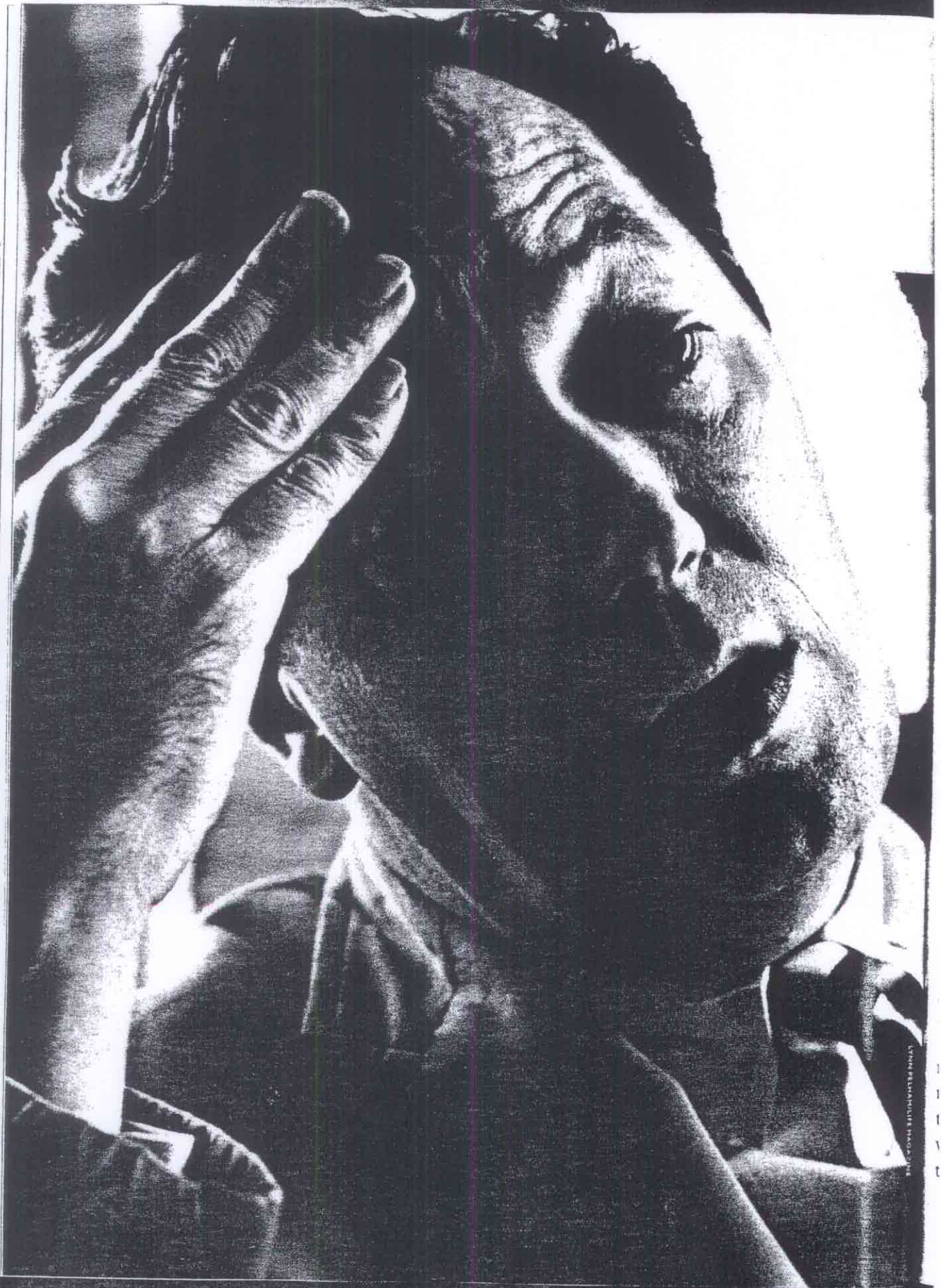
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# The Case Against Jim Garrison

He was the only prosecutor ever to file charges in the JFK murder.

