

Stone's 'JFK': A Higher Truth?

The Post, George Lardner and My Version of the JFK Assassination

The following statement by Oliver Stone was originally submitted to The Washington Post as a letter to the editor. Outlook has made minor deletions with the agreement of the author. Stone is aware that George Lardner has prepared the accompanying response.

By Oliver Stone

ON MAY 19, Outlook ran a lengthy diatribe by George Lardner directed at "JFK," my forthcoming film about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Let me explain why we are making this movie and what it is about.

The murder of President Kennedy was a seminal event for me and for millions of Americans. It changed the course of history. 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.

Today, nearly 30 years later, profound doubts persist about how President Kennedy was killed and why. The Warren Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone is not believed by most people. The House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) concluded in 1979 that President Kennedy "probably was assassinated as a result of a conspiracy" and that "government agencies performed inadequately" in investigating the assassination. Our movie is a metaphor for all those doubts, suspicions and unanswered questions.

The movie is not, as Lardner suggested, the "Jim Garrison story." It does use the Garrison investigation as the vehicle to explore the various credible assassination theories, and incorporates everything that has been discovered in the 20 years since Garrison's efforts.

It does not purport to "solve" this murder mystery. What I hope this film will do, when it is finished, is remind people how much our nation and our world lost when President Kennedy died, and to ask anew what might have happened and why. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, "Eternal vigilance is the price of Liberty."

In sticking by the Warren Commission report, The Washington Post has always supported and held to an account of the assassination more fictional than I could ever imagine.

The Warren Commission concluded that: 1) Oswald acting alone killed President Kennedy and Dallas police officer J.D. Tippit; 2) Jack Ruby acting alone killed Oswald; 3) there was no credible evidence of a conspiracy; 4) only three shots were fired.

Even today, our film is having to rely on bits and pieces of information because the Warren Commission urged that its material be sealed and kept from the public until the year 2039. Even then, the CIA has the option of continuing this censorship until the year 2118. Are the interests of the American public served by waiting this long?

I don't know if I'm more shocked or amused over the fact that a Washington Post reporter of the stature of George Lardner, who for years has covered government intelligence activities, would find our movie so important that he would admit in his article to obtaining a confidential first draft of our script through unofficial channels and then proceed to quote from it out of context (the draft has significantly changed as we are now on the sixth draft). Aside from the issue of whether a newspaper

Oliver Stone is the director of "JFK."

can print copyrighted material (including the end of a movie) and consequently seek to damage the commercial prospects of a private enterprise (a film company is not a government office; our documents are not public property), it is accepted practice in the theatrical sector 1) to wait for the movie to be made and review that (not the script) and 2) to not tell the audience what they are going to see. This is a standard The Post seems dedicated to changing.

Filmmakers and book publishers stay in business because they entertain and educate the public. Movies like "The Alamo," "Patton," "Dances with Wolves" and "The Battle of Algiers" have to sift through volumes of documentation, much of which contradicts itself.

Contradictions are the nature of reality. Both Congress and Harold Weisberg, whom Lardner quoted in the story, believe that the FBI and CIA withheld evidence that might have resulted in different findings by the Warren Commission.

The Washington Post, and Lardner in particular, have stood by in silence while the CIA and FBI have allowed evidence of a crime and historical documents significant to our history to be stolen or destroyed. It is as hard for me to understand The Post's silence as it is to understand Lardner's attack on an entertainment project.

Lardner takes a curious position on the assassination. He ridicules Garrison for thinking that the Warren Commission didn't tell the "truth" (his quotes) about the assassination and never bothers to say that the federal government wasn't convinced either—why else did the House Select Committee on Assassination exist? He even makes Weisberg—supposedly his ally—out to be *anti-conspiracy* despite the fact that Weisberg has done more damage to the Warren Commission than any other researcher through his persistent Freedom of Information Act suits.

