

The Conspiratorialists

Was Sirhan Sirhan on the Grassy

By Tom Bethell

MY most vivid recollection of Jones Harris is that he always wore a straw hat. Even indoors he seemed to prefer to keep it on. That, and the fact that he never would write anything down on paper. On that score, I remember D.A. Jim Garrison my boss, once saying that we didn't even have a sample of Jones' handwriting.

This disinclination on Jones' part to write anything down was most uncharacteristic of conspiratorialists — a deliberately convoluted word I have coined — most of whom were, as far as I could tell, highly prolific memo and letter writers. And working for Jim Garrison, as I then was, on his ill-fated Kennedy assassination investigation, I met most of the conspiratorialists of those years. Jones Harris was one who remains in my mind.

That was in 1967 and 1968. Now, seven years later, there seems to be a widespread return to the same vein of conspiracy thinking, mostly dealing with the possibility that one or another of the assassinations in recent years was committed at the instigation of conspirators who (we are led to suppose) did not have the best interests of the United States at heart.

Jones Harris had arrived in New Orleans on one of his frequent investigative jaunts with Richard Popkin, professor of philosophy at the University of California in San Diego and the author, of a highly implausible book called "The Second Oswald," which may be briefly summarized as follows:

In the course of its investigation, the Warren Commission produced evidence that Lee Harvey Oswald was in two places at once—manifestly impossible. Although most, if not all, of this contradictory evidence was either fleeting observation or from unreliable witnesses and thus could be dismissed as cases of mistaken identify (it would be surprising if some such evidence did not emerge in the course of so widening and well-publicized a case), Popkin chose to postulate that there were two Oswalds.

No matter. I remember once having dinner with Jones in the Pontchartrain Hotel in New Orleans and outlining this and other difficulties concerning the "second Oswald" theory. Jones replied perfectly seriously, "There were three Oswalds, you know." My mouth must have fallen open. "And two Jack Rubys," he added for good measure. I think it must have been around that time that I began to give serious consideration to the possibility that Oswald shot the President all alone and unaided.

The extraordinary complexity involved — three Oswalds! — is a fundamental characteristic of conspiratorialist reasoning.

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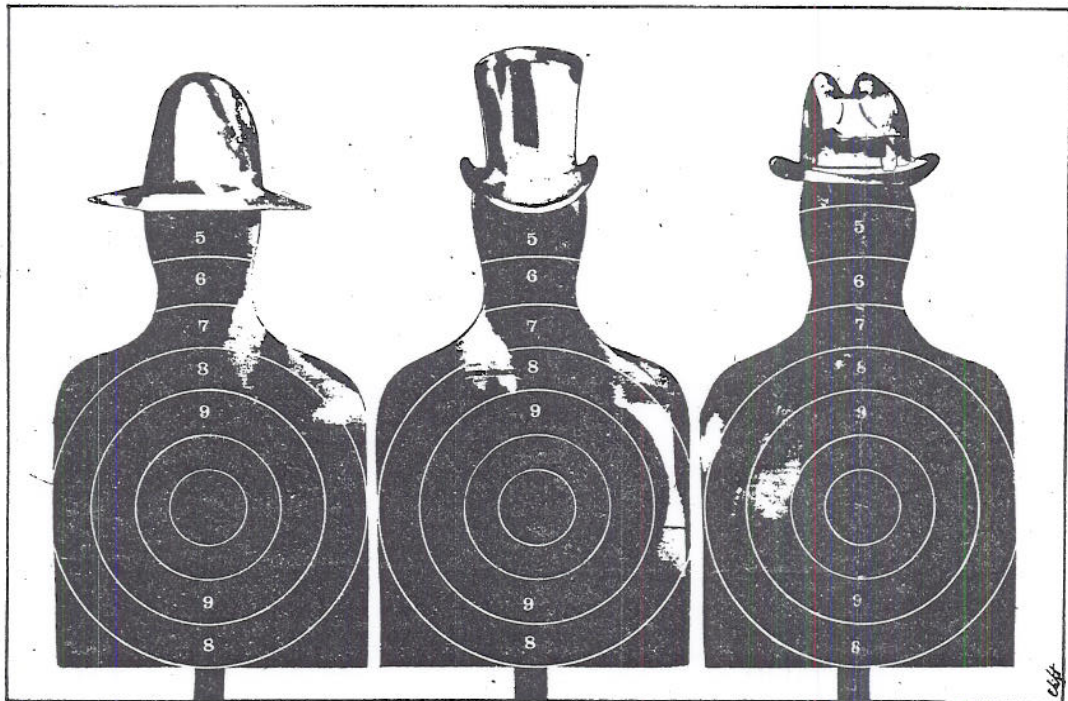
to conclude that this conspiracy does not exist.

