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Movie Reviews

Robert Brent Toplin
Contributing Editor

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Individuals who wish to propose films for review in the *Journal* should write to: Robert Brent Toplin, Movie Review Editor, Department of History, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Wilmington, NC 28403.

Forum: Oliver Stone's *JFK*

Films are increasingly important in arousing public debates about history, and occasionally one succeeds in stimulating a lively dialogue involving millions of people in the United States and abroad. Such was the case with Oliver Stone's *JFK*. The provocative thesis about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy presented in Stone's movie stirred arguments not only about conspiracy theories but also about the record of the Kennedy administration, Kennedy's intentions with regard to the Cold War and Vietnam, and other weighty issues. Furthermore, Stone's movie excited a fascinating exchange of ideas about Hollywood's relationship to history. For some, the director had stepped far beyond the bounds of artistic license; others demonstrated tolerance for his inventions, praising Stone for effectively challenging audiences to ask serious questions about the past.

In view of *JFK*'s important impact on the public's thinking about interpreting history, the *Journal* introduces in this issue its first movie forum. The following section features an analysis of *JFK*'s perspective on Kennedy's leadership in the White House by Thomas C. Reeves, a commentary on the movie's case for an assassination conspiracy by William W. Phillips, and a consideration of Stone's role as a "cinematic historian" by Robert Brent Toplin.

JFK. Prod. by Oliver Stone and A. Kitman Ho. Directed by Oliver Stone. Camelot Productions, 1991. 3 hrs., 8 mins.

In December 1991 Oliver Stone's \$40 million film *JFK* earned major media attention and began packing theaters. Few would deny that this account of John F. Kennedy's assassination is excellent and extraordinary (if often ghoulish) entertainment; its fast pace, brilliant directing, and consistently high level of acting keep one engrossed for the full three hours and eight minutes.

But *JFK* is more than entertainment. It is a movie with a message, a message so partisan, blatant, and interesting that it deserves the serious attention of scholars as well as journalists. Stone's film is, in fact, a skillful piece of leftist propaganda. Underlying the complex and often fantastic tale of conspiracy in high places is an intense hatred of the United States.

In *JFK* the president was not murdered, as the Warren Commission concluded, by a lone gunman. Indeed, Lee Harvey Oswald appears to have had no role in the killing. Instead, there was a massive conspiracy involving the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the armed services, Lyndon B. Johnson, anti-Castro Cubans, the Dallas police force, Clay Shaw, and an assortment of others. Kennedy was targeted because he was planning on defying the establishment, in particular the right-wing military-industrial complex, by pulling out of Vietnam and making peace with Fidel Castro's Cuba. Stone makes New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, played by Kevin Costner, a virtuous and heroic detective who unmasks the "fascist" coup d'etat.

One of Stone's most controversial devices is to blend actual film footage of the period with newly made re-creations shot in black and white to look authentic. No doubt many viewers have been unable to tell the difference. (My dentist and several of my students were taken in.) This technique is justifiable, of course, as art. But *JFK* also pretends to be history.

As an account of what really happened in Dallas in 1963, the film is not credible. Neither Stone nor anyone else can document *JFK*'s conspiracy thesis. After almost thirty years, we

lack the necessary witnesses and documents—most unusual for a plot that would have involved a very large number of people. While most Americans continue to have doubts about the Warren Commission report and evidence of a cover-up does exist, Stone's explanation is not compelling.

JFK no doubt appeals to many because it asks us to be cynical about all American cold warriors; in Stone's simplistic, 1960s vision of the world, they were—and are—the vilest of villains. In late 1991 he declared, "The forces that killed Kennedy did not operate in a vacuum. That parallel covert government has existed through the last 28 years." In stark contrast, Stone sees John F. Kennedy as the purest and most enlightened of heroes. The moviemaker still believes in Camelot.

In fact, the Cold War establishment had every reason to admire and trust President Kennedy. Like his father—the dominant figure in JFK's history—he was a militant anticommunist. While in Congress, Jack had sounded at times like Joe McCarthy (a Kennedy family friend). During the Thousand Days, Kennedy presided over a massive arms buildup, endorsed the domino theory, had two hair-raising showdowns with the Soviets, supported a \$50 million-a-year effort to disrupt the Cuban government and murder Fidel Castro, almost went to war in Laos, and dramatically escalated America's presence in Vietnam.

