



The Oswald Plot

MAX LERNER

If it has done nothing else, the New Orleans investigation of a possible "Oswald plot" in that city has, for the moment, taken the wind out of the conventional attacks on the Warren Commission Report. This may sound crazy, but it is only one of the many paradoxes of the whole debate over the Kennedy killing.

Note that the critics of the Warren Report have concentrated on Dallas. The FBI investigators and the Warren Commission staff had both looked into the New Orleans angle (William Manchester doesn't even do that in his new book), and had dropped it as unproductive. Mark Lane and the other assorted critics of the Report left New Orleans severely alone, since they were either trying to clear Oswald of blame or find some larger Texas conspiracy, preferably Right-wing, of which he was part.

Now comes the first murky bit of light on what may prove to be the New Orleans end of a more tangled Oswald story than we had counted on. District Attorney Jim Garrison has got past the first hurdle of his difficult race toward fame by getting clearance from a three-judge County Court to put Clay Shaw on trial for conspiring with two other men, both now dead, to kill Kennedy. Garrison hasn't yet been laughed out of court. But if he comes up with anything substantial it will be hard to take the Lane-et-al school of Warren critics seriously. Garrison may not in the end win the war, but he has opened a new battle sector — not new to the F.B.I. and the Warren staff, but new and alien to the anti-Warren shock troops.

* * *

In immediate terms Garrison is trying to nail down two accusations: that Clay Shaw knew Oswald and was seen with him; and that Clay Shaw is the same man as the one named "Clay Bertrand" by Dean Andrews, and "Clem Bertrand" by Perry Russo. The judges felt, one gathers, that he had made enough of a case on these two points to warrant giving him a chance to prove a third accusation in Court—that Shaw-Bertrand, if indeed they were the same—conspired in New Orleans with Lee Oswald and Dave Ferrie to kill Kennedy.

There are of course cracks in Garrison's armor. Of his two witnesses at the hearings, the major one had been given sodium pentathol to dredge up memories of Oswald he had not had when he talked with reporters in Baton Rouge; while the corroborative one, who testified to seeing Shaw and Oswald together in a park by sheer chance, has been a drug addict. Yet one must add that the psychiatrists who have experimented with sodium pentathol recognize it as an effective method for digging into the hidden unconscious. And the courts do not require that a witness should have lived a life of total virtue.

* * *

One's real doubts about Garrison's case arise from another source. From the start he seems to have been playing it by ear. When he first announced that he had proof of the conspiracy, he had not yet made contact with the two witnesses whom he has produced: what leads and evidence did he have at the time, and why has he not followed them up? He may be holding back, or have shifted his ground, or be waiting for other fortunate windfalls. He is evidently that kind of D.A.

The New Orleans story has become so charged with drama, intrigue and mystery that we must all be wary of making the unwarranted leap, whether of belief or rigid disbelief. Attorney General Clark may have felt he had to speak out against the Garrison theory, to support the F.B.I.'s original investigation, but he had no call to. Joseph Ball, of the Warren Commission staff, insists that Oswald could not have been in New Orleans after Sept. 25, despite Russo's placing him there early in October. But he too has a vested interest to protect, in the Warren Report. Instead of defending the Report as if it were the Holy Writ, everyone involved should wait for the trial, and see what light it sheds on the Kennedy killing, which is, after all, what we need to know.

* * *

It may be just barely possible that Oswald was in fact more deeply embroiled in the New Orleans scene than we had thought—that he was a marginal member of a group of "gay boys" there who were also involved on one side or another of the battle over Castro; that he had come under the spell of Dave Ferrie's flamboyant personality, had frequented Ferrie's apartment where so many others (including Shaw) came; and that he had heard some wild talk about how Kennedy might be killed, which fitted into his own frustrations and hatreds, and his reading at the little library near his flat, and his brooding over how one could change the course of history. When he got back to Dallas, and the chance came to get at Kennedy, he may well have acted not as a member of any conspiracy but as a loner—a frustrated, bitter paranoid who was getting back at the world at the same time that he was changing its course of history.

If this were to prove so, then part of the New Orleans story might be true, while leaving intact the basic theme of the Warren Report, that Oswald as killer acted alone. But the mind of Oswald may have been shaped in New Orleans in a more complicated way than we had known.