

Invincible Jim Garrison faces a troubled future

City Hall Reporter

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of The States-Item Staff

For almost 10 years Jim Garrison has been the Great Invincible in local politics. Time and again Garrison proved — with an uncanny flair for theatrics — that he was willing to take on all comers, whether they were grovelers who haunt the Criminal District Courts building halls or the men who hold high places in the U.S. Department of Justice.

The district attorney's power has had two bases: popular support and a Louisiana governor who was always ready to do him political favors.

In November, 1969, Garrison won a third term as DA in a first-primary tally giving him 53 per cent of the vote. That victory was especially remarkable because eight months earlier he had lost the most publicized criminal case in New Orleans' history, the Shaw case.

Of the 10 judges sitting on the Criminal District Court, five — Judges James L. Alcock, Rudolph F. Becker Jr., Frank J. Shea, Israel M. Augustine Jr. and Alvin V. Oser — were either appointed or elected with Garrison's support.

Oser and Alcock were appointed to the bench by Gov. McKeithen after they served Garrison as assistant DAs.

This week the governor admitted he had the power to institute removal proceedings against Garrison, now charged with accepting bribes, but McKeithen passed the buck to the Metropolitan Crime Commission with the argument that citizen groups had the same power that a governor has in such cases.

Those who cross him

What has kept politicians either noncommittal or outright fearful of Jim Garrison has been the DA's method of dealing with those who cross him — people like investigative reporters Walter Sheridan, David Chandler and Jim Mitchie; attorneys Robert Haik and Dean Andrews; and federal officials like U.S. Atty. Gerald J. Gallinghouse and John Wall of the Justice Department's strike force on organized crime.

All of these men have found themselves, after challenging Garrison's conduct in office, either before the Orleans Parish Grand Jury or in court facing criminal charges.

Accused instead of accuser

Today Garrison is the accused instead of

the accuser, a man racked with physical ailments, fighting back with every device his office affords him, and with more of those lengthy, prosaic press releases that have become part of the Garrison dramatics.

If the district attorney is exonerated of the federal charges against him, will he still be able to maintain a political future?

The answer lies first of course in public reaction to the events of the last two weeks and those inevitably yet to come. Although there have been demands from the usual groups that Garrison resign his office or be removed, the prevailing public attitude seems to be one of wait-and-see. And the DA still no doubt has a corps of followers who see the bribery charge as federal harassment.

No deafening outcry

If there is an outcry against Garrison's behavior, it has certainly not been deafening.

After his arrest, Garrison described the event as "just another day at Tulane and Broad." New Orleanians, possibly numbed by now with the events of the last 10 years in the DA's office, may be taking the same attitude.

There has been considerable talk that Garrison wants to run next year for one of two New Orleans district seats on the Louisiana Supreme Court. If the fates allow him to enter that race, he will no doubt have serious difficulties gathering organized political support. Several Civil District Court judges are also preparing to seek a seat on the high court, and local political leaders might by 1972 find that Garrison is much more of a liability than an asset.

Garrison won re-election in 1969 without a single mayoral candidate's public endorsement. Only one mayoral contender — John J. Petre — openly blasted him.

Much more vulnerable

By next year, assuming the DA is still in office, it seems certain that Garrison will be much more vulnerable. McKeithen will no longer be governor. It will be an off-year for elections, so other important offices will not be at stake, and established office holders will have less to risk in consolidating against Garrison.

The district attorney's astounding unpredictability has been an unsettling influence in local politics for years. The next few months will determine how much longer that influence lasts.

The spectre of going to jail can destroy anybody's political future, even that of the heretofore almighty Jim Garrison.