But your average conspiratorialist sees little merit in the argument from a standpoint of simplicity. To accept the simple explanation, he feels, is just simple-minded.

Another common feature of conspiratorialist thinking is that their theories are, one way or another, irrefutable. I have right-

(who in some ways was not a typical conspiratorialist: he was too frivolous about it all and sometimes had a most atypical sense of humor about his theories) was a master linker-upper, perhaps the best in the business. Name two people in New Orleans and Garrison could "link" them. If he had a rival in this regard it could only have been Mrs. Maw Brussel, author of the "Conspiracy Newsletter," and one of the more delightful visitors to my cubbyhole office in New Orleans. (I was in charge of the files in the case.)

When I met her in 1967 she must have been laboring for months, or years, in her Carmel retreat, for she arrived loaded with weighty parcels and pack-



Philosophers like to point out that any belief, more or less, can be sustained if the believer is willing to encrust his belief with enough assumptions.

I once went to a lecture given by a member of the Flat Earth Society, and it was surprising how similar this reasoning was to that of the various conspiracy theorists I have known. A Flat-Earther, for instance, is likely to tell you that the moon landings never really took place, that NASA is collaborating with the CIA to deceive the Russians and the American people. . . . Sound familiar? To believe the earth is flat one must also believe that a huge number of people are working assiduously to deceive our minds, and it is, in the end, just so much simpler

wing friends, for example, who discuss their all-encompassing conspiracy of the Elders of Zion like that. Absolutely anything that happens tends to confirm their belief that the conspiracy is working. Nowadays, I notice, left-wingers discuss the conspiracy of the Rockefeller family in the same way; and for those who believe in an all-pervasive CIA conspiracy, the fact that the CIA itself is presently being investigated by government agencies is bound to become an integral part of the conspiracy itself.

I must now say something about the conspiratorialist's love of links and connections. Linking people together is the very essence of the conspiratorialist's work. Garrison himself

ages of documents precariously knotted together with a string, and she proceeded to unfold a chart that more than covered my entire desktop. It delineated in copious detail the relationships among the White Russian community in Dallas.

Mrs. Brussel reminded me of Margaret Rutherford playing amateur detective in a British thriller. She was obviously proud of her comprehensive and multi-colored chart — which at first (and subsequent) glance seemed to link everyone together like those flow diagrams showing the hierarchies of power in a complex General Motors division.

IN assassination circles, one of the main linkage factors is what Garrison

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loved to call "propinquity." If two people live near one another, say within four or five blocks, it's suspicious. If they live closer, they are "linked". If they live at opposite ends of the city, get a list of friends of each. Two such friends are almost bound to live in the same block, or even know each other. Presto! The link.

City directories are indispensable tools for conspiratorialists; Garrison would spend hours poring over the New Orleans phone book, totally absorbed by it. One day he looked up at me from his city directory and said: "Sooner or later, because people are lazy, you catch them out on propinquity."

