

Oliver Stone on Jim Garrison, the KGB, and the CIA

Editor's Note: In the August 5/12, 2002 issue of *The Nation*, Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar published an advertisement that consisted of their letter to the editor of *Foreign Affairs*, which that journal had refused to run. The letter criticized a review in *Foreign Affairs* of an [article about Jim Garrison](#) that had been published in *Studies in Intelligence*.

The Stone/Sklar advertisement is posted here verbatim, along with a rebuttal that subsequently appeared in the September 2/9 issue of *The Nation*, and lastly, Stone/Sklar's October 7 rejoinder.

Jim Garrison, the KGB, and the CIA:

An Open Letter to *Foreign Affairs* Magazine

Last fall, Nation contributing editor Max Holland wrote an article for the CIA publication Studies in Intelligence asserting that former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison was duped by a KGB disinformation operation that led him, along with most Americans, to believe that the CIA had been involved in the assassination of President Kennedy.

This spring, Foreign Affairs magazine published a generous review of Holland's article. As co-writers of the film JFK, we sent a reply to Foreign Affairs. The editors refused to publish it. We offered to pay for an ad, but Foreign Affairs again refused.

For the record, here is our reply:

Dear Editors of *Foreign Affairs*:

Philip Zelikow's review of Max Holland's recent article in the CIA publication *Studies in Intelligence* is a disservice to your readers. Zelikow uncritically accepts Holland's theory that a KGB disinformation operation back in 1967 is at the root of most Americans' current belief that the CIA was involved in the assassination of President Kennedy.

Holland's thesis rests on one unproven premise: that the KGB planted a false story in March 1967 in *Paese Sera*, an Italian left-wing newspaper. The story reported that Clay Shaw, then recently charged with conspiracy to assassinate the President, was a board member of *Centro Mondiale Commerciale* (CMC), an organization that had been forced out of Italy amid charges that it was a CIA money-laundering front.

The problem Zelikow ignores is that Holland's only evidence to support his premise is one handwritten note by a KGB defector named Vasili Mitrokhin that "refers to a disinformation scheme in 1967 that involved *Paese Sera* and resulted in publication of a false story in New York." The note, supposedly summarizing a KGB document that Holland has never seen, does not mention Clay Shaw, *Centro Mondiale Commerciale*, Jim Garrison, or any specific New York publication.

Holland speculates that the New York publication may have been the *National Guardian*, which based an article on the *Paese Sera* series. But one short article in an obscure left-wing weekly that routinely picked up stories from the international press does not seem like much of an accomplishment for a KGB disinformation operation. There is no evidence that the *Guardian* article was picked up anywhere else in the United States.

Rather than speculate, Holland might have tried to interview the editors of *Paese Sera* who were responsible for the articles on *Centro Mondiale Commerciale*, as scholar Joan Mellen has done for her forthcoming biography of Garrison. They would have told him that the six-part series had nothing to do with the KGB or the JFK assassination, that they had never heard of Jim Garrison when they assigned the story six months before, and that they were astonished to see that Shaw might have any connection to the assassination. The articles were actually assigned in the wake of a right-wing coup in Greece and were intended to prevent such a coup in Italy.

Holland says "everything in the *Paese Sera* story was a lie." His evidence? A recently released CIA document saying that the Agency itself looked into *Paese Sera*'s allegations and found that the CIA had no connection to CMC or its parent PERMINDEX. Holland may be willing to accept this as the whole truth, but it is unconvincing to the rest of us who have noticed the Agency's tendency to distance itself from the fronts, to release to the public only documents that serve its interest, to fabricate evidence, and to lie outright even under oath to congressional committees.

Two important facts from the *Paese Sera* story remain true:

1. CMC was forced to leave Italy (for Johannesburg, South Africa) in 1962 under a cloud of suspicion about its CIA connections.
2. Clay Shaw was a member of CMC's board, along with such well-known sympathizers as Gutierrez di Spadaforo, undersecretary of agriculture for Mussolini; Ferenc Nagy, former premier of Hungary; and Giuseppe Zigiotti, president of the Fascist National Association for Militia Arms.

Holland claims that the *Paese Sera* articles were what led Garrison to believe the CIA was involved in the assassination. This is nonsense. Garrison's book *On the Trail of the Assassins* describes in detail how his uncovering of various pieces of evidence actually led him to the conclusion that the CIA was involved. This gradual process began two days after the assassination when he questioned David Ferrie, a pilot who flew secret

missions to Cuba for the CIA and trained Lee Harvey Oswald in his Civil Air Patrol unit. It included his investigation of a 1961 raid of a munitions cache by CIA operatives in Houma, Louisiana; the discovery that several of Oswald's co-workers 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 camp for Operation MONGOOSE; many eyewitnesses who saw Clay Shaw, David Ferrie, and Oswald together, etc. No doubt the *Paese Sera* series was another piece of the puzzle for Garrison, but it was not the centerpiece of his thinking that Holland makes it out to be.

From the moment his investigation of the JFK assassination became public, Garrison was pilloried in the press. This treatment was part of an orchestrated effort by the CIA to discredit critics of the Warren Commission. A CIA memo dated April 1, 1967, never mentioned by Holland or Zelikow, outlines the strategy and calls for the Agency's "assets" in the media (writers and editors) to publish stories saying the critics were politically motivated, financially motivated, egomaniacal, sloppy in their research, support the Soviet Union, etc. This is exactly the inaccurate portrait of Garrison that emerged in the press.