Stone's belief that Kennedy was about to leave Vietnam comes principally from Kennedy hagiographers Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Kenneth O'Donnell and two antiwar senators, Mike Mansfield and Wayne Morse. There is also the fact that shortly before his death Kennedy ordered the removal of one thousand United States advisers from Vietnam by the end of the year.

Still, there is too much evidence to the contrary to make this argument appealing. For example, Dean Rusk, Kennedy's secretary of state, has stated unequivocally that he never heard the president even discuss a withdrawal. Former under secretary of state George Ball declared, "By the time Kennedy was killed we had 16,500 men in Vietnam and there were two or three thousand prepared to move. I think you can safely say that escalation was

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proceeding fairly rapidly before Johnson took office." Bobby Kennedy, when later asked about the matter, said, "The President felt that he had a strong, overwhelming reason for being in Vietnam and that we should win the war in Vietnam." The reason? "The loss of all of Southeast Asia if you lost Vietnam. I think everybody was quite clear that the rest of Southeast Asia would fall."

A month before his death, JFK gave the green light to a coup that toppled the Saigon government and greatly increased American responsibility in the area. His final speeches in Texas bristled with anti-Soviet rhetoric, including an appeal to be vigilant in Southeast Asia.

As for Cuba, in mid-1963 Bobby Kennedy began secretly directing a new sabotage program against the Cuban economy, and the CIA was reviving efforts to assassinate Fidel Castro. The president had promised publicly after the Bay of Pigs invasion to liberate Cuba, and he appears to have been keeping his word.

If, then, President Kennedy was not becoming a dove and was resolute about Vietnam and Cuba, there was not a motive for the conspiracy to murder him that Stone postulates.

JFK's treatment of Jim Garrison is also faulty. Rather than being a dauntless and objective investigator, he appears in fact to be something of a crank. His conspiracy case against Clay Shaw (which, contrary to the film, he did not conclude with a closing argument) was dismissed by a jury in less than an hour.

In short, *JFK* is an entertaining and at times moving film. But it is not to be confused with history. As in his *Scarface*, *Platoon*, *Wall Street*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *The Doors*, Oliver Stone is waging war against America, which he sees as ultraconservative, repressive, imperialistic, greedy, immoral, and homicidal. There is a case for polemicism, of course, as long as it is accurately labeled.

Thomas C. Reeves
University of Wisconsin
Parkside

Probably no movie in American history has attracted so much editorial opinion and seized so broadly upon public misperceptions and biases as Oliver Stone's *JFK*. It is powerful and

dramatic, distinguished by spectacular scenes interlaced with memorable newsreel. As historical docudrama, however, the film is a disaster. Though Stone insists his is just "another approach" to finding truth, in fact he simply ignores the historian's mode of validating evidence. His main theme, that the murder was essentially a coup d'état, the work of a vast conspiracy called "The Agency," rests upon allegation and supposition. There is no verified historical evidence supporting such a view—not a shred.

The movie's chief character is New Orleans District Attorney James Garrison, who is struck by apparent connections between the assassination and certain New Orleanians. He slowly comes to see Clay Shaw, a local dignitary, as a central figure in the conspiracy. From this point on, the movie shows Garrison building his case against Shaw and concludes with the 1969 trial at which Shaw is acquitted.

As the movie unwinds, the viewer discovers the vastness of the conspiracy. It reached "all the way to the top," implying that Lyndon B. Johnson was involved. Underneath we find the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CIA, the FBI, military intelligence, the United States Army, the Secret Service, pro- and anti-Castro Cubans, the Mafia, the United States Navy, civilian doctors, the Dallas police, and unidentified industrialists. Stone tries to take the hard edge off his assertions by saying that "renegade" members of government agencies were involved, not the agencies themselves; but his disclaimer falls flat when applied to LBJ, the joint chiefs, and various generals and admirals.

Stone admits to making Garrison "better than he is," because he represents not just himself but every researcher who "tried and tries" to uncover the truth. Stone's consultants and researchers are all people who believe there was a conspiracy and who, as speakers and authors, trade profitably off their views and the public interest in the Kennedy murder. There is not a historian in the lot; more significant, judging by their own works, not a one of them knows how to handle historical data in a critical way. Corroboration is an apparently unknown concept, and the standards of internal criticism seemingly belong to another cosmic order.

Nearly every "Stone" scene, as distin-

guished from newsreel, is wholly or partly fictional. There is not enough space in a short review to identify all the errors, so just a few of the most egregious ones will be noted.

