

# H-e-e-e-r-e's Conspiracy!

## Why Did Oliver Stone Omit (or Suppress!) the Role of Johnny Carson?

By Michael Isikoff

**F**OR ALL the hoopla surrounding Oliver Stone's "JFK," it is remarkable that nobody has mentioned what must surely be its most glaring omission—the role in the Kennedy assassination cover-up allegedly played by Johnny Carson.

Compared to, say, the mysterious disappearance of President Kennedy's brain or the three "tramps" behind the grassy knoll, the evidence implicating America's most popular late-night talk show host is not well known even to close students of the assassination. But it ought to be familiar to Stone. Carson's suspicious behavior on matters relating to Kennedy's murder is spelled out in one of the many overlooked passages in "On the Trail of the Assassins," the 1988 book by Jim Garrison, the former New Orleans district attorney. Garrison's book, of course, forms much of the basis for Stone's three-hour blockbuster.

As thousands of moviegoers are now aware, Garrison, portrayed by superstar Kevin Costner, is the hero of Stone's film—the one public official with the courage to expose the true dimensions of the JFK assassination plot. In the movie's view, this is a conspiracy of gargantuan

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proportions, including, among other participants, the CIA, anti-Castro Cubans, Pentagon covert-operations specialists, Navy doctors, military contractors (Bell Helicopter and General Dynamics Corp. are specifically mentioned), the Mafia and the Dallas police force. Not to mention FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and Lyndon B. Johnson, who the Garrison-Costner figure says, in a stirring jury peroration, "I consider accomplices after the fact."

So why does Stone flinch when it comes to Carson? Why does he fail to include the one figure in Garrison's grand conspiracy theory who is still very much on the scene—the seemingly genial talk-show host who appears most weekday nights in the bedrooms of millions of Americans? Indeed, what I call "the Carson connection" leaps out at anybody who reads through Garrison's field guide to the assassination, specifically Chapter 16, entitled "Escape of the Assassins." It is only there that one finally discovers the truly sinister reach of the plotters.

**T**he time is early 1968 and Garrison has spent more than a year pursuing would-be conspirators in the New Orleans netherworld. Through this pursuit, he has just obtained what he believes to be one of his strongest pieces of "evidence" to date—unpublished Dallas newspaper photographs of the now-famous "three tramps" arrested in a boxcar in the railroad yards near Dealey Plaza.

In conspiracy lore, the tramps have long been key to unlocking the mystery of who killed Kennedy. Some theorists have speculated that one of the tramps bears a striking resemblance to E. Howard Hunt, the Watergate conspirator and ex-CIA agent. Others believe another looks like Charles V. Harrelson, a professional hit-man and father of actor Woody Harrelson (the bartender in "Cheers"), convicted in the 1982 murder of federal judge John Wood. Garrison calls them "among the most important photographs ever taken."

At about this time, one of Garrison's volunteer investigators, comedian Mort Sahl, appears on the Carson show and talks about the assassination. When he asks the audience if they would like to hear from Garrison directly, "The response was so demonstrably affirmative that it left Carson and the network with no alternative," writes Garrison. A telegram requesting his appearance arrived a few days later and Garrison promptly accepted.

But when Garrison showed up at the NBC studio the afternoon of his scheduled appearance (Jan. 31, 1968), strange things began to happen. "Three or four well-dressed men," apparently NBC lawyers, entered the room and started grilling him for several hours. Carson himself, "stiff and ill at ease," popped in for some small chat and then just as quickly disappeared.

A few hours later, Garrison was back

for the taping. Carson's "small humorless eyes, like a pair of tiny dark marbles, were fixed on me," writes Garrison. The talk show host fired off questions from a list prepared for him by the NBC lawyers. Garrison refused to play along with the pre-arranged script. Carson out of frustration finally asked why the government would still be concealing evidence.

Garrison now decides his moment had arrived—to show for the first time on national television the pictures of the tramps. "Don't ask me, John," I said, opening my briefcase," he writes. "Ask Lyndon Johnson. You *know* he has to have the answer."

**F**or true conspiracy buffs, what happened in the next few seconds is hair-raising indeed. As Garrison starts holding the pictures in front of the camera, he writes, Carson "lunged at my arm like a cobra, pulling it down violently so that the pictures were out of the camera's view. 'Photographs like this don't show up on television,' he said sharply."

Garrison is undeterred. "Sure they do," I replied. "The camera can pick this up."

"This time he [Carson] yanked my arm down ever harder. 'No it can't,' he snapped."

Nevertheless, Garrison for a third time swings the pictures up in front of the cameras. "This time, I however, I saw the red light blink off and realized that the director of the show had cut the camera off . . . Then before anyone could change the subject, I said loudly, 'Those arrested men you just saw were never seen again. They all got away.'"

What precisely is the meaning of this unsettling incident? As he flies back to New Orleans, Garrison speculates. Why had Car-

son pulled his arm away? And "why had the director and control room switched off the cameras so that the photographs could not have been seen?"

Skeptics might suggest that Carson and his producers were worried about the potential libel of accusing some strangers in a photograph of having killed the president. Or perhaps they concluded that most TV viewers wouldn't have been able to make any sense of the tramp pictures.

An NBC spokesman said Carson was away for the holidays last week and unavailable for comment. "Carson was probably trying to keep this thing calm and nice and not raise a lot of hell," suggested Frank Mankiewicz of Hill & Knowlton, the designated Washington spokesman for Stone, when I called to ask him why Stone had neglected to include the scene in his movie.

But for Garrison, Stone's hero, such innocent explanations are clearly the height of naivete. "The only reasonable, realistic explanation, I found myself concluding, was control," he writes.

Only a few months earlier, Garrison writes of doing his own research on NBC after the network ran a documentary attacking his New Orleans probe. Eventually, Garrison discovered that RCA, the corporate owner of NBC had been "an integral part of the American defense structure . . . part of the warfare machine."

To the true conspiratorialists, such findings illustrate the real size of the enemy; even today, they conclude, the vice-like grip of the conspirators maintains its hold on the American people. But perhaps there is hope. Next spring, the veteran "Tonight Show" host is scheduled to retire, to be replaced by Jay Leno.

At long last, will America finally learn the truth?