

Who Calls the Shots?

The Movie Raises Many New Doubts — About Stone

By Robert W. Greene

OLIVER STONE is a Hollywood huckster. He sells illusion for a living. Nothing wrong with that. But his hits have gone to his head. He's grown so pretentious he peddles his fables as fact and attacks those who disagree as "lame-brained."

Take, for instance, his movie "JFK," which seeks to convince the American people — my grandchildren among them — that those who really run their government are so powerful that they can murder presidents with impunity.

No doubt about it. It is a quick-paced, exciting and provocative movie. It is also a package of hoary half-truths, assumptions, insinuations and distortions wrapped up as fact. Because Stone's illusion is so convincing, people believe in his movie. And they swallow the poison in his message.

There are many things about "JFK" that make me suspicious of the truth of anything that Stone says. Here are two of them:

First, as our good guy, he gives us Jim Garrison, the former district attorney of New Orleans. This is the yo-yo who used President John F. Kennedy's killing as the pretext for an orgy of prosecutorial gay-bashing. Garrison was literally laughed out of court when he presented his case to a jury. His evidence was sleazy, disjointed and patently unbelievable.

Second, in his movie, Stone has Garrison meeting in the 1960s with a "Col. X," who tells him his investigation is on target. Stone now admits Garrison never met "Col. X" while investigating the Kennedy assassination. Stone says it was he himself who met "Col. X" — identified as former Air Force Col. L. Fletcher Prouty — while he was scripting "JFK."

Stone excuses this as "artistic license." That may be what they call such things in Hollywood. On Long Island, where I come from, we call it lying.

I don't know whether there was a conspiracy to kill John F. Kennedy. I wish I did. I knew and liked him. I was on his brother's staff. I stood in the rain at the White House door on that awful night when they brought the body home after the autopsy at Bethesda. I covered the creation of the Warren Commission. And I covered the Jim Garrison farce for more than a month in New Orleans.

But I do know this. The most compelling evidence in the Kennedy case comes from two investigative bodies operating more than 10 years apart. They are the Warren Commission, which found no conspiracy, and the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which found a probable conspiracy.

These groups did not rely on amateurs. They variously used the FBI, NASA, former New York City detectives and the nation's top ballistics, photographic, pathology and engineering experts.

The House committee considered much of Stone's so-called evidence and discarded it. Both the commission and the committee concluded that the shots that killed Kennedy and wounded then Texas Gov. John Connally were fired from a sixth-story window of the Texas School Book Depository. And they were fired by only one person — Lee Harvey Oswald.

Unhappy with a critique I recently did of the so-called facts presented in "JFK," Stone has written an outraged letter of protest. This litany of yelp is typical Stone, filled as it is with self-serving misquotes and distortions of both what I



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The "lone" gunman — Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas, April, 1963.

wrote and the conclusions reached by various investigating agencies.

Timing of the shots. Nowhere did the Warren Commission say, as Stone claims, that 5.6 seconds was the most likely time span between the three shots. It did set a minimum of 4.8 and a maximum of 7.9 seconds as the span between the first and third of what it concluded were three shots. Both the Warren Commission and the House committee said one of the three shots fired by Oswald missed.

Based on this, the Warren Commission said Oswald had between 4.8 and 5.6 seconds to get off all three shots only if the shot that missed was his second shot. But, said the Commission, if he missed either the first or third shots, Oswald had a minimum of 7.1 to 7.9 seconds to fire three times.

The Warren Commission said it was impossible to tell which of the shots missed. But the House committee later concluded it was the first shot. This would have given Oswald the 7.1 to 7.9 seconds mentioned by the Warren Commission.

Where the first bullet hit Kennedy. I never wrote, as Stone says, that the commission "established that a bullet struck the president in the back 5 1/4 inches below his collar." I wrote that the commission said the bullet entered the president's back "about 5 1/4 inches below the top of his shirt collar" and emerged from the bottom of his neck.

The commission, reporting on the autopsy, said: "... another bullet wound was observed near the base of the back of President Kennedy's neck slightly to the right of his spine. . . ." At another point in its report, the commission referred to "the bullet that hit President Kennedy in the back and exited through his throat. . . ."

More than 10 years later, a team of nationally known forensic pathologists assembled by the House committee concluded by an eight-to-one vote that the path of the first bullet that went through Kennedy was essentially identical to that described by the Warren Commission.

