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Murdering History

Trotting out David W. Belin as an expert on investigating the dark side of American politics is like running Oedipus as the candidate of family values ("History According to Hollywood," editorial page, Feb. 13). The truth, as demonstrated by the record of the Warren Commission of which he was a member, is that Mr. Belin is incapable of investigating anything, especially a conspiracy. Conversely, one could persuasively argue that the Warren Commission, of which Mr. Belin may be the last surviving defender, was itself a conspiracy aimed at hiding the truth about the JFK assassination from the American public.

Mr. Belin has the temerity to claim that academic materials discussing Oliver Stone's films "J.F.K." and "Nixon" inject "a virus of lies into our nation's school system." In fact, Mr. Belin's Warren Commission Report unleashed an epidemic of lies from which American society still suffers. This is the "investigator" who, among others, managed to produce the official version of the murder of the president without ever discovering that the CIA had been actively plotting for four years to assassinate foreign heads of state. He confidently assured us that Jack Ruby, the killer of the alleged assassin, had no ties to organized crime, though we now know that Ruby had worked since his childhood for the Al Capone mob and was the Chicago Mafia's point man in Dallas. And in his remorseless investigation of Oswald himself, this hawk-eyed crusader for the truth managed to miss a mountain of evidence, subsequently uncovered by independent researchers such as Prof. John Newman, that the putative assassin had long-standing ties to intelligence organizations, including the CIA.

Mr. Belin congratulates himself on his intrepid sleuthing for the 1975 Rockefeller Commission, yet the principal reason the commission had to investigate the CIA's assassination program was that the CIA had so successfully lied to Mr. Belin and his Warren Commission colleagues 11 years earlier; because of those lies, the fact that political murder was part of U.S. foreign policy had remained in the shadows. Who can deny that if the Warren Commission had known in 1964 that the CIA had tried some 14 times to murder Fidel Castro, and that Castro had responded with his own threats against President Kennedy, its findings would have been different? That this did not happen, we can attribute in part at least to Mr. Belin's indefatigable investigative efforts.

Mr. Belin's statements about "Nixon" in his recent article are, quite frankly, just as ludicrous and insulting to the American public as were his assertions as a writer of the Warren Commission Report. He criticizes the film for suggesting that Richard Nixon knew about the Castro murder plots, and claims that it takes the

Oliver Stone did not succumb to the CIA's systematic pattern of lies about its political murder plots—Mr. Belin did. Oliver Stone has tried, successfully, to provoke a vigorous public discussion of America's clandestine postwar history.

Where official investigators fail, artists who care about history must intervene. Mr. Belin has proved that he is no open-minded investigator of history; he is a gullible servant of the status quo. The only historical truth that emerges from Mr. Belin's article is that, if we were to leave official history to investigators like him, we would get, as the philosopher de Maistre warned us, precisely the government we deserve.

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(Mr. Rivele co-wrote the film "Nixon" with Christopher Wilkinson and Oliver Stone.)

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Mr. Belin writes that Nixon was not in the slightest involved in the assassination plots against Fidel Castro. I fear that the historical record is not so clear as he claims. The assassination of Castro was an integral part of the Eisenhower administration's original conception of the project that ended so ingloriously in the Bay of Pigs. As Richard Bissell, the chief CIA planner, later said, "Assassination was intended to reinforce the plan. There was the thought that Castro would be dead before the landing."

"I had been," Nixon himself wrote in Reader's Digest in November 1964 of the invasion project, "the strongest and most persistent advocate for setting up and supporting such a program." Philip Bonsal, the American ambassador to Cuba in 1959-60 and an experienced and careful professional, called Nixon—in his book "Cuba, Castro and the United States"—"the father of the operation." Brig. Gen. Robert Cushman, Nixon's military aide and later deputy director of the CIA, told Howard Hunt in 1960 that the vice president was "the project's action officer within the White House" and said that "Nixon wanted nothing to go wrong" (see Hunt's memoir, "Give Us This Day," pp. 39-40). John Ehrlichman's notes of a conversation with Nixon on Sept. 18, 1971, describes him as "deeply involved" in the Bay of Pigs.

