

The controversial first news break

On February 17, when a front-page headline blared, "DA Here Launches Full JFK 'Plot' Probe," the investigation that was to draw a world-wide press pilgrimage to New Orleans became public.

It was the *States-Item* that broke the story that warm Friday. Reporters Jack Dempsey, Rosemary James and David Snyder compiled the story that had been porpoising along in silence for nearly four months.

Though all local media knew bits and pieces of the rumored investigation, it was not until February 10 that *States-Item* City Editor John Wilds and Rosemary James conferred about the facts and figures that police reporter Jack Dempsey had put together. On Tuesday, the 14th, Rosemary checked out Dempsey's information and fellow-reporter David Snyder scoured the public records. Later that day she called Garrison's office for an appointment. She told Garrison she wanted to talk to him about his "special investigation." When Garrison put her off she asked, "Well, are you conducting an investigation into the assassination of President Kennedy?" "I will neither confirm nor deny it," he replied. He then talked of other matters and ended the conversation with, "Come on out to the office and we'll have a cup of coffee."

Rosemary wrote the story the next day and turned it in to John Wilds. He told her to take it to Garrison Thursday and show it to him. She arrived at Garrison's office at 10 a.m. and asked to see him. According to Rosemary, she went in, handed Garrison the story and greeted Lynn Loisel and Louis Ivon, two of the D.A.'s investigators. Both remained in the office. Garrison, in his shirtsleeves, leaned on his cluttered desk and read the first page of the story. He again repeated, "I will neither confirm nor deny it."

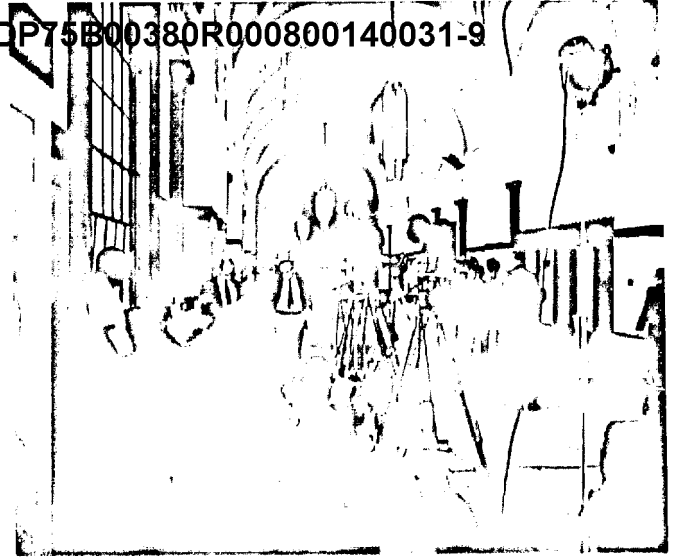
He then shrugged, passed off the story and began talking about other matters. Rosemary departed, after talking with Loisel and Ivon about a successful stake-out operation they had completed. Late Thursday after the story was sent to type, Rosemary worked on follow-up copy for Saturday.

After the story broke Garrison charged the *States-Item* with hurting his investigation and stated "Anyone who says I had an opportunity to see this story is a liar."

The following Monday, Rosemary went to his official press conference at a local motel and was barred. She saw Louis Ivon at the door and he said, "Hello, how are you?"

He then made his exit, replied Rosemary, who had yet to receive the promised cup of coffee from Garrison.

