

## EXECUTIVE ACTION

*Executive Action* has turned into one of the surprise commercial hits of the year, its success confirming the public's continuing fascination with the mystery surrounding the death of John F. Kennedy. It is neither as bad, offensive, nor dull as I expected it to be. But film is a poor medium for straight exposition and that is all that this movie ever aims for. The results, especially in the reenactment of the assassination, are noteworthy only for their clumsiness.

It would have been more sensible to shoot the film as a documentary rather than as fiction based on fact. A straight report would have circumvented the need for clumsy intercutting between ten-year-old black-and-white news footage and movie-star (Burt Lancaster and Robert Ryan) living-color-make-believe. It would have also eliminated the need for characterization and motivation, especially such inanities as a right wing tycoon deciding to commit himself to the conspiracy because of the leftward drift of events on the news.

In a documentary, the filmmakers—scenarist Mark Lane and director David Miller—could have frankly admitted their ignorance or uncertainty about particular points, in-

Conspirator Lancaster in Executive Action; can fiction based on fact make its point?



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stead of trying to hurry us past them, hoping we won't notice their own confusions. They are obviously unsure where to place Jack Ruby in their "second Oswald" theory. They show us someone playing his part, as well as the famous footage of the killing. But the incident remains unintegrated into the rest of their story and the result is incoherent.

More important than its internal shortcomings, *Executive Action* fails because it tries for the impossible—a consideration of Kennedy's murder isolated from any serious interpretation of his personality, the mood of the country and his role in history. Lane, screenwriter Dalton Trumbo and Miller have lifted the assassination whole, from out of his and our lives, ignoring the emotions and trauma that still suffuse our collective memory of the event. They offer information, theory, some screen-wise sleight of hand, but absolutely no feeling for, and little demonstrable concern about, the death of the man. They are so lost in the debate that they've lost sight of its tragedy.