

Scribblers assail Oliver Stone's 'JFK'

Seven months before the movie "JFK" premiered last December, an army of establishment politicians and columnists began surfacing with wild slanders against the movie and its director Oliver Stone. The campaign of press vilification was reminiscent of the National Broadcasting Corp.-led effort to pillory New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison back in 1967, when he first announced the investigation and eventual indictment of Perminex-Centro Mondiale Commerciale's Clay Shaw for the Kennedy assassination conspiracy.

According to Col. Fletcher Prouty, USAF (ret.), the campaign during the 1960s to discredit Garrison was aided by a "for eyes only" memo prepared by the Central Intelligence Agency for distribution among publishers and editors who had worked with the CIA. Some of the reporters and public figures who were involved in that smear campaign 25 years ago—like the *Washington Post's* George Lardner—have resurfaced today as the leading trashers of Oliver Stone and his film. In fact, Lardner launched the campaign to discredit the Stone film before the movie even went into production, publishing commentaries on the first draft of the script, which was leaked to him behind Stone's back.

Here is a sample of some of the diatribes that have appeared in the press about "JFK."

George Lardner, "On The Set: Dallas in Wonderland—How Oliver Stone's Version of the Kennedy Assassination Exploits the Edge of Paranoia," *Washington Post*, May 19, 1991.

"Film maker Oliver Stone . . . the controversial, Oscar-winning chronicler of the 1960s and the war in Vietnam, is in the midst of a \$35-40 million production about the murder [of John F. Kennedy] tentatively titled 'JFK.' His hero: former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, whose zany investigation of the assassination in the late 1960s has almost faded from memory. . . . What this means is that Oliver Stone is chasing fiction. Garrison's investigation was a fraud. . . ."

"A copy of the original script was obtained by [Harold] Weisberg and made available to the *Washington Post*. And while there isn't space to list all the errors and absurdities, large and small, some are deserving of special mention.

"For this reporter, one of the most interesting flights of fancy involves the death of David Ferrie, one of Garrison's prime targets. I was probably the last person to see him alive.

"In reality, in the wake of the JFK murder, authorities had received a wild batch of second-hand reports about Ferrie, a

vain, nervous flight school instructor based in New Orleans: that he knew Lee Harvey Oswald and might have hypnotized him, that he might have gone to Dallas as a 'getaway pilot' for a presidential assassin. Dismissed from Eastern Airlines in March 1963 because of a record of homosexual arrests, Ferrie had been interrogated shortly after the assassination by Garrison's men, the Secret Service, and the FBI (which found nothing). But Ferrie became a Garrison target when the DA [district attorney] decided in the fall of 1966 that the 'truth' about the assassination remained untold by the Warren Commission, but was still within his grasp. . . ."

"On Feb. 22, 1967, five days after the *New Orleans States-Item* disclosed Garrison's probe, Ferrie was found dead in his apartment. Garrison promptly pronounced him 'one of history's important individuals' and claimed that he had been about to 'arrest' Ferrie on unspecified charges. 'There's no question about the fact that its suicide,' the DA said.

"The coroner, Dr. Nicholas Ghetta, held flatly that Ferrie, 49, died of natural causes despite several undated notes found in his apartment that suggested suicide and unrequited love for a man named 'Al.' Ghetta said death was due to a cerebral hemorrhage. Ferrie, he declared, could only have killed himself by worrying himself to death under the 'stress and strain' of Garrison's investigation.

"Stone gives Ferrie's demise a different spin, at least in the script he started with. In a scene labeled the 'Night Before,' Ferrie runs into the toilet, looking terrified, chased by two Cubans. . . . They catch Ferrie at the sink and start forcing medicine down his throat. Moments later, they are busy typing a note, perhaps trying to force Ferrie to sign it as 'he convulses, dies.'

"Strange, I used that same bathroom a few hours later, in the course of a four-hour conversation with Ferrie (he said he was convinced Garrison's investigation would turn out to be a 'witchhunt'). Ferrie was very much alive when we walked downstairs at around 4 a.m. I didn't see any Cubans—or anyone else.

"Stone, who is reportedly revising the script as he goes along, will begin filming in New Orleans shortly, taking his star-studded cast with him. . . . All the hoopla will, of course, obscure the absurdities and palpable untruths in Garrison's book and Stone's rendition of it."