—Eugene A. Sheehan



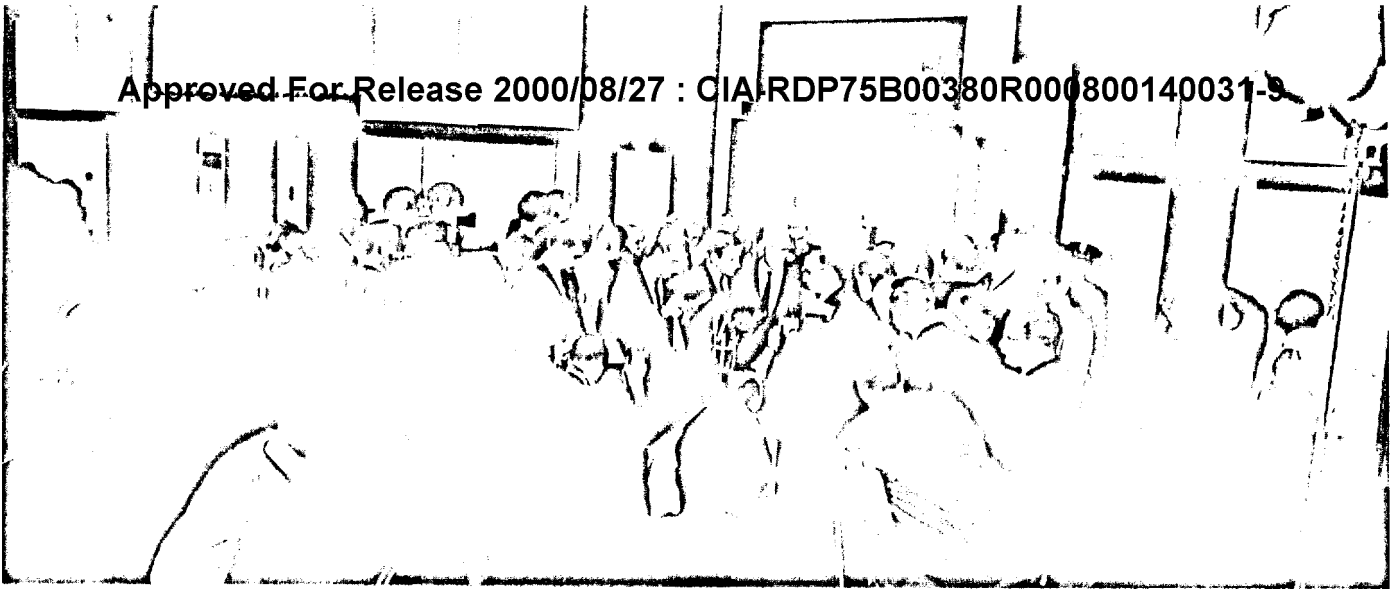
THE PRESS: its actions

Along the windowed wall of the almost block-long second floor marble hall of the New Orleans courthouse, reporters with impressive credentials from all over the world were sitting on the floor, on wooden benches, or hunched behind waiting television cameras and lights. Microphones sat mute, waiting for targets; pencils, sharpened like needles, waited to be manipulated. Conversation had long since dwindled away into bored silence. The "wall watch," as the press corps had come to call it, was now a week old and there wasn't much left to talk about. There was some occasional griping about the lack of action, but that is common among reporters. Most of them are accustomed to waiting for the action to begin—it comes with the territory.

The subject of this daily vigil had become as elusive as a clue in a Perry Mason mystery, an uncommon role for New Orleans' controversial and usually garrulous D. A., Jim Garrison, who is not best known for avoiding a consanguinity with publicity. He has, during his career, blown sparks from many embers, whipping up fires when only smoke seemed visible. He entered the D. A.'s office in 1960 and immediately ripped into the institution. Using cloak and dagger methods, he took on the hookers and shakedown joints along Bourbon Street and cleaned them up. He cracked down on lottery racketeers and unscrupulous bail bondsmen and even locked horns with eight criminal court judges at one point. When they fined him \$1,000 for defamation he had the ruling set aside by the United States Supreme Court. His exploits were merrily chronicled in the national press, including the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *National Observer*, and *The New York Times*.

But this time Garrison was after much bigger fish. This time he was after the conspirators who he said had plotted the assassination of President F. Kennedy.

In mid-February, the local newspapers revealed that Garrison was deeply involved in investigating a New Or-



and reactions

By William F. Diehl, Jr.

leans-based conspiracy which he believed had ended with the death of the president. Garrison, who had told the papers "no comment," reacted predictably. He called a press conference, barred the local papers, and berated them for thirty minutes. Then, his spleen vented, he announced: "We have solved the case. We will make arrests and obtain convictions. *The Warren Report* was wrong."