With the publication of Holland's recent article attempting to link Jim Garrison to the KGB, the CIA continues to pursue this misguided strategy of smearing Garrison and other critics of the Warren Commission. Fortunately, the American public has never bought the tired old lie that the CIA's misadventures can be written off as figments of KGB disinformation. Too bad your critic did.

Oliver Stone & Zachary Sklar
Co-writers of the film *JFK*

Holland's Reply to Stone & Sklar:

To the uninitiated, the Oliver Stone/Zachary Sklar advertisement on page 37 of the August 5/12 *Nation* appears to be a telling critique of my *Studies in Intelligence* article on the CIA and the Kennedy assassination. It is not.

Stone/Sklar challenge the notion of a KGB provenance for the *Paese Sera* articles by citing unnamed *Paese Sera* editors. These editors allegedly explain that the articles could not be *dezinformatsia* timed to Clay Shaw's arrest, because they were "actually assigned [six months before] in the wake of a right-wing coup in Greece." This new information would be damaging to my argument save for one thing – it can't possibly be true. *Paese Sera* published the first article in question on March 4, 1967 – three days after Shaw's arrest – and the infamous colonels' coup in Greece did not occur until seven weeks later, April 21, 1967. (For the record, my researcher in Italy contacted two *Paese Sera* editors and one of the two reporters who wrote the articles; the former professed not to remember the articles and the reporter wanted to be paid for answering questions.)

Another novel concoction in the ad is provably false, again because dates are stubborn things. Until now no one has ever claimed that Garrison began to perceive a CIA hand in the assassination as far back as November 1963. This revisionism is refuted by the documentary record. In December 1966, early in his reinvestigation, Garrison handwrote a three-page letter to *Life* journalist Richard Billings. “At the base of everything,” the DA predicted, will be “self-designated revolutionaries from the lunatic fringe of the Cuban movement.” Not a word about the CIA. Immediately after Shaw’s arrest, Garrison fervidly claimed to journalists that the assassination was a “homosexual thrill-killing.” Again, not a word about the CIA.

Billings’s diary gives us the precise date the New Orleans DA trained his mercurial mind on the agency: March 16, 1967, two weeks after Shaw’s arrest, the day Garrison heard about an article that “supposedly mentions Shaw’s [CIA] work in Italy.” On April 3 Billings observed, “Garrison now is hot on the CIA angle.” Correspondence in Garrison’s own papers proves he embraced *Paese Sera*’s stunning allegations, namely, that Shaw was an “Agency man” and a neo-Nazi intent on restoring Fascism to Italy.

It’s crucial to understand why Stone/Sklar are hellbent on backdating Garrison’s “gradual” thought process on CIA involvement: to paper over a pivotal falsehood in Garrison’s 1988 memoir (which Sklar edited). He wrote that he didn’t discover Shaw’s “life as an Agency man in Rome” until “well after” the 1969 trial. Why did Garrison lie? Everything depends on the [answer](#).

I find dumbfounding Stone/Sklar’s trust in a single source, *Paese Sera*. They regard its articles as gospel (as did Garrison) and have never seriously attempted to corroborate the allegations (nor can they; no reputable Italian newspaper ever printed remotely similar allegations). On the rare occasion they pretend to provide corroboration, they rely on outlandish sources. Their *JFK: The Documented Screenplay*, for example, approvingly cites *Executive Intelligence Review*, a Lyndon LaRouche publication. Worse, those sources turn out to be circular, always boiling down to *Paese Sera*! Reliance on one source is why Stone/Sklar perpetuate outrageous assertions about such peripheral figures as Ferenc Nagy, whom they smear as a “well-known fascist sympathizer” when he was actually jailed by the Gestapo in 1944.

Ten years ago Stone testified – with “pleasure and pride” – in support of a statute to unseal the secret files on Kennedy’s assassination. Now those files are largely open, and Stone doesn’t like one of the consequences: Jim Garrison stands revealed as the Joe McCarthy of the 1960s, an audacious liar who unfortunately held a position of state power.

Stone & Sklar’s Rejoinder:

Max Holland’s comparison of Jim Garrison to Joseph McCarthy [“Letters,” September 2/9] shows 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. They 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, McCarthy never operated under the rule of law.

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

Holland persists in his theory that Garrison came to believe the CIA was involved in the JFK assassination solely because of an article in the Italian newspaper *Paese Sera*. Despite the entry in a *Life* reporter's diary that Holland cites as his proof, it is simply not believable that a man with Garrison's conservative background – two decades in the military, former FBI agent, district attorney – would jump to such a radical conclusion solely on the basis of one foreign article.

Garrison offered a more plausible explanation. In private conversation he told us he underwent a gradual transformation of consciousness based on an accumulation of evidence he did not initially understand or connect. These included Oswald's fake defection to the Soviet Union; Oswald's connection to Guy Banister, who was involved in the CIA's Operation MONGOOSE, and to David Ferrie, who was flying missions over Cuba for the CIA; Garrison's discovery of a CIA munitions raid in Houma, Louisiana, etc. This evidence pointing to the CIA included Garrison's reading of the *Paese Sera* series, but the process had begun long before.

Holland is correct about the date of the Greek coup. But the basic point we were making remains true: Editors of *Paese Sera*, an independent left-wing paper, have made it clear that their series had nothing to do with a purported KGB disinformation operation. Holland has offered no credible evidence to the contrary.

Oliver Stone & Zachary Sklar