Unfortunately, says the author, his reel story doesn't quite match his real story

I know life is supposed to be full of surprises, but sometimes one comes along that exceeds the limits of what you should have to put up with. I never thought I'd see someone make an all-out effort to rehabilitate Jim Garrison, the six-foot-seven, booming-voiced district attorney of New Orleans during the years I was growing up there, and the only man to prosecute someone for conspiring to assassinate John F. Kennedy. Garrison lost his case after one hour of jury deliberation. The responsible wing of the assassination-conspiracy community—meaning writer-investigators, such as Harold Weisberg and Edward Jay Epstein—has regarded him as an embarrassment for nearly a quarter-century. Although until this past November he was still working in New Orleans, where he served many years as an elected state judge, most people there place him in the same category as the colorful, roguish political figures from Louisiana's past, along with Earl Long.

As with Uncle Earl, Big Jim's reputational deliverance has come from Hollywood: In Oliver Stone's movie *JFK*, the Garrison character, played by Kevin Costner, is the hero. *Blaze* at least avoided the mistake of taking Earl Long seriously; *JFK*, from all advance indications (I have not seen the movie as of this writing), will portray Garrison straightforwardly as a hero of the *High Noon* variety—as, in Stone's words, "one of the few men of that time who had the courage to stand up to the Establishment and seek the truth." There are enough good journalists around today who covered Garrison back in his heyday to


By Nicholas Lemann



guarantee that Stone will be called on this. Still, because of the momentum of JFK's publicity, when it opens there will be an unavoidable feeling in the air that, well, by God, Garrison was onto something. It's easy to present the widespread opposition to him as a badge of honor. Courageous visionaries are always unpopular, aren't they?

In this case, though, everyone should face the unappealing truth: Establishment or no Establishment, Garrison was wrong. More than that: Garrison was a pernicious figure, an abuser of government power and the public trust, and if there's a deeper issue in American society that he exemplifies, it is that so many intelligent people prefer conspiracy-theorizing to facing this country's problems head-on.

**Jim Garrison,** actually Earling Carothers Garrison, was born in a small town in Iowa and grew up in New Orleans. In the sketchy biographical account he gives of himself in his books (*A Heritage of Stone* and *On the Trail of the Assassins*), he mentions, curiously, the influence of his grandfather but not of his father, and he doesn't say how his family wound up in the Deep South. If his father was a distant, cold or missing figure in his life, it wouldn't surprise me: People who have become fixated on



Garrison began as a reform-minded district attorney. His probe into Oswald's activities put New Orleans in the media spotlight.

## I remember feeling excited

the Kennedy assassination often are engaged in some sort of search for a lost father. Garrison had a generational link to Kennedy, too. He was born four years after Kennedy; served, like Kennedy, in World War II; and was elected district attorney of New Orleans a year after Kennedy was elected president.

In his early years in office, Garrison was a reformer. He got his job by upsetting a mossback incumbent and quickly made a name for himself by cleaning up the long-standing minor-vice rackets in the French Quarter that had existed under the unofficial sanction of the city and state political machines. In those days, New Orleans still thought of itself as the queen city of the South, not yet having succumbed to its present self-concept as a quaint tourist Mecca. Garrison, a young, articulate, handsome, well-read, crusading politician, was the object of quite a good deal of civic pride.

The official Garrison anecdote about how he decided to investigate the Kennedy assassination goes like this: In 1966, he got on a flight from New Orleans to New York and found himself sitting next to Louisiana Senator Russell Long, who told Garrison that he didn't find the Warren Commission's official report on the assassination credible. (Though Garrison doesn't mention this in his books, it seems relevant that Long is the son of an assassinated politician, the circumstances of whose death have always been in dispute.) Because Lee Harvey Oswald had spent the sum-

mer of 1963 in New Orleans, Garrison could, by stretching, claim that investigating the assassination was within his jurisdiction. He and his staff of assistant D.A.'s, along with an eccentric crew of conspiracy theorists from around the country—the stand-up comedian Mort Sahl, for example, and Mark Lane, later famous as an adviser to mass murderer-cult leader Jim Jones—went to work putting a case together (in secrecy, until the *New Orleans States-Item* blew their cover a year later).