Like lemmings, the press streamed into the city from all over the world. Safaris of television crews arrived from New York, loaded down with equipment. Reporters converged from most of the major newspapers and press services. Because of the bizarre nature of the story, many of the questions, too, were loaded. Because the story had not emanated from his office, Garrison could afford to play it cool, and cool it he did. Interest surged and ebbed, and Garrison, well aware of the power of the press, played the story as a conductor directs a symphony, feeding the press corps just enough to keep them on the hook, making rare appearances and entering and leaving his office by a private entrance. To many of the reporters, he was inaccessible; to others, whom he trusted and liked, he was available, meeting them in hotel rooms, restaurants, and other out-of-the-way places. At first, he was hardly encouraging, commenting that arrests might take months or even years. Too much publicity, he said, might scare off witnesses and conspirators. Some might even commit suicide.

The American press was skeptical, most of them eyeing Garrison as a small town boy trying to make a name for himself with an incredible grandstand play. The international press saw in Garrison a knight on a white charger—a man who might finally "solve the Kennedy murder." The attitudes of the reporters and their approach to the Garrison investigation reflects these opposing views and, in an odd way, the views of opposing attitudes of the people in this country and the rest of the world. In the first months after Ken-

neddy's death, the American public seemed content to accept the "one man, one shot" theory of the assassination. The Europeans have never accepted it.

Evelyn Irons, a reporter for the *Sunday Times* of London said: "In Europe, where political plots and assassinations are fairly common, nobody has ever believed Oswald acted alone. *The Warren Report* is looked on with a great deal of skepticism. When I came here, I was assigned to look for a hookup with the Cuban situation, facts and figures and names involved in 'the' plot to kill Kennedy and possibly get a report from the Warren Commission. Notice I said 'the' plot. My editors have no question about *that*. As far as we're concerned there was a plot, period.

"The American press, on the other hand, doesn't seem to want a plot to exist. They come armed to the teeth with questions all related to Garrison's political aspirations. For the most part they don't seem to take Garrison at all seriously; they come with smiles on their faces."

As the story progressed, however, the smiles were wiped off more than one face. One fact is irrefutable: As of this writing, Garrison has become "hot copy" because there is a growing wave of doubt concerning *The Warren Report*, not only abroad but in this country too. For the most part, public opinion is based on what people read in the newspapers, see on their television screens, see in their magazines. It is doubtful that many people read the entire twenty-six volumes of *The Warren Report* nor the shortened versions that were printed. Knowledge of *The Warren Report* is based on the interpretive reporting of the press. In this country most of the newspapers assumed a positive attitude toward the report. In Europe, the press was negative toward it. Now, years after the assassination, fresh doubts are creeping into many people's minds in this country. But the United States press seems to have difficulty accepting the theory that a plot existed, particularly when it is revealed by / continued on page 52

THE PRESS / continued from page 13

the district attorney of New Orleans. After all, if all the resources of the FBI did not uncover a plot, how could Jim Garrison? Some, with tongue in cheek, were having a field day at Garrison's expense. A week after the first story on the investigation appeared, *Time* magazine reported that "Garrison all too clearly writes his own scripts" and summed up its first story thus: "But he (Garrison) was not talking anymore —no more, that is, than it took to keep his name in the papers."

Newsweek, in its second week of coverage, under the tag "History or Headlines?", concluded an article laced with anti-aphorisms ("Garrison's self-perpetuating investigation") by referring to a one-man submarine which the late David Ferrie, one of the alleged conspirators, had constructed to harass Castro's shipping lanes. "The little craft," reported *Newsweek*, "was made from an old B-25 gas tank, had no navigation instruments and no power plant but foot pedals. The sub rested for a time in a backyard and finally ended up in a dump."

"So, says Garrison's own growing gallery of critics, will the D. A.'s case?"

