

Oliver Stone on Garrison's Demon

This letter-to-the-editor appeared in the *Wilson Quarterly*, Summer 2001.

To suggest, as Max Holland does [in "[The Demon in Jim Garrison](#)"] that Jim Garrison somehow is the root cause of Americans' current distrust in their government is absurd. Garrison himself, a combat veteran who had served in the U.S. military for 23 years, accepted the Warren Commission's verdict on the Kennedy assassination for three years. By the time he started his investigation, a substantial number of Americans already believed there was a conspiracy and a cover-up. So Garrison was catching up to the American people, not leading them.

Americans' distrust of their government stems from decades of lies and cover-ups by arms of the government, including the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1940s and '50s, the Warren Commission, the executive branch (especially during the Vietnam War: the "credibility gap" existed long before Garrison said a word about the Kennedy assassination), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (e.g., COINTELPRO, etc.). As the lies have accumulated, so Americans' distrust of their government has grown.

Holland's comparison of Garrison to Senator Joseph McCarthy shows that he lacks a fundamental understanding of McCarthyism. The essence of McCarthyism was that a member of Congress or a witness before a witch-hunting congressional committee could throw accusations around about Communists and spies in the State Department or in Hollywood or in labor unions without ever having to produce any evidence. The accusers were not accountable because they were protected by congressional immunity. Those accused did not have the right to scrutinize the evidence or to confront or cross-examine their accusers. In other words, Joseph McCarthy never operated under the rules of law.

Jim Garrison, as a prosecutor, brought his accusations through the legal process. Clay Shaw was indicted by a grand jury of 22, had a pretrial hearing before three judges, and received a full trial. The evidence was available to him. He was able to confront his accusers and to cross-examine them. The fact that Garrison lost the case does not make him a Joseph McCarthy. Prosecutors bring cases all the time that do not gain convictions.

And in the Shaw case, there are many reasons why Garrison lost. His investigation was sabotaged from day one. Every single one of his requests for extradition of witnesses from other states was denied. Federal attorneys refused to serve his subpoenas on Allen Dulles and other former Central Intelligence Agency officials. Garrison's offices were bugged, and he was constantly under surveillance by the FBI. His requests for crucial evidence such as Lee Harvey Oswald's tax records and the Kennedy autopsy photos were denied. Key witnesses such as David Ferrie and Eladio del Valle died under mysterious circumstances. The CIA, as reported by former CIA official Victor Marchetti, was

helping Shaw at trial. Garrison's files were stolen by a "volunteer" and given to Shaw's defense attorneys before trial. And Garrison was pilloried in the press.

Garrison's treatment by the press was part of an orchestrated effort by the CIA to discredit critics of the Warren Commission. A CIA memo dated April 1, 1967, outlined the strategy and called for the agency's "assets" in the media (writers and editors) to publish stories about the critics that said they were politically motivated, financially motivated, ego-maniacal, crazy, sloppy in their research, etc. This is exactly the inaccurate portrait of Garrison that emerged in the press.

Garrison's book *On the Trail of the Assassins* describes what actually led him to the conclusion that the CIA was involved. He gradually uncovered pieces of evidence and witnesses, beginning with David Ferrie, who worked for the CIA; a gunrunning raid by CIA operatives in Houma, Louisiana; the fact that several of Oswald's coworkers at Reily Coffee Company in New Orleans now worked at NASA; the fact that Oswald was working out of an office that was running the CIA's local training camps for Operation MONGOOSE; many eyewitnesses who saw Clay Shaw, David Ferrie, and Oswald together, etc.

There is no doubt that the *Paese Sera* article was another piece of the puzzle for Garrison, but he had neither the staff nor the resources to go to Europe and follow up its leads. And it was not the centerpiece of his thinking that Holland makes it out to be.

A final note: During the shooting of our film in New Orleans, we noted that in spontaneous encounters on the street or in places of business, Jim was constantly hailed and approached by local supporters with great respect, greetings, and smiles. He was a clear favorite of the African American population and white working class, and was a popular, twice-elected district attorney who ran on and enforced a reform slate. The only hatred we found directed at him was expressed by people with special interests in the case, or by the power structure of the city.

We continue to be amazed and appalled at the disproportionate obloquy and scandal directed at Mr. Garrison. Anyone really interested in witnessing the man's probity and clear-headedness need only watch his 30-minute address (without any notes) on national TV, granted him by the Federal Communications Commission after NBC aired a clearly biased and uncorroborated disinformation piece about him.

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