The best thing the conspiracy theorists have going for them is the fact that if a lone assassin had shot President Kennedy from a sixth-floor window, he would have to have been a marksman of almost superhuman skill in order to kill Kennedy and wound Texas Governor John Connally Jr. in the few seconds when a clear shot at their car was possible. Without getting into the dense forest of four- and five-bullet (and two- and three-gunman) theories, clearly the most vulnerable point of the Warren Commission report is its contention that Oswald fired three shots and that one of them hit both Kennedy and Connally. The second-best thing conspiracy theorists have going for them is that Lee Harvey Oswald was not merely a loner and a misfit, but a loner and a misfit who had served in the U.S. Marine Corps, defected to the Soviet Union and then undefected and returned home. His extremely weird career involved spending time under the aegis of both superpower govern-





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# ed about Garrison's crusade...

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ments during the Cold War. The mechanics of Kennedy's murder and the details of Oswald's life are twin mother lodes for conspiracy theorists. But bear in mind that there is an enormous difference between, on the one hand, a few discrepancies, coincidences and lacunae and, on the other, actual proof that there was a conspiracy.

When Oswald was living in New Orleans, he worked in a manual-labor job at a coffee plant and, famously, formed a pro-Castro organization called the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, which got a good deal of publicity, considering it was a one-man, desk-drawer operation. To Garrison's mind, all of this was a cover: The real situation was that Oswald was caught in the webbing of a powerful network of right-wing militarists, who had placed him at the coffee company and had manufactured a leftist identity for him, all in preparation for the time when he would be blamed for (but wouldn't actually commit) Kennedy's murder.

## It's impossible to explain

Garrison's theory adequately without first saying that the hallmark of the Kennedy-conspiracy theorists is that the burden of proof always lies with the Warren Commission, never with them. The full Warren Commission report takes up twenty-six thick volumes, filled with a mass of evidence and testimony. In addition to the shortcomings in the way

the commission sequenced Oswald's shots, all of this information doesn't comprise a seamless web. There are loose ends and contradictions. On the other hand, the report does manfully shoulder the difficult task of presenting a comprehensive explanation of the assassination. While Garrison capitalizes on every flaw, or imagined flaw, of the report, as if each discovery invalidates the entire twenty-six volumes, he holds himself to a significantly lower evidential standard, where the sketchiest connections are held to prove the existence of the conspiracy and he never has to explain precisely how he thinks Kennedy was murdered or by whom.

So: The Reily Coffee Company was at 640 Magazine Street, on the edge of downtown New Orleans. Two blocks away, at 544 Camp Street, was the office of W. Guy Banister, a former FBI agent and deputy superintendent of police in New Orleans. In 1963, Banister was a private detective and a right-winger involved in anti-Castro activities. And on Oswald's pro-Castro Fair Play for Cuba leaflets was a return address—544 Camp Street! Garrison is a man who thinks in terms of "links," and to him this is a rock-solid one; he had no trouble asserting, as a proven fact, that Oswald and Banister knew each other. (Banister died in 1964, before Garrison began his investigation.)

The next link, also unsubstantiated, is between Guy Banister and a weird character named David Ferrie. In



1963, Ferrie had been fired from his job as an Eastern Airlines pilot and was making a living as a civil-aviation pilot. He was also participating energetically in the underground homosexual life of New Orleans. According to Garrison, Ferrie performed, under Banister's direction, espionage-related piloting missions to Cuba and Central America during the early Sixties. On the fateful morning of November 22, 1963, Ferrie and two male "companions" had driven from New Orleans to Houston for a weekend trip. To Garrison, this was a transparent attempt to establish an alibi; Ferrie's real job had been to transport unnamed conspirators from Dallas to Mexico, in a private plane, a few days later. Ferrie died in 1967, a year into Garrison's investigation.

Next link: David Ferrie and Lee Oswald. Garrison asserts, again with no hard evidence, that the two men were in the same Civil Air Patrol squadron in New Orleans and that Ferrie taught Oswald to fly and to shoot a high-powered rifle. Just before Ferrie died, the *New Orleans States-Item* broke the story that Garrison was investigating the Kennedy assassination, on the public's dime. (Afterward, a group of right-wing New Orleans businessmen funded the investigation privately.) The publicity increased the pressure on Garrison to produce a suspect, but the conspirators he had been focusing on—Oswald, Banister and Ferrie—were all dead. A final link was called for, and Garrison produced it: In March 1967, only a few days after the *States-Item* had blown his cover and Ferrie had died, Garrison arrested Clay L. Shaw, the retired director of the International Trade Mart in New Orleans.