The outrageous depiction of guns firing six or more shots at President Kennedy from three locations is without any basis in fact. Stone ignores the massive body of *real* evidence showing that there were only three shots, all fired from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository (TSBD) by a Mannlicher-Carcano owned by Lee Harvey Oswald and bearing his palm print. This evidence conclusively shows that the first shot missed, the second was the "Magic Bullet" that passed through both Kennedy and John Connally, and the third struck JFK high on the head. The viewing audience is not told that the observer on the overpass who saw a puff of smoke on the grassy knoll also saw Secret Service agent Roy Kellerman bend down in the front seat of the Kennedy limousine and pick up a machine gun. None of the five hundred photographic records from the Dealey Plaza that day show such a weapon in the hands of Kellerman. How can one place any credence in the "smoke" testimony of such a witness?

JFK's alleged determination to pull out of Vietnam is shown in two totally counterfeit scenes. In one the President is quoted as saying, "In the final analysis, it is their [South Vietnam's] war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it." Stone's "researchers" got that quotation from a September 2, 1963, JFK interview with Walter Cronkite, but they conveniently overlooked Kennedy's further statement in the same interview, "I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake. . . . We made this effort to defend Europe. Now Europe is secure. We also have to participate—we may not like it—in the defense of Asia." In the second scene, the script implies that The Agency decided to kill Kennedy when on October 11, 1963, National Security Action Memorandum 263 provided the authorization for an unpublicized White House decision of October 2 stating that "1000 U.S. military personnel assigned to South Vietnam can be withdrawn." To suggest further President Johnson's complicity in the conspiracy, he is shown countermanding this authori-

zation as one of his first official acts. What the viewers are not shown is that in several sessions with Kennedy's chief national security advisers, LBJ continued discussions (which had started before the assassination) as to whether to cancel the withdrawal policy.

The assassination is almost a publishing growth industry; there are over six hundred books on JFK's murder, written mostly by scoundrels seeking notoriety and wealth—all but a handful are trash. Hundreds of these are even more outlandish than Stone's movie. And in the cinematic field, the most bizarre entry surely is *Winter Kills*, a flick that has Daddy Joe engineering the plot because Jack disobeyed paternal commands.

The notion of conspiracy taps into a strong subterranean belief system that all important events are controlled behind the scenes by evil, sinister people. There seems to be a growing predisposition among Americans to view history in this way, and they keep the market going for ever more sales of trashy, sensational assassination books and movies. Conspiracy also appeals in a mistaken way to that strain in our heritage that exalts the rationalism of the Enlightenment; conspiratorial assassination at least seems rationally purposeful, whereas a wanton act by a confused person seems irrational and not to the tastes of those who like their history neat.

The initial and continuing fascination with JFK is closely related to societal values favoring style over substance, a condition that he and Jackie helped foster. In our time, an aspect of this condition is seen not only in the elevation of sound bites and splashy headlines over content, but also in the popularity of disgraceful books and movies such as *JFK*.

This controversy stays alive in part because the Warren Commission did conduct a sloppy investigation, and the autopsy was done in dreadful fashion. Despite their faulty procedures, both came to basically sound conclusions, and their shortcomings were largely corrected with a thorough investigation in the late 1970s by the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA). HSCA in turn proposed a conspiratorial fourth-shot *probability*, but that conjecture was definitely refuted two years later by the "Ramsey Report." There are some

sincere conspiracy theorists, and a few of them (Robert Blakey, Edward Epstein, the late Bernard Fensterwald, Jr., David Lifton, and Harold Weisberg, notably), mistaken as they are, have nevertheless added to our understanding of the assassination and of how government is, indeed, not to be implicitly trusted.

Viewers of *JFK* should take a filmic purgative. The best one is Jim Moore's relatively brief *Conspiracy of One* (1990). Though not a historian, Moore treats the evidence more critically than any other author. His work establishes beyond doubt that the major findings of the Warren Commission were correct; namely, that Lee Harvey Oswald, a lone gunman, fired three shots from TSBD, two of which struck President Kennedy. Viewers would also profit by reading the reports of the Warren Commission (1964) and the House Select Committee on Assassinations (1979).

William W. Phillips
Old Dominion University

In a little over three hours Oliver Stone's *JFK* manages to give uncritical screen time to a rich variety of extraordinary conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination, theories that represent, in many cases, poorly substantiated speculation. The film also suggests a simplistic picture of John F. Kennedy's leadership (promoting the Camelot legend), and it presents New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison in a manner that obscures serious questions about his investigatory techniques. Stone acknowledges that he presented a romanticized view of Kennedy and Garrison and gave recognition to "evidence" about the assassination that may not be true in order to achieve a larger purpose. He wanted to draw attention to serious shortcomings in the Warren Commission's report and encourage viewers to consider important political questions raised in the literature published since release of the report.

