

'JFK's' premise is full of holes—but so was Warren Report

By Jack R. Payton

WASHINGTON—If you're planning to see the new blockbuster movie about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, it's probably useful to keep one thing in mind from the beginning: Kevin Costner is no Jim Garrison.

To paraphrase a former vice presidential candidate, I knew Jim Garrison, and Kevin Costner is no Jim Garrison.

For those of you who may have forgotten, Garrison was the district attorney of New Orleans who claimed to have figured out that Lee Harvey Oswald was only a patsy, a fall guy, and that powerful men in the government, possibly including Lyndon Johnson, were behind the 1963 assassination in Dallas.

Garrison and his theory are the centerpiece of "JFK," directed by Oliver Stone and starring Costner as the heroic New Orleans D.A. who takes on the U.S. government and gets squashed in the process. I saw the movie at a special media showing in Washington last Friday, and Stone showed up to answer questions about it. There were a lot of questions.

If you'll remember back to the late 1960s, Garrison accused a prominent New Orleans businessman, Clay Shaw, of being a CIA "black operations" specialist and putting together a motley crew of misfits who took part in the Kennedy killing. A jury in New Orleans took all of 50 minutes to acquit Shaw of the charges, and for most people that was the end of it.

But not for me. And probably not for most of the other reporters who were in New Orleans in those days to cover Garrison and his bizarre investigation. Whether we believed Garrison was onto something—and most of us didn't—few of us came away with much confidence in the government's official version of the truth, the Warren Commission Report.

When Garrison went public with his investigation in 1967, I was getting off active duty in the Air Force and had landed a job as a cub reporter with the United Press International office in New Orleans. In fact, the job I got was created to help with the crush of work caused by Garrison's accusations.

One of the first things any reporter in New Orleans did in those days was to read the entire Warren Commission Report, all 26 or so volumes of it. Reading the report, you couldn't help but conclude that it was a pretty haphazard piece of work, full of inconsistencies and theories that just didn't make sense. Still, many of Garrison's ideas seemed no more convincing.

Many of us got to interview Garrison at his cavernous office in the Justice Building on Tulane Avenue and ask him about these weaknesses in his case. I did, several times, and each of those times I came away bewildered.

Here was a man who was intelligent, a lot better read than most of the reporters covering him. But he was a lousy public speaker, often ponderous and sometimes almost inarticulate—certainly nothing like Kevin Costner in the movie. He seemed perfectly sane and totally aware of the powerful forces gathering to oppose him.

Yet here also was Garrison, a previously obscure district attorney, making monstrous accusations he didn't have a chance in hell of proving. He was completely out of his depth, and we all knew it. Whether his conspiracy theory had merit became almost irrelevant after a while. There was simply no way he could prove it with the tools at his disposal as district attorney of Orleans Parish in Louisiana.

By the time Shaw went to trial, Garrison had only one witness who claimed to be able to link him to the other accused conspirators in the case. The witness was a man named Perry Raymond Russo, who just happened to be my next-door neighbor when I lived on Prytania Street in uptown New Orleans.

Russo, like the rest of Garrison's suspects or witnesses, was a misfit, not the kind of person you would depend on to prove a conspiracy as far-reaching as Garrison's. When he finally got called to the stand, Russo admitted under cross-examination that he remembered his crucial testimony only after being hypnotized.

As a next-door neighbor, Russo was simply weird. As the star witness in the biggest trial of the decade, he was a total flop. Nobody believed his story about attending a meeting in New Orleans in which Oswald, Shaw and the rest of Garrison's menagerie of suspects supposedly plotted Kennedy's death.

Maybe that's why Stone, except for a passing mention, left Russo out of his movie. He just didn't fit in with the story Stone was trying to sell.

But there's something else Stone left out of his movie, something that disturbed a lot of reporters in New Orleans in those days. It's the fact that whatever you thought of Garrison or his screwball theory, somebody put together a carefully orchestrated campaign to discredit him right from the beginning.

Most of the reporters in New Orleans knew that shortly after Garrison went public with his accusations, the Justice Department sent down a special task force from Washington to keep tabs on what he was up to. The offices of the U.S. Attorney and the local FBI got huge increases in staff.

That was about the same time that strange rumors started floating around. Reporters, myself included, started getting strange telephone calls from people who wouldn't identify themselves.

One I remember in particular was from a man who said Garrison was a noted pederast and had a record of molesting young boys at the New Orleans Athletic Club. Others suggested marital infidelities, financial improprieties or ties to the local Mafia clan.

You would try to check these things out and always end up getting nowhere. Even so, some of it would show up in the media, attributed to unnamed sources.

Nobody I know ever found out who was spreading this garbage around, but we all had our suspicions.

For those of us who have been close to this case or studied it over the years, Stone's movie is a fascinating piece of movie-making, however flawed it might be as history. Seeing Abraham Zapruder's home-movie film of President Kennedy's brains being blown out and his broken skull falling against Jackie's shoulder was just as shattering last week as it was the first time around in that New Orleans courtroom so long ago. Seeing recreations of those chaotic news conferences in Garrison's office couldn't help but bring back memories of the real thing.

But it's precisely the fact that Stone's movie is so masterfully done, so compelling and powerful, that makes it so troubling.

A lot of people seeing "JFK" are going to believe that this movie represents the whole truth about what happened in Dallas' Dealey Plaza on that historic day. They're going to believe, as Garrison used to say and as Costner says in the movie, that America's history since 1963 has been shaped by the darkest plot since Brutus and his co-conspirators murdered Julius Caesar.

I lived and breathed the Garrison case for almost four years as a young reporter in New Orleans. Like most reporters I knew then, I wasn't convinced by the Warren Commission conclusion that Oswald did it all by himself. But I wasn't convinced by Garrison's case either. And after seeing Stone's new movie, I'm still not.

Still, it's some movie.

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