Most of Garrison's suspects and witnesses were real fly-by-nighters, but Clay Shaw was a respectable figure. He was a tall, dignified, well-dressed white-haired man who, as head of the Trade Mart, had run a chamber-of-commerce-like organization. He wasn't rich or powerful, but he was settled, well-known and upper middle class. He was also gay. It would have been inconceivable at the time for an openly gay man to hold the job Shaw had, so he necessarily had a secret life. At least part of the time, he traveled in the kind of social circles where people didn't use their last names and otherwise kept their participation quiet. This gave him just enough of a shadowy edge to make him useful to Garrison. In fact, a good part of Garrison's case had an aspect of persecution of homosexuals about it; he had relied on the closeted nature of gay life to lend plausibility to his vision of an underground world of conspirators.

Garrison asserted that Shaw had known Ferrie and Oswald; that Shaw had helped recruit Oswald to his role as the fall guy in the assassination; and that Shaw's ironclad alibi for November 22—he was in California making a speech—only strengthened the case for his involvement in the conspiracy. Remember, it has never been proved to the satisfaction of anyone, except Garrison and his admirers, that Lee Oswald, Clay Shaw, David Ferrie and Guy Banister even knew one another. It's a testament to Garrison's manipulative skills that he was able to turn this weakness into a strength by spending Shaw's entire trial endeavoring to prove that the four men *had* known one another, as if that

was tantamount to nailing down their involvement in a conspiracy to kill the president. Virtually all of Garrison's oeuvre—meaning the Shaw trial, Big Jim's handful of lengthy interviews with sympathetic reporters, his two books about the Kennedy assassination and, presumably, *JFK*—is concerned with these "links," and nowhere does Garrison reveal how his four conspirators actually accomplished the murder or who fired the fatal bullets. (While we're on the subject of "links," I should mention, before Garrison or Stone does in a letter to the editor, that I have several of my own to the whole affair. My father and his brother are partners in a New Orleans law firm. One of the firm's long-standing clients is the very same Reily Coffee Company that had employed Lee Harvey Oswald. Another was the late Edith Stern, a liberal philanthropist, who was a friend and prominent supporter of Clay Shaw's. Also, my uncle worked on Garrison's campaign when he was first elected district attorney. And for twenty years, I've been a friend of Tom Bethell, a former investigator for Garrison who defected to the other side just before the Shaw trial began. To me, the lesson here is that, taking the "links" approach, just about everybody is a potential suspect.)

**Garrison has** always been similarly vague about the identity of the assassination plot's mastermind. In one typically Garrisonian locution on the subject, in a 1967 interview, he said "At midday on November 22, 1963, there were many men in many places glancing at their watches." Who were they? Who knows! Over the years, he has made dark, knowing references to the involvement of the FBI, the military-industrial complex and the oil business in the conspiracy, but his suspicions have centered on the CIA. There is much, much less than meets the eye to Garrison's conclusion that the CIA did it. All his evidence consists either of wild leaps of faith—David Ferrie is "linked" (to Garrison's satisfaction, though not to many others') to the CIA, therefore the CIA killed Kennedy—or rank speculation. When, exactly, did the CIA decide to assassinate the president? Who gave the order? How was the job carried out and then covered up? Garrison never comes anywhere near giving the answers to these questions.

In his more recent book, *On the Trail of the Assassins*—on which *JFK* is based—Garrison says the assassination "was instigated and planned long in advance by fanatical anti-communists in the United States intelligence community." Well, who were they? A few pages later, Garrison says there is no evidence that the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover, Chief Justice Earl Warren, the CIA's Allen Dulles or President Lyndon Johnson "had any prior knowledge or involvement in the assassination, but I would not hesitate to classify all of these men as accessories after the fact." Why? What did they do? And how were the real planners of the assassination able to carry out their fantastically detailed conspiracy without the head of the agency's noticing?