Should we accept fiction in order to achieve a greater truth, a deeper appreciation of significant issues that need reflection? Should we overlook the director's inventions, understanding that, metaphorically, his fictionalizations symbolize real problems in United States history such as the covert activities of CIA and FBI

agents during the Cold War, the threats posed by the military-industrial complex, or deceptions in United States policy making regarding the war in Vietnam? Marcus Raskin offered a particularly bold reflection on this question in a review of *JFK* published in the *American Historical Review* (April 1992). Raskin said, "It does no good to pick apart the rendering of an event by an artist. His or her purpose is not the particular but the general."

Clearly, we cannot analyze movies with the same techniques we apply to books. The challenge of rendering history through an expensive Hollywood production differs from the challenge of interpreting the past in a printed work of scholarship. We must be tolerant of the visual medium's use of invention, compression, and symbolism. It would be going too far, however, to suggest that an artist's product should remain free of the historian's scrutiny. We cannot separate art and scholarship too rigidly, treating films in a manner that places them off limits to assessments by the historian. Indeed, a modern view of motion pictures should recognize that popular films represent another dimension of historical interpretation, one that is becoming increasingly attractive with advances in technology. Scholars are eager to examine the products of Hollywood not only because they are fascinated with the dramatization of historical personalities and events but also because they recognize that movies can significantly influence the public's perception of history (as *JFK* demonstrates).

In making movies the focus of analysis, historians must guard against the danger of concentrating too narrowly on the picayune. Scholars make only a minimal contribution to the public's thinking about movies when complaining, for example, that a motion picture shows the wrong silverware in a dinner scene or depicts an event on a sunny day when, in fact, it happened on a rainy day. Discourse is far more valuable when it relates to the larger questions about a movie's interpretation of history.

In this respect it seems fair to say that Stone's movie stimulates a useful dialogue on a number of fronts. Perhaps his most valuable contribution is giving new vigor to an old debate about John F. Kennedy's posture toward

the Cold War. *JFK* suggests Kennedy's speech at American University about the dangers of war and his negotiation of a test ban treaty with the Soviet Union signaled important new directions for his administration. According to the movie, these developments, along with Kennedy's plans for a first-phase withdrawal of one thousand advisers from Vietnam, indicated that the president was ready to move dramatically toward a reduction of Cold War tensions. A number of Kennedy administration veterans as well as journalists and historians have supported the thesis suggested in Stone's movie. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., for example, articulated this case forcefully in the *Wall Street Journal* (although Schlesinger disagreed, at the same time, with Stone's assumptions about an assassination conspiracy). On the other hand, historians such as James N. Giglio and Robert Dallek have expressed serious doubt regarding Stone's claims about Kennedy and Vietnam. Giglio says Kennedy's own statements suggest he intended no pullout after the 1964 election, and Dallek maintains that Kennedy had no intention of "losing" Vietnam.

This public dialogue has helped to stir the nation's thinking about important questions related to Cold War policy making. It has also sharpened thinking about the difficulties of interpreting the motivations and actions of presidents such as John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Furthermore, Stone has challenged viewers to transcend the particular arguments about Kennedy's posture toward Vietnam. He has asked audiences to go beyond disputes about the meaning of the president's October 1963 order to withdraw troops and to contemplate a broader observation that "the Vietnam War as we know it would never have happened" if Kennedy had lived.

With respect to Stone's most important hypothesis, however (his assumptions about a conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination), the movie does not advance our thinking much beyond the theories offered in numerous publications on the subject released in the last three decades. Stone offers abundant questions about the Warren Commission's conclusions but presents no real answers. Like other individuals who have proposed conspiracy the-

ories, he demonstrates confidence in raising doubts about official explanations but pursues no counterexplanation to the point of a definitive conclusion. There may, indeed, be much more to the story of the assassination than the Warren Commission discovered, but as of this writing, conspiracy buffs have not been able to make striking breakthroughs that allow us to pursue a new line of thought successfully. A number of ideas look intriguing at first; most, under scrutiny, appear to lack substance. For example, recently a doctor who was a junior member of the team that operated on Kennedy at a Dallas hospital argued that a bullet struck the president from the front but that evidence of this wound seemed to be altered sometime before Kennedy's body arrived for an autopsy in Bethesda, Maryland. The doctor's claims came under challenge very quickly. Two pathologists who performed the autopsy affirmed that the bullets that killed the president came from above and behind, and five doctors who treated Kennedy in the emergency room said they observed nothing that contradicted the pathologists' conclusions. Once again, what looked like a smoking gun turned out to be an illusion.