Gerald Ford and David Belin, "Kennedy Assassination: How About the Truth?" *Washington Post*, Dec. 17, 1991.

"The media treatment of the Kennedy assassination tragedy and the Warren Commission report is a microcosm of one of the central problems facing our democratic society: False sensationalist claims are given wide dissemination and the truth is submerged, and the responsible press usually does not undertake sufficient effort to expose the fraud that is being perpetrated. Two vivid examples are the recent series of five one-hour A&E television programs about the Kennedy

Stone answers critics of Jim Garrison

At a luncheon lecture at the National Press Club on Jan. 15, Oliver Stone responded to a questioner who charged that Jim Garrison had undertaken the prosecution of Clay Shaw for conspiracy in the assassination of Kennedy, as a public relations stunt to win the Louisiana governorship:

Why anyone would in 1967 seek to be a governor of a state by going against the CIA and the entire government by suggesting they killed a President is beyond me. Jim's political life was over the moment he brought those charges. He was taking on the establishment in a major way and he paid the price.

As for the case itself, I just want to remind you that he has been vilified and trashed over and over and over again in the press, and he has now become a non-person, in the sense that Stalin's opponents became non-people. There are no specifics ever brought up. It has become a media mantra, a buzz-word, a credo. The journalists cite each other to substitute for critical analysis.

Jim had an interesting history. He was an FBI man, he was a war hero, he was elected three times DA of New Orleans. Why? Because he was popular. He was unpopular in the press, in the *Times-Picayune*. He was unpopular with Clay Shaw's friends. He was unpopular with the establishment of New Orleans. But he was elected three times. Since then he has become an appellate judge.

He had a case. There were two evidentiary hearings. It went to a three-judge panel. He presented his facts. Those three judges in 1967 said "go to trial." He went to a grand jury of 12 jurors and they said "go to trial." It was hardly the frolic described. It was no whim. He had witnesses and evidence. Three major witnesses, however, died before he could get to trial. Obviously, Oswald; obviously, Ruby. And we have Guy Bannister. And we have David Ferrie, who was the key witness to the possible connection of Shaw, Bannister, and Ferrie. We have found since the trial significant new evidence that Shaw knew Oswald; not only through Perry Russo, but through the Clinton witnesses. In Clinton, Louisiana, 10 people—8 of them black—pointed to Shaw being in Clinton with Lee Harvey Oswald at a CORE rally. Dean Andrews pointed to a man called Clay Bertrand, who Jim found out to be Clay Shaw.

That testimony was thrown out of court by the judge. . . .

The jury came back and said that Clay Shaw was not guilty, but they were polled after the trial and they said



Director Oliver Stone on the set of "JFK."

Jim Garrison had convinced them there was a conspiracy to kill Kennedy, but they just couldn't make the links to Clay Shaw. . . .

After Clay Shaw died, Judge Haggerty, who presided over the case, and in a sense hurt Jim's case by refusing to take the Clay Bertrand testimony, said in a television interview: "I do believe to this day that the jury should have found Clay Shaw guilty. I do not believe Clay Shaw told the truth at the trial."

After the trial, they found a picture that showed that Clay Shaw and David Ferrie were at a party together. I think that Shaw perjured himself time and again, denying he knew Oswald, denying he knew Ferrie, and denying he was a member of the CIA—that we found out he was. He has a history with the CIA that was pointed out by Richard Helms. Finally, under oath, he told the truth. Victor Marchetti supports that theory, saying that during the trial, Mr. Helms was very concerned with the fate of Clay Shaw and offered all the help he could.

In addition to that, we now know that Mr. Shaw was on the board of directors of Perminindex, a fascist organization in Italy that was thrown out of Italy for illegal activities, among them, promoting financial transactions in the attempted assassination of Charles de Gaulle, the President of France. So, don't think, here we have this innocent businessman pictured by the press.

I think we have a serious case that was brought and lost and failed, and that is as it is; but there is something more than meets the eye. I liken Jim Garrison's case somewhat to the Lawrence Walsh case in the 1980s, when he tried to bring that same covert arm of the government to light of day.

assassination called 'The Men Who Killed Kennedy' and the new Oliver Stone-Kevin Costner film, 'JFK.'