Garrison consistently gets himself off the hook of questions like these by implying it's miraculous that he, a lone

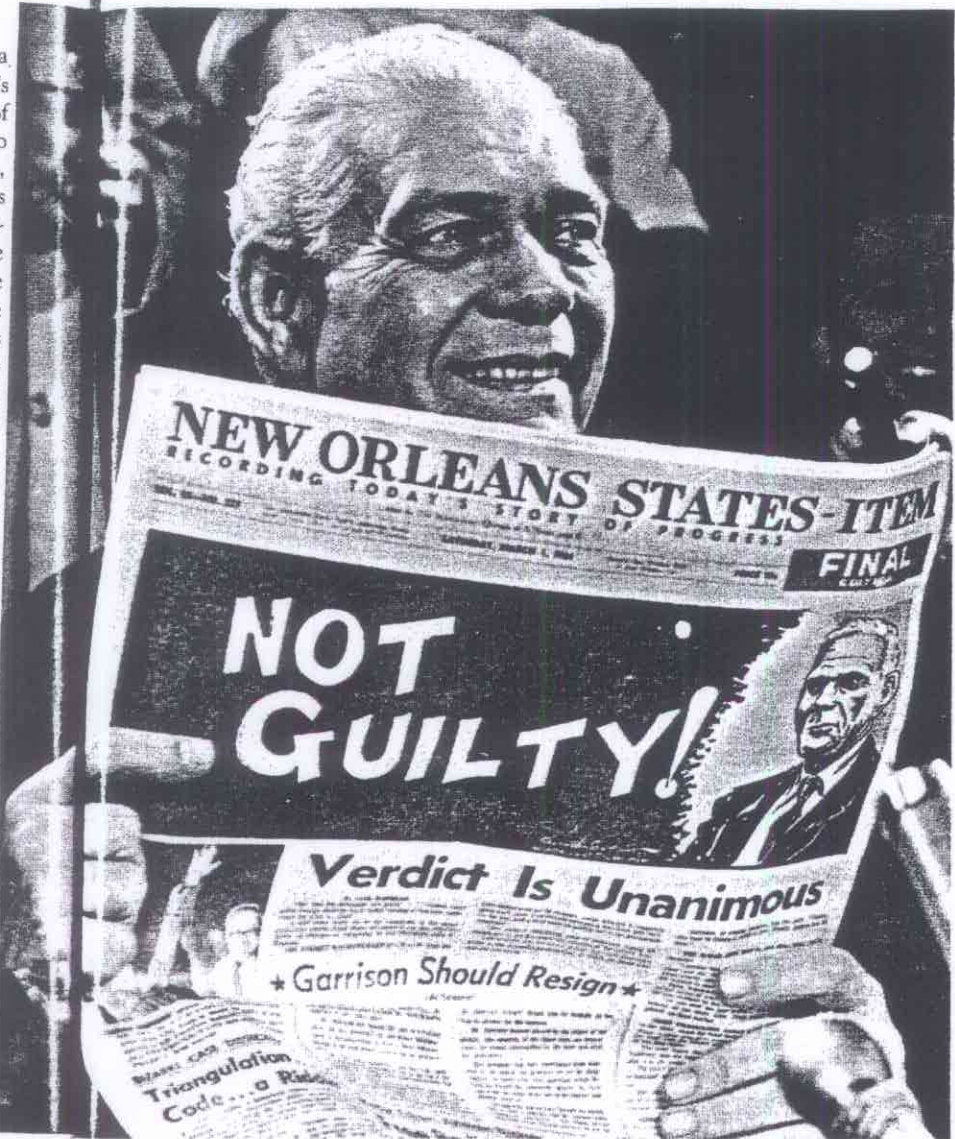


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ARWIDE WORLD



## It took the jury an hour to acquit Clay Shaw of conspiring to kill the president.

being "part of the warfare machine"; this thought hovers in the background of Garrison's unintentionally hilarious description of the depredations visited upon him when he appeared on *The Tonight Show*, which, in his retelling, is meant to make us wonder whether Johnny Carson was entirely uninvolved in the events of November 22.

