

NEW ORLEANS SETTING

Aura of Conspiracy Fits Garrison Probe

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NEW ORLEANS — Hollywood's best cinematic minds couldn't have planned a more perfect backdrop than New Orleans for Dist. Atty. Jim Garrison's provocative investigation into the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Three flags — Spanish, French and American — have flown over this sophisticated old port city, and each has shaped its personality — gay and abandoned, yet moody and conspiratorial.

It's a city which always has been characterized by sin, violence and mystery.

Probe Has All Three

The Garrison investigation literally crackles with these qualities.

The probe has centered, at least in part, on homosexual activity in the city, revolves around murder — the murder of a President — and is as baffling now as it was when it began.

Since the investigation was revealed a little more than two weeks ago, day-by-day developments have become more and more bizarre.

Perhaps the major thunderstroke was the arrest last week of one of New Orleans' leading citizens, Clay L. Shaw, and Garrison's accusation that he conspired with the sleaziest sort of characters to murder President Kennedy.

Possibility Stunning

If what Garrison alleges is true, and if developments continue as they have thus far, the potential climax is staggering.

Should the Garrison investigation prove there was a conspiracy to assassinate Mr. Kennedy, it would strike at the heart of the Warren Commission report — which held that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.

Such an eventuality also would reflect on the investigative prowess of the prestigious FBI, whose agents in the months after

the assassination could find no evidence of a conspiracy.

And it also might shake the faith of many Americans in the integrity of their government, since the government sponsored the Warren investigation.

Informer's Data

Apparently Garrison's case, at this point, is based on information supplied him by a confidential informer, a man who may have been among the alleged plotters.

Speculation about his identity has ranged from a man Garrison may have spirited out of the state to a convict immediately available to him, steps from Garrison's office.

The latter is Miguel Torres, now in custody in the Orleans Parish (county) prison hospital.

Torres was brought to New Orleans in late January from Angola, the state prison farm, by Garrison's investigators, who questioned him at length in the parish prison. However, not long after Torres' arrival here, the investigators appeared to lose interest in him. Garrison has described Torres as "an unworthy witness."

Never Sent Back

The fact remains, however, that Torres never has been returned to Angola.

Even public officials, highly skeptical at first of Garrison's motives, admit now that they no longer casually dismiss the flamboyant district attorney's claims.

Everybody in town has a theory — and that includes other top law-enforcement officials who insist they know no more than private citizens about what Garrison is doing.

One of the most intriguing of these theories, far-fetched as it sounds, is that the assassination of the President was carried out by emissaries of Fidel Castro. Playing the role of

disgruntled exiles, these men are supposed to have used Oswald as a dupe. As the story goes, Castro sent his assassins to this country in retaliation against a plot by the Central Intelligence Agency to assassinate him.

Homosexuals and Cuban exiles, thus far, have played the biggest roles in the investigation. There even is talk that the mysterious disappearance from Cuba of Ernesto (Che) Guevara, about a year ago, may be linked to it in some way.

If one is to follow this tortuous theory, Clay Shaw figures in the plot because of his many contacts in Latin America during his 18 years as managing director of the International Trade Mart here.

The possibility — and it still seems remote — that Garrison has developed evidence that eluded both the FBI and the Warren Commission has made officials super-cautious about downgrading the Garrison investigation, except behind closed doors.

Changing Theories

"Every night now I go home and play detective," said one high-placed law enforcement officer. "Every night I get a new theory. But every morning something happens to change that theory."

Said another, who actually was present at the questioning under sodium pentathol of the informer upon whom Garrison is basing his case:

"At first, I too thought Jim was grabbing for headlines, but now . . ." he said, in dead seriousness, "don't forget what Jim has said about not betting money against him because you'll lose if you do."

For some unexplained reason, Garrison dropped from the public eye toward the middle of last week but the investigation coursed along on its own momentum — witnesses continued to be subpoenaed, new rumors surfaced and Garrison remained oddly silent.

Probe Under Cover

To the already devious nature of the investigation, Garrison's absence from his office added a new dimension. What looked like a normal police

investigation a week ago suddenly was transformed into a cloak-and-dagger caper.

There was vast speculation over the weekend about how Garrison might personally profit.

Many close to him insist he is simply a dedicated public servant. Others contend his motivations are purely political.

One man who has been close to him said, where once he confined his ambi-

tions to a state level, Garrison now is convinced the investigation will project him into national politics.

"He sees himself as another Tom Dewey, maybe not a Presidential contender but at least as a Vice Presidential possibility on a ticket with Bobby Kennedy," the man said.

The governor of the state, John McKeithen, a close friend of Garrison, explained why he has chosen to remain silent:

"I have learned that most of Jim Garrison's enemies — politically speaking — are buried, and I don't propose to join the list of the deceased."

Focus of Garrison's investigation is his office in the grimy old Criminal Courts Building.

Its cavernous corridors have been awash daily with swarms of reporters from all over the world — Norway, Great Britain, Japan, even Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia.

Many old courthouse hands frown on Garrison's conduct, calling him a "big counterfeit."

They tittered when a shiny new sign with tall, glittering letters appeared above the otherwise austere attorney's office door. The bold sign read simply: Jim Garrison.

Particularly in the gloomy Criminal Courts Building, theories and rumors revolving around the probe and the assassination are argued, discarded or simply left hanging in air.

For a multitude of reasons, most people here are cautious about criticizing Garrison because of a wide belief that somehow, in some way, the Warren Commission and the FBI may have mishandled their investigation into the President's death.

OVER

But Chief Justice Earl Warren said only last week nothing that has happened in New Orleans has changed his mind one iota:

"I have not heard anything which would change the report in any way, shape or form."