The pathologists concluded, "... one bullet entered in the upper right of the back and exited from the front of the throat." The path

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Stone's Movie Takes Artistic License Too Far

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thologists also agreed with the Warren Commission that this bullet then went through Gov. John Connally.

Whither the "magic bullet?" Another Stone misquote. I never wrote, as Stone infers, that the bullet that went through both Kennedy and Connally was "found on Gov. Connally's stretcher."

I wrote: "The bullet that went through Kennedy and Connally was recovered after it dropped from a vacated hospital stretcher on which Connally had been lying earlier . . ." This was what the Warren Commission found. And this is what the House committee found. Warren Commission firearms experts said the bullet that fell from the stretcher had been fired from Oswald's rifle. House firearms experts reached the same conclusion. And neutron activation analysis by House experts found it "highly likely" that the stretcher bullet (CE399) and the bullet fragments removed from Gov. Connally's wrist came from the same bullet.

Time to aim and fire. The Warren Commission Report does not say, as Stone claims, that it took a minimum of 2.3-seconds for Oswald to recycle his rifle between shots "which did not include time to aim." The commission report says, "Tests of the assassin's rifle disclosed that at least 2.3 seconds were required between shots." At another point, the commission report says: "If either the first or third shots missed, then a minimum of 2.3 seconds (necessary to operate the rifle) must be added to the time span of the shots which

hit . . ." And the House Committee said Warren Commission tests had found the "average minimum firing time between shots was 2.3 seconds." The House committee added: "The tests for the Warren Commission, however, were based on an assumption that Oswald used the telescopic sight on the rifle."

No matter how Mr. Stone reads it, the commission is talking about the time required between shots, which includes aiming through the telescopic sight. The House committee goes further. It says its experts were able to get off two shots in 1.66 seconds from a rifle of the same make by ignoring the telescopic sight and using only the rifle's built-in iron sight.

I'm not a ballistics expert. Neither is Stone. Both the Warren Commission and the House committee used some of the nation's top ballistic experts in their investigations. All concurred that Oswald's rifle was capable of hitting the president within the allotted time spans. They also said that the misaligned telescopic sight, which I mentioned in my story, would have made it even easier for Oswald to hit the president because it compensated for his downward shooting angle.

As for Stone's drivel about Oswald being a bad shot, I can only suggest he tell it to the Marines.

While in the Marine Corps, Oswald qualified on the rifle range as a sharpshooter and marksman. At the request of the Warren Commission, Oswald's shooting proficiency records were reviewed by Marine Corps Master Sgt. James A. Zahm, noncommissioned officer

in charge of the Marksmanship Training Unit in the Weapons Training Battalion of the Marine Corps School in Quantico, Va.

This is Sgt. Zahm's sworn testimony before the Warren Commission: "I would say in the Marine Corps he [Oswald] is a good shot, slightly above average, and as compared to the average male of his age, throughout the civilian, throughout the United States, that he is an excellent shot."

More "magic bullet." As mentioned earlier, and contrary to Stone's claim, ballistics experts for both the Warren Commission and the House committee said the bullet found near the stretcher at Parkland Hospital had been fired from Oswald's rifle. And House experts used neutron analysis to show that it was "most likely" that the slivers found in Connally's wrist were from that bullet. G. Robert Blakey, former counsel to the House committee, tells Newsday that the bullet and slivers checked by his experts are identical to those examined by the Warren Commission and that Stone's claims to the contrary are nonsense.

Autopsy. Stone blithers when he says the autopsy did not conclude that the bullet passed through Kennedy's neck.

The following is a quote from the conclusion of the official autopsy protocol on John F. Kennedy written by Navy Commanders J. J. Humes and "J" Thornton Boswell, and Lt. Col. Ernest A. Finck, MC, USA:

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"The other missile [bullet] entered the right superior or posterior thorax above the scapula and traversed the soft tissues of the supra-scapular and the supra-axillary regions of the base of the right side of the neck. The missile contused the strap muscles of the right side of the neck, damaged the trachea and made its exit through the anterior surface of the neck." In other words, the bullet passed through Kennedy's neck.