Nevertheless, the public's belief in a conspiracy remains strong. Before *JFK* reached the theaters a poll showed that 56 percent of the American people believed the assassination involved a conspiracy. Stone's movie probably pushed the percentage significantly higher. The number may continue to climb even though we lack startling new evidence that supports popular conspiracy theories concerning who committed the crime and why.

In the absence of a breakthrough, we are left only with fascinating speculation. A strong case can be made for the involvement of the Mafia, the CIA, or Cuban exiles in the assassination. It should also be noted that a strong case can still be made that Lee Harvey Oswald, a psychologically troubled individual who was lacking in self-esteem, acted alone in killing the president.

For many people, the last scenario appears too random, too irrational to serve as an acceptable explanation. They find it difficult to conclude that the Kennedy murder might represent a sort of "accident" in history that

lacked great political meaning. Many prefer to believe that the president's murder resulted from a complex plot involving powerful and dangerous individuals who operated with specific goals in mind. Their suspicions must be examined in the context of recent history, of course. Revelations in the last few decades about CIA-connected plots to assassinate foreign leaders and CIA overtures to Mafia figures for help in eliminating Fidel Castro have understandably fueled the public's thinking about sinister webs of intrigue in government affairs. Still, in the absence of truly convincing evidence in the Kennedy case, the readiness of many people to accept *JFK's* assumptions about a vast conspiracy raises questions. Does the modern theorist's image resemble, in some ways, the perspective of earlier figures regarding the power of the Masonic order, the Catholic church, the international bankers, or the Elders of Zion? Do we need to reread Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* to get a better understanding of some public reactions to the movie?

As for *JFK's* relationship to history, surely the issue became more controversial because of Stone's posture in defending his movie. Had Stone stuck to the concept that his film simply played out a number of speculative scenarios about the assassination, he would not have provoked many people who insisted on a measure of authenticity in such a popular historical representation. On occasion, Stone identified his role in a defensible way, saying that he wanted to present a "countermyth" to the official "myth" of the Warren Commission's report, explaining that he did not really know how or why Kennedy died. *JFK* offered versions "of what might have happened," Stone explained. Yet on many other occasions Stone aggressively reviewed the historical evidence in support of his case. Defending the details of his movie's interpretation of a conspiracy, he promised that, after seeing *JFK*, Americans would become more informed about their history. Furthermore, he boldly called himself "a cinematic historian" and insisted that an artist such as himself has the right "to interpret history and reinterpret it as he sees fit." It is not surprising, then, that the movie came under scrutiny for its presentation of the past and that Stone faced challenges when he tried to

play the role of a historian. Arguments about the validity of the movie's approach to history were appropriate.

JFK made a contribution to the nation's thinking about the assassination of a popular president, and it sparked efforts to make public some records of the Warren Commission and the House Select Committee on Assassinations that had been scheduled to remain closed for many years. The movie also made a different kind of contribution. It helped inject fresh energy into an old debate about the relationship between Hollywood and history. In doing so it brought an important discussion into the open about the filmmaker's responsibilities to history.

Robert Brent Toplin
University of North Carolina
Wilmington

Columbus and the Age of Discovery. Prod. by Graham Cheed. WGBH-TV, Boston, 1991. Seven programs of 58 mins. each. (Films for the Humanities and Sciences, P.O. Box 2053, Princeton, NJ 08543)

There are richly rewarding aspects of this wide-ranging contemplation of Christopher Columbus, the world that shaped him, and the worlds transformed in his wake. How disappointing that such an ambitious, largely sophisticated effort sometimes lapses into simplistic, monotone narrative or clumsy non sequiturs. Nevertheless, with calculated use of the fast-forward and pause buttons, much of these seven tapes could make excellent teaching material.

The photography is often superb. A clever structural device throughout the seven segments, or episodes, is the zestful piloting of the inquiry by Colombian historian Mauricio Obregón, whose periodic articulation of themes and transitions lends essential coherence. Commentaries, with voice-over translation as needed, from Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Chinese, and British specialists amplify key points. There are conscientious efforts to present African and Native American viewpoints; the former prove more successful than the latter.

Episode 1, "Columbus's World," examines