The Post criticized Garrison for not having found the truth. Instead, we at Camelot Productions see Garrison as one of the few men of that time who had the courage to stand up to the establishment and seek the truth. He symbolizes the American public's nagging sense of doubt about the pat conclusions of the Warren Commission. And in him we have found a protagonist of merit.

Jim Garrison did not want to see the flame of life that was John F. Kennedy extinguished without bringing his killer—or killers—to justice. Is the sad part that he failed, or that he was one of the few persons in America willing to try?

Concerning Lardner's presentation of the "facts":

■ *David Ferrie's death:* Lardner is the last man we know of to see Ferrie alive. He claims he left Ferrie alive. He claims he left Ferrie's apartment at 4 a.m., but the coroner (Dr. Chetta) claimed that from Ferrie's state of rigor mortis, he had been dead since before 4 a.m. Also, the presence of two suicide notes and 15 bottles of pills (some empty) should indicate something more than natural causes. Additionally, the HSCA heard testimony that Ferrie worked for the CIA and confirmed that he was deeply involved with CIA-funded Cuban exile terrorists.

■ *The Clay Shaw verdict:* Yes, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty on Clay Shaw, but Lardner does not point out the larger accomplishment of the trial. In interviews after the trial, most of the jurors indicated that they were now certain that there had been a conspiracy to kill the president, but whether Clay Shaw was part of it hadn't been proven beyond a reasonable doubt. Lardner ignores the fact that former CIA director Richard Helms admitted under oath that Shaw was a contact for the agency



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and that the agency had failed to acknowledge this. Lardner also ignores that Shaw was director of a company expelled from Italy for illegal espionage activities. Additionally, Lardner implies that Perry Russo was the only witness to link Shaw, Ferrie and Oswald, when in fact there were more than half a dozen witnesses who linked this trio. The HSCA in 1979 established "an association of an undetermined nature between Ferrie, Shaw and Oswald."

■ **The hobo photos:** He says, "They may have been guilty of moper, but they had nothing to do with the assassination." I'd love to know the source of this, especially as these men have never been identified. The Warren Commission testimony of Dallas police Sgt. D.V. Harkness places the hobos' arrest about 25-30 minutes after the shooting—not 90 as Lardner claimed—and they were taken off a train behind the Book Depository, not from the other side of Dealey Plaza, as Lardner asserted.

Bona fide hobos or imposters—either way, there's no justification for Dallas law enforcement officials' negligence in taking their names at such a critical time.

■ **Acoustics evidence:** On page 71 of the HSCA Report, it says there were six impulse patterns on the Dictabelt, two of which did not come from either the Texas School Book Depository or the grassy knoll (the only locations tested). All six of these impulses exhibited the traditional S-curve of high-powered rifle fire in Dealey Plaza (that is, they could not have been anything else). Lardner claims that there is no evidence of a fifth shot, but what he should be saying is that the fifth shot—and the sixth—did not come from either firing point tested by the HSCA but from a third location.

■ **Vietnam policy:** Lardner has misinterpreted National Security Action Memo 273, concerning an early withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, either wittingly or unwittingly, asserting that it "explicitly stated the 1,000-troop withdrawal would be carried out." Not true at all. It did not say that, and the withdrawal never happened. What we have here is a deliberate attempt to disguise the policy reversal in the wake of Kennedy's death. After November 1963, no actual reduction of U.S. military men in Vietnam ever occurred. As we all know, the opposite happened. Kennedy is quoted several times by associates as intending to withdraw from Vietnam after the 1964 campaign. According to William Gibbons's "The Government and the Vietnam War," the withdrawal of 1,000 troops was achieved on paper only, by "juggling the fig-

ures to make it look like there were 1,000 fewer men."

■ **Pershing Gervais:** Lardner should not rely on someone like Pershing Gervais for insight into Garrison's character. As Garrison demonstrates in his book, "On the Trail of the Assassins," Gervais tried to set Jim up for criminal prosecution.

