



Max Lerner

The Garrison Probe

It is now four months since District Attorney Jim Garrison, of New Orleans, startled the world by announcing that "there will be arrests" in a New Orleans plot involving the Kennedy assassination. The arrests and indictments came, and there has been a recent spate of interviews and statements by Garrison, but little that has cleared up the "plot" itself.

How much is there to it? Is Garrison engaged on a serious project of investigation and prosecution, or is this an adventure in self-dramatizing or in the too vivid fantasy life of the District Attorney?

To get some light on these questions I had breakfast some weeks ago with Garrison at his home in New Orleans, in the new section of the city, recently built up with spacious houses and lawns. When Garrison came across the room in greeting one noted his oversized lumbering frame, his saggy face, pale and night-furrowed, his brooding intelligent eyes.

Our breakfast conversation lasted three hours, while several of his small children trailed back and forth through the room, or sat on his lap. Through it all his conversation was intense, as he discussed the outlines and phases of the "plot," drew diagrams of it, traced locations on a detail-map of New Orleans, described and analyzed the principal actors. It was a mind in motion, filled to overflowing with telling minutiae, but constantly going off on side expeditions.

There was much in the story I felt I could not publish because I didn't want to interfere with Garrison's own chosen sequence of making it public. He has since made a number of statements that free me from this inhibition on some phases.

If Garrison is right then Oswald was recruited in New Orleans by a C. I. A. agent into a vague plot against the Castro regime in the post-Bay-of-Pigs period. His episode of living in the Soviet Union was a perfect cover for this role, as was also his working for the Fair Play for Cuba movement. Presumably also he was given a cover job in a New Orleans firm in which the government had interests. The payments he received on this job were substantial and can be traced. Two of the men who (as Garrison charges) worked with Oswald were men for whom Garrison has issued warrants for arrest as material witnesses—Vincente Arcacha Smith and Gordon Novel—on the Garrison theory that they burglarized a munitions depot in 1961 to get arms for use in this secret anti-Castro drive. It isn't clear yet whether Garrison thinks the ultimate aim was to kill Castro or only to harass him.

This was Phase One of the story, and presumably (in Garrison's version) Dave Ferrie (now dead) and Clay Shaw (now awaiting trial) master-minded it. Phase Two is even murkier. One gathers from Garrison that the CIA lost interest or dropped out for other reasons, but that the "master-minds" didn't let it rest there but converted it into their own anti-Kennedy plot with Oswald still in it, and with the emphasis now on a highly neurotic

and strongly homosexual group. The motivation is terribly obscure—partly anger at Kennedy's Cuban fiasco, partly a homosexual love-and-hate obsession with the highly virile Kennedy image, partly a fascination with the plot itself and a vaunting drive to show that one could conspire successfully to kill a President.

Garrison is convinced that Oswald himself did not fire a shot but was used—first as decoy, then as patsy—by the masterminds, that the triangulated shooting was done by three Cuban gorillas (not "guerillas," as some of the accounts have it). He charges that a Cuban known to the CIA had been detailed to guard Oswald all through Phase One, and was with him when he visited the Cuban Embassy in Mexico. He also charges that the CIA and the FBI have tried to cover up the true story of the anti-Kennedy plot because it would lead to revelations of their involvement with the anti-Castro phase.

Much of this is obviously far-fetched, but I would not dismiss the possibility that there is a core of validity in the whole Garrison caper. As Garrison has followed up the trail of Ferrie and Oswald in New Orleans he has tried out for size every theory against the Warren Report—the "three assassins" theory, the "Oswald as patsy" theory, the "other Oswald" theory, the "miracle bullet" theory. They can't all be true, but Garrison has turned his staff into a one-man Second Warren Commission, on a roving investigative mission that may hurt innocent people and that will furnish sensational copy around the world.

Is Garrison a charlatan, as some charge, intent on using the story for publicity and public office? I did not myself get the impression of a man cynically pretending to have a case in which actually he has no belief. If anything, Garrison has over-sold himself on the case, is obsessed with it as with a chess puzzle, and has become a fanatic on it. He sees himself as another Clarence Darrow, an "Attorney for the Damned," on a case bigger than anything Darrow ever had. On the fly-leaf of a book on criminology he gave me he wrote the old Latin command, *Fiat justitia, coelum ruat*: Let justice be done, even if the heavens fall.