**Garrison** presents the masterminds of the Kennedy assassination as being extremely far-reaching and clever—and yet, oddly enough, they were constantly making little mistakes that allowed Garrison to pick up their trail. Take the Clay Shaw trial. The obvious question was, Why didn't the conspirators entrust the hit to a more reliable crew? Garrison's key witness against Shaw, Perry Russo, was a young insurance salesman—cum-grifter who claimed to have overheard Shaw and Ferrie discussing the assassination at a party. Another witness, named Charles Speisel—a paranoid accountant who regularly fingerprinted his own children and claimed to have been hypnotized by people on the street dozens of times—told a

crusader, has been able to chip away even some of the smooth façade presented by the immensely rich and powerful conspirators; he can hardly be expected to have gotten all the answers. And when he's going after big fish, he's maddeningly elusive about exactly what accusation he is making. In his books, there is the implication, for example, that the big news media are somehow tied in to the conspiracy, but he's never actually said so directly. Back in the early days of the investigation, an editor from *Life* made friendly overtures to Garrison. A while later, as Garrison tells the story, the editor "suddenly flew in from New York. He seemed amiable enough, but he appeared to have lost a great deal of weight. He had deep circles under his eyes. His Ivy League clothes hung loosely on his thin frame. He informed me that *Life* would no longer be able to support me and work with me. . . ." We're supposed to think, aren't we, that the editor was tortured in some *Darkness at Noon*-style editorial dungeon. But Garrison doesn't say so. NBC's hostile coverage of the investigation is explained by its

similar story about overhearing Shaw and Ferrie casually planning Kennedy's murder at a different party. It's not like the CIA, as Garrison describes it, to be so sloppy as to allow such conversations to take place. A third witness, prison inmate Vernon Bundy, testified that while preparing himself a heroin fix on the well-traveled banks of Lake Pontchartrain, he had seen Shaw handing money to Oswald. Wouldn't it have been wiser for them not to have made this transaction in a public place?

I remember feeling excited about Garrison's crusade, in the early days: Finally, something of national import was happening in New Orleans. In the late Sixties, the word "Sunbelt" had not yet been coined, but there was an unmistakable sense that, one century later, the South was finally going to stop obsessing about the Civil War and transform itself. It was also clear that while cities such as Atlanta and Houston had jumped into this process with both feet, New Orleans was attracted in some deep way to eccentricity and torpor and endless sifting through the past. Thus, when the



true nature of Garrison's inquest became apparent, there was a powerful reverberation: The trial's aftermath seemed like a metaphor for the state of the city—that the attention we were attracting because of the Shaw trial was going to be censorious, not admiring; that what we had on our hands, civically, was a tremendous embarrassment; that New Orleans was becoming known as the weirdo capital of the United States.

Almost immediately after the Shaw trial's humiliating end, Garrison began to downplay its importance. His first book, *A Heritage of Stone* (1970), barely mentions Shaw, and Russo, Speisel and Bundy not at all, and presents the trial as really having been an excuse to dispute the Warren Commission report in a public forum. "We saw the verdict as pointing up the impossibility of presenting an espionage case in an American court of law," he says, explaining why he lost. Lately, Oliver Stone has begun to sound this note, too. "Yes, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty on Clay Shaw," he wrote in *The Washington Post*, but he went on to praise "the larger accomplishment of the trial." A second front in defense of Garrison's conduct opened up in 1975, when the renegade former CIA agent Victor Marchetti revealed that Shaw (who had lived very quietly in New Orleans from the time of his acquittal until his death, in 1974) had once been affiliated with the agency's Domestic Contact Division, which debriefed civilian businessmen who regularly traveled overseas. Both Garrison and Stone discuss this as if it's important new evidence.

Shaw's possible connection to the CIA is another illustration of the problem with Garrison's whole way of thinking: Even if Shaw had been a career CIA agent, that fact alone does not implicate him in the Kennedy assassination. Garrison still hasn't presented any convincing evidence of that. (Similarly, Garrison and Stone like to cite the conclusion of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, in 1979, that Kennedy "probably was assassinated as a result of

trial when, by his own admission, he knew he didn't have a real case. With his use of innuendo, his carelessness in flinging the gravest charges at people, his belief that individual liberties (at least, Clay Shaw's individual liberties) are less important than his attack on what he imagines to be a vast conspiracy destroying America, Garrison does have a forebear, but it isn't Orwell or Kafka. It's Joe McCarthy.