Another reporter, representing a northern newspaper, said he came to New Orleans believing Garrison was simply publicity hungry. "He just hasn't been making headlines much lately," he said. "Besides, he must be out of his mind to try and discredit the whole Warren Commission." In the next breath he admitted that his newspaper is interested in the Garrison investigation because of a "growing distrust of the Warren findings by the public."

As the story progressed, the skepticism of some American pressmen began to alter slightly. Ferrie's death, called a suicide by Garrison and a natural death by coroner Nicholas Chetta (a broken blood vessel at the base of the neck), came a few days after Garrison predicted premature news stories might lead to the suicide of some witnesses. Characteristically, Garrison leaped on Ferrie's death, calling him "one of history's most important men," and fingering him as the getaway pilot for Oswald's co-conspirators. Less than a week later, Garrison provided more action and arrested one of New Orleans' more prominent businessmen and real estate speculators, Clay Shaw, a decorated man in World War II who had helped start the International Trade Mart. If headlines were Garrison's meat,

he got them. Many newspapers, which had underplayed the story until then, finally put it on the front page. The normally conservative *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, which had been playing the story down, headlined Shaw's arrest with a banner, two-deck headline on the front page. *The New York Times* continued to relegate the Garrison investigation to the back pages. Coroner Chetta's announcement that Ferrie died naturally appeared in three paragraphs on page sixty-nine. But by the end of the second week, many reporters were beginning to regard Garrison as an enigma, rather than a publicity hound.

Garrison also requested a preliminary hearing, a move which generally surprised the press since it's usually a matter of routine procedure for the defense to ask for the hearing. A hearing is designed to show either that the evidence held by the state is sufficient to bind the accused over for trial, or insufficient, in which case the defendant is discharged. By filing for the state, Garrison was obviously taking a legal opportunity to perpetuate testimony in the form of official notes taken by the court reporter. The move was another show of confidence by Garrison.

The divergent attitudes of the U.S. and foreign press regarding the Garrison story are perhaps best indicated by the editorial approaches of two reporters, Jack Nelson, Pulitzer Prize winning southern correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*, who is based in Atlanta, and Phillipe LaBro, a columnist for *France-Soir*, the largest daily newspaper in France, who has been vitally interested in the Kennedy assassination since he went to Dallas the day after the death. Both are recognized, competent, and hard-nosed men. LaBro learned journalism in this country.

Nelson was returning to Atlanta from another assignment when the Garrison story first appeared on the national newswires. The *Los Angeles Times* put the story on page one.

"If they had been able to contact me, I would have advised them to play the story down, the same as *The New York Times* played it," Nelson said. "With it on the front page, I came over to New Orleans to try and put it in some context — everybody out there was wondering what the hell was going on.

Nelson's story, which appeared in the Sunday editions of both the *Times* and

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, was tough, reflecting Nelson's opinion that Garrison was "exploiting all the doubts about the commission," "You know how those things go," Nelson said. "Everytime somebody dies, this kind of thing feeds on itself. If there is a plot, I think the world should know about it. So far Garrison hasn't got anything."

Nelson's story quoted Aaron Kohn, of the Metropolitan Crime Commission, as saying he was surprised that Garrison would let himself get caught in a "bush league play when he wants to be a big leaguer." The story, however, failed to point out that Kohn only recently had accused Garrison of protecting "organized crime" in New Orleans by pardoning Bourbon Street stripper Linda Brigitte, accused of obscene dancing. Nelson also confided that one of the city officials had told him, off the record, that Garrison was dealing with nothing but psychopaths.

LaBro, wolfing down a sandwich and writing a daily column at the same time in his hotel room, had also heard the report that Garrison was dealing with psychopaths. His reaction was quite different than Nelson's.

"Of course he's dealing with psychopaths," LaBro said. "Who else but psychopaths would conspire to kill the president of the United States?" LaBro had left Paris the day Ferrie died and looked on Garrison's investigation as a "possible breakthrough in the assassination plot after all these years." He has read all twenty-six volumes of *The Warren Report* and was the first reporter in the world to mention Ferrie in a news story (last October).