"The common denominator of these commercial productions is the big lie—the assertion that the top echelons of our government were conspiratorially involved in the assassination and that Lee Harvey Oswald was not the lone gunman who killed President Kennedy and Dallas Police Officer J.D. Tippit.

"In 'JFK' the big lie is disseminated through Kevin Costner, who portrays New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison. . . . In the A&E series, the big lie is disseminated through key interviewees who are portrayed as purported experts, such as Col. Fletcher Prouty (a consultant to Oliver Stone in the production of 'JFK'), who asserts: 'You see, you're dealing with a very high echelon of power. . . . Otherwise, how could you have gotten people like the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court to participate in the coverup?'

"False charges of this kind are a desecration to the memory of President Kennedy, a desecration to the memory of Earl Warren and a fraudulent misrepresentation of the truth to the American public. . . . The basic format underlying the dissemination of lies is to cover up the overwhelming weight of the evidence and instead paste together scraps of testimony to form a case for conspiracy and an attempt to cover up the guilt of Lee Harvey Oswald. . . .

"There are some who assert in the face of this conspiracy barrage by the mass media, particularly movies and television, that we will never know the truth. That is simply not accurate. The truth is known. Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman who killed President Kennedy and Dallas Police Officer J.D. Tippit. Those of us who served on the Warren Commission and those lawyers on the staff who examined the evidence in depth know that to be the truth—beyond a reasonable doubt."

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.), "The Paranoid Style," *Washington Post*, Dec. 29, 1991.

"I did not think there had been a conspiracy to kill the President, but I was convinced that the American people would sooner or later come to believe that there had been one unless we investigated the event with exactly that presumption in mind. . . . The Warren Commission did not see its work in anything like the perspective I had hoped for. It was Lyndon Johnson at his worst: manipulative, cynical. Setting a Chief Justice of no great intellect to do a job that a corrupt FBI was well content should not be done well. Edward Jay Epstein laid it all out in a master's thesis written at Cornell a few years later.

"More relevant to the present moment, however, is Richard Hofstadter's incomparable essay 'The Paranoid Styles in American Politics,' which, as it happens, he delivered as the Herbert Spenser Lecture at Oxford within days of the Kennedy assassination. He begins: 'Although American political life has rarely been touched by the most acute varieties



Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) at the grave of John F. Kennedy, in Oliver Stone's film.

Warner Bros., Inc.

of class conflict, it has served again and again as an arena for uncommonly angry minds. . . . Hofstadter (as also Daniel Bell) was at this time primarily concerned with the conspiratorial fantasies of the right. . . . But he knew well enough about the paranoid style of the left also. . . .

"And so to 'JFK.' It could be viewed as parody. The homosexual orgies in the New Orleans town house of the villain Clay Shaw are straight out of Maria Monk's nunnery in Montreal. The generals boozing it up as they plan the murder of their commander-in-chief are straight out of *Ramparts* in a slow week in the '60s. The black waiter who hears nothing is, well, MGM in the '30s. A John Birch look-alike is the fake erudition. Garrison is forever going on about those who practice to deceive, about riddles wrapped in mysteries inside enigmas. . . .

"But it is not parody, and it is not funny. It could spoil a generation of American politics just when sanity is returning. All of us in politics ought to see it: This is what citizens under 30 or 40 are going to be thinking soon."

George F. Will, “ ‘JFK’: Paranoid History,” syndicated column, Dec. 26, 1991.

“Oliver Stone’s movie ‘JFK’ will give paranoia a bad name and give us all pause. . . . This is the message of Stone’s celluloid diatribe. Much of America’s establishment conspired to kill Kennedy because he loved peace and ‘they’ wanted war. Strange that a society so sick allowed such a saint to be President at all, but this is cartoon history by Stone, who is 45 going on eight.

“In his three-hour lie, Stone falsifies so much that he may be an intellectual sociopath, indifferent to truth. Or perhaps he is just another propagandist frozen in the 1960s like a fly in amber, combining moral arrogance with historical ignorance. . . .

“Back in Stone’s formative years—those 1960s he loves so ardently—members of the John Birch Society thought President Eisenhower had been a communist. Intellectually, Stone is on all fours with his mirror images, the Birchers, who, like Stone, thought Earl Warren was a traitor. Stone and they are part of a long fringe tradition, the paranoid style in American politics, a style ravenous for conspiracy theories.