The House committee panel of nine forensic experts was headed by Dr. Michael Baden, former New York City chief medical examiner, and now director of forensic sciences for the New York State Police. Baden and his fellow experts had performed more than 100,000 autopsies. They reviewed all of the records of the original Kennedy autopsy and by an eight-to-one vote agreed with the original autopsy findings. The one dissenter is now an adviser to Stone.

Dr. Baden found nothing sinister about the fact that no forensic pathologists were present at the original autopsy, saying this was the norm in 1963. Baden said that forensic scientists skilled in murder investigations would have done a more thorough job of the autopsy. But, he said, the X-rays, photographs and descriptions compiled in the autopsy provided enough material for his panel to reach a positive conclusion. All of the X-rays and photographs were independently authenticated by Baden's group.

Baden disagrees with Stone's contention that it's impossible to know the bullet's path through the brain because the brain is missing and it was never sectioned. The path of the bullet, said Baden, was illustrated by the autopsy X-rays, photographs and clinical descriptions. He also sees nothing sinister in the fact that the brain — reportedly delivered over to Kennedy family representatives — is no longer in public custody.

Blakey, if there was a fourth shot from the grassy knoll, as Blakey's committee feels is probable, there was a provable conspiracy, Blakey, who feels there is a 66 percent chance of a conspiracy, has not — as Stone claims — dissociated himself from the findings of his

committee's sound experts, who claimed a 95 percent probability that a fourth shot was fired from a grassy knoll near the School Book Depository. Blakey says his sound experts based their conclusions solely on their auditory findings, but as committee counsel he had to consider all the evidence.

Oswald's fingerprints, etc. No one has ever claimed that any fingerprints were ever lifted from Oswald's rifle. Considering the then existing animosity between the Dallas police and the FBI, it would not have been unusual for the Dallas police to hold onto the partial palm print of Oswald's they found on the underside of the rifle barrel. They forwarded the print to the FBI laboratory on Nov. 26, two days after Oswald was killed, when there was no longer a chance that Dallas prosecutors would be putting him on trial. This coincided with an FBI request for any other evidence the Dallas police might have.

Stone misstates the facts when he says: "The FBI was puzzled that it could find no trace of the print on the rifle or any evidence that a palm print had been lifted from that area."

This is what the Warren Commission said: "The print's positive identity as having been lifted from the rifle was confirmed by the FBI laboratory tests, which established that the adhesive material bearing the print also bore impressions of the same irregularities that appeared on the barrel of the rifle."

Stone, ever the snake-oil salesman, also argues that the fibers from Oswald's shirt found on the rifle are also "highly problematic." He buttresses his conclusion with the following quote, which he attributes to the Warren Commission Report: "There is no way to eliminate the possibility of the fibers having come from another identical shirt."

Here is what the Report really said — with language omitted by Stone in italics:

"The FBI expert Paul M. Stombaugh concluded: 'There is no doubt in my mind that these fibers could have come from the shirt. That is, we may have been able to eliminate the possibility of the fibers having come from

another identical shirt.'

"Having considered the probabilities as explained in Stombaugh's testimony, the commission has concluded that the fibers in the tuft on the rifle most probably came from the shirt worn by Oswald when he was arrested and that this was the same shirt that Oswald wore on the morning of the assassination."

Garrison. Stone still argues that former New Orleans DA Jim Garrison was waging the good fight against the military-industrial complex and blazed new conspiracy trails for Blakey's House committee. I covered Garrison, and I never heard him mention the phrase "military-industrial complex" when he was targeting Clay Shaw, one of the city's leading gay citizens, as a conspirator in the Kennedy murder. All

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the talk then was about some shadowy conspiracy involving anti-Castro Cubans and a nationwide ring of statogically placed homosexuals.

Most of us who covered Garrison left New Orleans thinking he was a total flake. Nothing since has changed my mind, including the time, for example, in 1968 when Garrison barred nearly 400 members of the National District Attorneys Association from a dinner in a New Orleans hotel because they wouldn't let him make a speech about the assassination.

Blakey, now a law professor at Notre Dame, says that Garrison's investigation consistently steered away from New Orleans mob boss Carlos Marcello, who he feels is the most logical person to suspect of conspiring to kill Kennedy. And Blakey repeats his assertion that Garrison's investigation was a matter of dissent to all the men who had been in the room. So does Stone.