■ **Oswald's alibi:** Several witnesses, including Carolyn Arnold, Roy Truly, Mrs. Robert A. Reid and Officer Marjorie Baker all saw Oswald on the second floor of the Texas School Book Depository Building immediately before or after the shooting. Carolyn Arnold's insistence that she saw Oswald in the second floor lunchroom between 12:15 and 12:25 p.m. is mysteriously absent from her FBI statement, probably because it proves that Oswald was definitely not the gunman seen by witness Arnold Rowland in the sixth-floor window at 12:15. Not a single witness can place Oswald on the sixth floor at the time of the shooting at all, let alone with a gun in his hand.

■ **The fourth shot:** Lardner comes close to making history here as he admits "experts conclude there was indeed a fourth shot from the 'grassy knoll.'" This is the first time The Post has printed that there were four shots. Of course this destroys the Warren Commission. Or does Lardner think there were two lone assassins, each trying to kill Kennedy at the same time?

Why is Lardner so worried about our movie? Why is he so concerned that the investigation not be reopened? Lardner admits to a conspiracy, so why is he so afraid people might see it? If I am the buffoon he and Outlook's demonizing cartoon make me out to be, no one will really believe my film. I can't but feel there is another agenda here. Does The Washington Post object to our right to make a movie our way, or does it just object to our disagreeing with its views that the Warren Commission was right?

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by a newspaper trying to kill the making of a movie. That has happened in Hollywood ever since the Hearst papers and its reporters attacked "Citizen Kane." Should we be so surprised by history repeating itself so long after "Citizen Kane"? Not really.

But then one purpose of our movie is to see that in at least one instance history does not repeat itself. We can only hope the free thinkers in the world, those with no agenda, will recognize our movie as an emotional experience that speaks a higher truth than the Lardners of the world will ever know.

...Or Just a Sloppy Mess?

Facts Speak for Themselves but Stone Doesn't Seem to Know Them

By George Lardner

THE BEST thing that can be said about Oliver Stone's letter is that he is not a careful reader of The Washington Post. He accuses us of still believing the Warren Commission down the line, of standing by "in silence" while agencies we cover for the public "allowed evidence of a crime and historical documents . . . to be stolen or destroyed." Since Stone offers no particulars, it is impossible to tell what he means. The only incident that comes to mind is the time a CIA officer rifled through files of the House assassinations committee. But I disclosed that episode in The Post in 1979.

Stone complains that his film has to rely on "bits and pieces of information" because so much is locked up. This is silly. Warren Commission records began to be made public in the mid-'60s. Hundreds of thousands of pages have been released since then. These included records that, The Post reported in 1977, showed the FBI to be "more interested in investigating the motives and affiliations of its critics than in pursuing contradictions offered by the evidence at the scene of the crime."

After noting darkly that I have "covered government intelligence activities" for The Post, Stone says I "admit" in the Outlook article "to obtaining a confidential first draft of the script." The script is about as confidential as a press release. My copy, as I wrote, came from Harold Weisberg, a longtime critic of the Warren Commission. As Stone should know, many copies are floating about. One reporter told me he got a copy from a New York literary agent.

Let me take his other points one at a time:

■ *David Ferrie's death:* Ferrie, a target of former New Orleans DA Jim Garrison's investigation, was found dead in his apartment on Feb. 22, 1967 around 11 a.m. I was probably the last man to see Ferrie alive. Is Stone suggesting that I interviewed a dead man? In fact, the coroner originally said Ferrie died around midnight, then redid that aspect of the autopsy after I told him he was wrong. "This man died a natural death," the coroner, Dr. Nicholas Chetta, declared several times in concluding Ferrie, who suffered from hypertension, died from a cerebral hemorrhage.

It is, of course, true that the House assassinations committee may have "heard testimony" about Ferrie and the CIA. It may also have "heard" that Kennedy was killed from a UFO. Ferrie was involved in anti-Castro activities, a fact widely reported at the time, but there is no proof that he worked for the CIA.