“Why is actor Kevin Costner lending himself to this libel of America? Is he invincibly ignorant or just banally venal? Nothing else can explain his willingness to portray as a hero Jim Garrison, who, as New Orleans’ district attorney, staged an assassination ‘investigation’ that involved recklessness, cruelty, abuse of power, publicity mongering, and dishonesty, all on a scale that strongly suggests lunacy leavened by cynicism.

“After covering the assassination story for 28 years, the journalist who knows most about it is the *Post*’s George Lardner. He documents Stone ‘stomping on presumptions of innocence, cooking up false admissions, ignoring contrary evidence and giving a conspiratorial tone to inconsequential facets of the tragedy that were explained long ago.’

“. . . ‘JFK’ is an act of execrable history and contemptible citizenship by a man of technical skill, scant education, and negligible conscience.”

Wall Street Journal, editorial, “ ‘JFK’: The Movie,” Dec. 26, 1991.

“What Mr. Stone is basically selling is political grotesquery itself. Thus former New Orleans DA Jim Garrison—played by Kevin ‘Dancing With Wolves’ Costner—becomes a relentless truth-seeker. We have to say we admire Mr. Stone’s brass, and particularly his skill at finding advantage in attacks on the film’s historical veracity; he suggests this further proof of a plot. . . .

“The keystone of this publicity campaign is an imprimatur of seriousness from the op-ed page of the *New York Times*, on which Mr. Stone argued his script with a straight face. No surprise, since the *Times* op-ed page also launched Gary Sick’s movie deal for ‘October Surprise.’ . . .

“Anyone who wants to know what rocks the Warren Commission left unturned should not turn to Mr. Garrison. Instead, read Edward Jay Epstein, author of *Inquest*, a critique of the commission, *Counter-plot*, a critique of Mr. Garrison, and finally *Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald*.

“Lee Harvey Oswald, as even ‘JFK’ is forced to acknowledge, was a former Marine who defected to the Soviet Union and returned to Dallas. Mr. Epstein fleshes out this information: Oswald disappeared from sight during a year of his Moscow visit. His wife married him after a month’s acquaintance, and Oswald was also befriended by her uncle, a colonel in the secret MVD. In Mexico City, eight weeks before the assassination, Oswald met with a Soviet intelligence officer, and also with Cuban officials in seeking a visa. While in Dallas, Oswald was befriended and helped by George De Mohrenschildt, a shadowy figure with intelligence connections around the world. De Mohrenschildt agreed to a series of interviews with Mr. Epstein, but after the first was found shot, an apparent suicide.

“It’s too early to draw any real conclusions from these facts, which are not inconsistent with Oswald being simply a lunatic. But there is reason enough to hope that with the changes in Russia, someday we will be able to see the KGB files on Oswald. . . . Maybe someday the Cuban files too. . . .

“Pending more definitive evidence, the bare facts of the Epstein revelations would make a corking movie. But somehow no one wants to make a movie speculating that the KGB killed Kennedy. Instead, inevitably we suppose, Oliver Stone makes a movie about the CIA killing Kennedy, the *New York Times* turns the script into an op-ed article, the critics rave, and the talk shows are overwhelmed by the media blitz.

“What sells, it seems, is precisely the hatred for the U.S. government and institutions that saturates ‘JFK.’ All this somehow reminds us of a great book by the late Richard Hofstadter entitled *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*.”

The Times (London), editorial, Dec. 28, 1991.

“Mr. Stone is certain to engrain his version on the fertile minds of millions. . . . With their mixture of naiveté and distrust of government, Americans have long been partial to discerning the machinations of the hidden hand. . . . The ‘60s and the early ‘70s were bliss for conspiracy theorists beginning with the prescient film the ‘Manchurian Candidate.’ . . .

Every child of the counterculture knew for a fact that a murderous cabal in Wall Street and Washington controlled everything. The Optimistic Reagan Years saw a respite from such paranoia, save for the escapades of Lyndon LaRouche, the perennial Democratic presidential candidate, now in prison, whose followers are certain that Queen Elizabeth II heads the world’s biggest drug cartel.”