Another respect of conspiratorialist: normal ideological labels do not apply to true conspiracy believers. I know I have spoken here of "left-wing" conspiracies and "right-wing" conspiracies, but this is misleading. True conspiratorialists are on neither the left nor the right, but are united on some other dimension entirely. Garrison was in some ways a left-wing ideologist (he used to pride himself, for example, on his refusal to discern a Communist conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination, and he mocked J. Edgar Hoover's obsession with communism, saying that Communists were like unicorns, everyone had heard of them but nobody had ever seen once).

Nonetheless he was always on good terms with conspiracy-minded right-wingers, and they with him. When conspiracy discussions really got going, the ideological bent of the participants was cheerfully overlooked; it was unimportant after all, compared with the joy of discovering linkages, connections, and overlaps. Moreover, in the end all were prepared to agree that the special "they" who controlled the nation were inimical to left and right alike.

In the case of the assassination of President Kennedy there is practically no evidence whatsoever of a conspiracy, and by far the most plausible (and simplest) hypothesis is that a single, unaided assassin — Lee Harvey Oswald — shot

the President. Yet the conspiratorialists will believe anything rather than believe this.

After studying this assassination for a long time an analogy finally occurred to me, but I soon found that it did not appeal to conspiracy theorists. The analogy is that of the jigsaw puzzle.

Reconstructing the assassination, as the FBI did, by interviewing a large number of people, is like reconstructing a picture by putting together a large number of jigsaw puzzle pieces. If one puts these "pieces" together on the hypothesis of a lone assassin, one finds that most of the pieces fit quite well, and only a few pieces have to be discarded (e.g. "second Oswald" pieces.) But, unfortunately, the pieces don't quite fit exactly. There are bad joints here and there (occasioned by



faulty memory as much as anything else), and it is these that the conspiratorialist seizes on. He proceeds to discard the entire "lone assassin" puzzle as a result, and proposes a new one involving a conspiracy. His puzzle has, perhaps, the advantage of not having bad joints, but at the expense of the pieces themselves; his puzzle is, in reality, a blank, to be filled in largely by his own imagination.

That is what is wrong with the Langman-Cockburn critique of the Robert Kennedy assassination as published in Harper's. They expect all the pieces to fit perfectly — everyone's recollections to be completely consistent — hardly realistic when one is dealing with humans.

Be that as it may, my jigsaw puzzle analogy made little headway with Jim Garrison and the conspiratorialists in his entou-

rage. For them it was precisely the blank puzzle that was so much fun to play around with.

How well I remember the interminable conversations about whether this or that person was "involved."

"Hey, what if so-and-so was involved?" one might say.

"Oh, he was involved all right," another would answer with the same confidence with which one might assert that he had brown hair.

"Had to be," a third would add knowingly.

Garrison had such a vivid imagination that he was the acknowledged master of this type of colloquy. He could all but hypnotize his audience.

Garrison played around with a scenario involving Allen Dulles, who was thought certainly to be "involved." Garrison's plan was to have Dulles arrested along with Gordon Novel, a former employee of Garrison's who had absconded with some potentially damaging evidence against his former boss. Both Novel and Dulles smoked pipes, and for some reason, Garrison was amusing himself that day by imagining their photos side by side in the papers — both of them solemnly smoking pipes.

On occasion Garrison would retire into the sauna baths of the New Orleans Athletic Club for several days at a stretch. After one such recuperation he returned to my office with a brief one-act play he had written about a zany king who held court wearing roller skates. I was quite touched that he brought it over for my perusal. For a while I kept it in my big filing cabinet along with the files on Lee Harvey Oswald, Clay Shaw, Robert Kennedy (a suspect until his death), the CIA (always known as "the company"), H. L. Hunt, Paramilitary Organizations, Edgar Eugene Bradley, Jack Lawrence, the Minutemen, L.B.J. and many, many others. In the end, I believe, the play was lost; or perhaps Garrison retrieved it.

A lot of people have asked me if I think Garrison was crazy. My answer is that he was no crazier than a lot of other people I've known. Today he is doing well as a defense attorney, and I'm sure that the whole subject of assassinations has completely faded from his mind.

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