■ *The Shaw verdict:* Stone maintains that "the larger accomplishment" of the Clay Shaw travesty was that the jurors were convinced there had been a conspiracy to kill the president. Who needed a trial for that? A Harris poll almost two years earlier showed that two of three Americans believed the same thing. As for Shaw's "associations" with the CIA, he was a widely traveled businessman who had occasional contacts with the CIA's Domestic Contact Service. Does that make him an assassin?

I never suggested that Perry Russo was "the only witness to link Shaw, Ferrie and [Lee Harvey] Oswald." I said he was Garrison's key witness for a conspiratorial discussion the trio allegedly had and that Russo dragged Shaw into it after prompting by a hypnotist. Stone's script, at least the one he started with, eliminates Perry Russo. I'm not surprised.

■ *The hobo photos:* As for the so-called "tramps," Weisberg points out that two independent investigations, undertaken in 1968 to establish the facts of the tramps' apprehension, showed that they had taken refuge in the boxcar to get drunk and that the only reason they were photographed in front of the Book Depository was that it was the only way for police to walk them out of the yard without heisting them up to a loading dock behind the Central Annex Post Office. Stone's account of Sgt. D.V. Harkness's testimony is wrong; Harkness told the Warren Commission nothing about when and where in the railroad yard the "tramps" were picked up. Stone sees "no justification" for the failure of the Dallas police to get the men's names. But even if they had, conspiracy theorists would just insist the men had lied about who they were.

■ *Vietnam policy:* Stone, in his script, has Lyndon Johnson meeting with his Vietnam advisers two days after the assassination, countermmanding JFK's order to withdraw 1,000 military personnel from Vietnam by the end of 1963. I called the scene "nonsense" and said the LBJ memo after the meeting ordered the withdrawal to be carried out. Let me quote from NSAM No. 273: "The objectives of the United States with respect to the withdrawal of U.S. military personnel remain as stated in the White House statement of Oct. 2, 1963 [approving among other things 'plans to withdraw 1,000 military personnel by the end of 1963.']" Historian Gibbons told me the withdrawal did take place and was offset in succeeding months.

"Kennedy, if he had carried it out, would have done it just as Johnson did it," Gibbons said. He added that the withdrawal "was never more than a device . . . a way of putting pressure on the [South] Vietnamese" to take up more of the burden. "Any thought that it had anything to do with getting out, withdrawing entirely," Gibbons said, "is absurd."

■ *Pershing Gervais:* Garrison's book "demonstrates" nothing but a facility for gothic fiction. Gervais, incidentally, says he would be "delighted" to take a polygraph test on whether he tried to frame Garrison—and on any other points in dispute.

■ *Where Oswald was:* Stone did change his response on this after I pointed out errors in his original reply, but he still misinterprets a descriptive paragraph in my May 19 article as an assertion as to where Oswald was, or wasn't, at the time of the shooting.

■ *Acoustics evidence:* Acoustics experts for the House assassinations committee found six impulse patterns that could have been rifle shots because they passed "preliminary screening tests." Stone transforms this into proof positive. "Certainly, nothing I ever did or said would have supported his [Stone's] certainty," one of the experts, James Barger, told me. The experts concluded that there were four shots: three from the Book Depository and one from the "grassy knoll."

It is typical of Stone's confusion that at one point he accuses us of adhering to the Warren Commission and later says my Outlook article was "the first time The Post has printed that there were four shots." I reported on that finding in several front-page stories in 1978; it was subsequently the subject of numerous stories in The Post, including articles highlighting the committee's finding that Kennedy was "probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy."

On a more personal note: My acknowledgement that a probable conspiracy took place is not an acknowledgement that Garrison's investigation was anything but a fraud. And no amount of screenwriting can change that fact. Stone claims an interest in history. Why is he so sloppy with it?