"I've talked to everyone who has seriously criticized *The Warren Report*, and I've made five trips to Dallas since the assassination, refreshing myself on the details and any new developments. I think this is the most important development to date." LaBro had talked to Garrison twice, once for five hours.

"Our readers want to know everything about this Garrison and about New Orleans. But you must remember, nobody in France believes that Oswald was alone in his plan to kill Kennedy. We are used to complicated political plots. The average Frenchman can't believe it was all that simple. After talking with Garrison, I am sure he has some-thing against him on this. He's not a kook, he's not a nut. He's a very sound guy. And if he is

political, he certainly would not risk it on anything this important unless he was sure he had the cards."

LaBro feels that the press explosion will help, not hinder, Garrison because it will accelerate the evidence. And, like many other reporters both here and abroad, LaBro believes Garrison was "ready for the story to leak. It is a risk, doing it this way, but he was ready for the gamble.

"Sometimes I do not understand American reporters. They pursue a line of questions based on what they think before they arrive on the scene. In Europe we take nothing for granted and we look both ways. I do not say that American reporters are all bad reporters, but I think the press of any country reflects the attitude of its people and in this country I think perhaps the press reflects the naïvete of the Americans. It also reflects the great fear in this country of communism. We are always suspicious of communism in France, but we are not petrified of it.

"Perhaps that is why it was so easy to accept the Oswald theory in this country. You point to him. You say he is a Marxist! 'Aha, Great!' everybody says. It is the easy answer. The death of Kennedy was an awesome thing . . . totally horrible. Why discount the idea that the plot which led to his death was awesome and totally horrible?

"This could explain why the FBI, in its investigation for The Warren Commission, might have overlooked—or ignored—a plot involving Oswald. If they started out on the theory that it was one man acting alone, their questions and the development of their case might easily have proceeded on just that line. In which case, they might have tended to give little credence to information that would have shown something else."

Perhaps the only foreign newsmen who did not express opinions one way or the other were the Russians. But even they were on the scene here. Yuri Barsukov of Izvestia, Henry Borovik of Novosti Press Agency, and Harry Freeman of TASS, said they were covering the story entirely objectively and would continue to do so. "It is true," said Borovik, "that most people throughout Europe and even in Russia are suspicious of the circumstances surrounding the death of President Kennedy. But the Soviet press has been objective throughout."

By the end of the second week, some reporters—and newspapers—were taking a second look at Garrison's story of intrigue. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, which had published Nelson's story, published a second story the following Sunday by Clarence Doucet, assistant city editor of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, copyrighted by *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, headlined: "Garrison is just beginning to swing." The story began: "Big Jim Garrison has shaken the confidence of a lot of people who thought his much-publicized probe of the assassination of President Kennedy already would have fallen flat on its face." The story, a favorable one, concludes: "It is apparent that Garrison has something. But what it is, near miss or conspiracy, only time will tell.

"One thing is certain, he won't allow himself to be rushed. And Garrison is now calling the plays."

In the courthouse hall, the wall watchers, bored with the waiting, speculated, talked, conjectured. Garrison was still calling Ferrie's death a suicide. Well, perhaps. Ferrie was a noted hypochondriac and had abnormally high blood pressure. Under the extreme pressure of the investigation he might simply have stopped taking medication, inducing the stroke which killed him; in which case both the coroner and Garrison would have been right: suicide by normal means. Even more bizarre were other theories. A shot of adrenalin, for instance, could have caused the affliction that killed Ferrie. And what about the opposing political viewpoints of some of those allegedly implicated — Castroites and anti-Castroites involved in the same plot? Impossible. Yet there were strong implications of homosexuality; perhaps these ties were strong enough to overcome political differences.

Meanwhile the jokes and the speculation ran rampant. Garrison was the hidden man and the press simply watched the big oak doors at the end of the hall, waiting for his next move.

"He's holed up at the Athletic Club," said one reporter.

"Nah, he's in Miami," said another. Still another: "I hear he's operating out of an apartment in the Quarter."

"All wrong," said another. "He's in Las Vegas."

"What the hell's he doing in Las Vegas?" they asked. "I hear he lost the city last night," was the answer.

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