Oliver Stone's parents split up when he was 16, in 1962. "The news of their divorce came as a total shock," he told *Time* five years ago. ". . . And when they were divorced, my father gave me the facts of life. He told me that he was heavily in debt. He said 'I'll give you a college education, and then you're on your own. There's literally no money.' "

A few months ago, Stone wrote in *The Washington Post*, "The murder of President Kennedy was a seminal event for me and millions of Americans. . . . It was a crushing blow to our country and to millions of people around the world. It put an abrupt end to a period of innocence and great idealism."

It doesn't take a particularly venturesome foray into the realm of armchair psychology to see a parallel in the way that Stone describes these two almost simultaneous tragedies, one private and one public. That his own secure world suddenly came apart in the early Sixties might help explain why Stone would be drawn to the view that the Kennedy assassination had the same effect on national life—and why he was later drawn to Garrison. Like many demagogues before him, Big Jim has the ability to conjure up a simpler, better national past, which he equates with the innocence of childhood; the assassination ended those wonderful times, and tracking down the murderers holds out the larger promise of restoring (in his words) "the America I knew as a child."

The rational (or, more accurately, quasi-rational) accompaniment to this powerful emotional logic is the idea, fervently embraced by both Garrison and Stone, that John F.

## JFK's murder was a tragedy

a conspiracy," as proof that "the federal government" now agrees with them—but the House committee was an independent investigative operation; it didn't solve the case either, and it certainly didn't implicate Clay Shaw in the assassination.)

**What's much** more important, though, is the chilling line of argument Garrison and Stone are using to defend the trial. Garrison's writing is full of self-congratulatory references to George Orwell and Franz Kafka, but the essence of those writers' vision is that the most profound wrong a government can commit is to turn its powers against an innocent individual in order to advance a larger cause. Garrison was a public official who had prosecutorial power in his hands, and he used it to bring a man to

Kennedy was a man of peace who was planning to abort the Vietnam War. The CIA or the military Establishment or the defense contractors or whoever became seriously alarmed about Kennedy when he signed the Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty with the Soviet Union, in the summer of 1963, and when he signaled his intention to bring our troops home from Vietnam, they decided he had to be rubbed out.

Most of the evidence in support of the Kennedy-as-dove theory comes from books written after the assassination by the president's advisers, especially Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Kenneth O'Donnell. Of course, what Kennedy would have done if he had lived is speculative, though Garrison doesn't treat it that way. But it's fair to say that the overall thrust of historical writing about Kennedy, in recent years, has been that he was a Cold Warrior at heart—certainly not someone with ambitious plans to dismantle the military-



In *JFK*, Garrison, center, portrays Chief Justice Earl Warren, whose report, ironically, he disparaged in real life.



industrial complex and to effect, in Garrison's words, "a reconciliation with the U.S.S.R. and Castro's Cuba." Robert Kennedy, who was probably in a better position than anyone else to know what his brother's intentions in Vietnam were, had this to say on the subject in an in-depth, off-the-record interview conducted for the historical record in

point in American history—which it wasn't. Garrison, for all these years, has been engaged in a witch-hunt, not a genuine attempt to solve a crime. Like all witch-hunts, his has been based on the idea that some vast, mysterious evil force has society in its grip. If the sense of pervasive corruption isn't there, then Garrison's mission (and, even more,

## ly but not a turning point.

1964, the year after his brother's death:

INTERVIEWER: Did the president feel that we would have to go into Vietnam in a big way?

KENNEDY: We certainly considered what would be the result if you abandon Vietnam, even Southeast Asia, and whether it was worthwhile trying to keep and hold on to.

INTERVIEWER: What did he say? What did he think?

KENNEDY: He reached the conclusion that probably it was worthwhile. . . .

Not only is the Garrison-Stone case for the greater importance of the Kennedy assassination essentially a fantasy, it's strange that they feel it has to be made at all. Even if Kennedy wasn't planning to end the Vietnam War, his death was still a great tragedy. Garrison and Stone are trying to make it into something more: the main turning

his method) somehow completely loses its aura of virtue.

There is plenty that is wrong with American society, and Oliver Stone is one of the few directors with the clout and the interest in politics to be able to address it in mainstream films. Instead of going after a real problem, though, like economic decline or racial tension, he has chosen to pursue a made-up problem: a conspiracy that killed a president in order to heat up the Vietnam War and transform America from a sylvan, virtuous land into a military state. Stone won't get more than a handful of opportunities to make an important statement about this country. Too bad he wasted this one.

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