"We will probably never know for certain whether Vice President Nixon flashed the green light for a CIA-Mafia attempt against Castro," Michael Beschloss writes in "The Crisis Years," but after a review of the evidence Mr. Beschloss finds it not improbable that he did. John Newman, after his own review of the evidence, writes in "Oswald and the CIA" that "It is thus likely that Nixon knew some of the details about the CIA's cooperation with the Mafia." The CIA's internal history denies this; but then intelligence agencies, trained in tech-

ing ties to intelligence organizations, including the CIA.

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Mr. Belin's statements about "Nixon" in his recent article are, quite frankly, just as ludicrous and insulting to the American public as were his assertions as a writer of the Warren Commission Report. He criticizes the film for suggesting that Richard Nixon knew about the Castro murder plots, and claims that it takes the position that Jack Kennedy had no involvement with them. Mr. Belin argues that there is no evidence of Nixon's knowledge, and that the attempts to kill Castro were wholly of the Kennedy administration's creation. This is utter nonsense.

As the Church Committee Report of 1977 made clear, the plots began under the Eisenhower-Nixon administration, with authority from the White House. They were supervised by the Special Group on Cuba, of which Vice President Nixon was a member, and they included at least two murder attempts and the creation of the CIA-Mafia plots, surely the most sinister of all the assassination schemes, during the summer and fall of 1960. That Richard Nixon, who counted on the removal of Castro as his October surprise in the 1960 election, knew nothing about the plots is highly unlikely, as historians Arthur Schlesinger and Michael Beschloss have argued. In later years Nixon himself said that no one pushed harder on Cuba than he did, and in 1960 there was no "harder push" against Castro than the CIA's attempts to murder him.

Second, the film does not claim that JFK had no involvement in the Castro plots, for the historical record makes it clear that he did. What the film says is that Kennedy was not told about them before the Bay of Pigs invasion, a point on which most historians agree. The record indicates that only after that debacle did he and his brother Bobby aggressively take charge of the effort to murder Castro. And so once again, Mr. Belin's keen investigative instincts have caused him to miss both the forest and the trees.

That Mr. Belin, of all people, should accuse Oliver Stone of revisionist history is a monstrous practical joke. Oliver Stone did not help write the Warren Commission Report, perhaps the single greatest distortion of history in our lifetimes—Mr. Belin did. But Oliver Stone was instrumental in forcing the release of some two million pages of documents relating to the Kennedy murder that Mr. Belin and his colleagues had tried to hide from the American public for 75 years. And

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The CIA assassination plots began under Eisenhower, continued under Kennedy and went on into the Johnson administration. No evidence has yet been produced to show that any of these three presidents authorized the plots or were even informed about them.

Mr. Belin claims the existence of documents "that specifically showed that Robert Kennedy was aware of these plots." He does not identify the documents in his Journal piece, but I suspect he is referring to a document cited in his book defending the Warren Commission. On page 111, he writes, "In May 1961 . . . the FBI first told [Robert Kennedy] about the CIA collaboration with the Mafia in assassination plots directed against Castro." He cites as proof a memorandum of May 22, 1961, written by Edgar Hoover to Robert Kennedy. That memorandum, a report to the attorney general on a CIA briefing of the FBI, does indeed mention CIA collaboration with the Mafia, but it says nothing about assassination plots—for the simple and ample reason that the CIA briefers had not informed the FBI for what the Mafiosi were going to be used.

The CIA in those days told the FBI as little as possible. As the Church Committee report "Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders" puts it (page 127), the CIA briefing "did not reveal the specific objective of the Giancana operation to the FBI." The Hoover memorandum merely referred in general terms to the CIA's use in "clandestine efforts against the Castro government" of "hoodlum elements" with "sources and contacts in Cuba." I repeat: nothing at all about assassination plots.

The distortion of the Hoover memorandum does not inspire confidence in Mr. Belin's talent for accuracy.

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