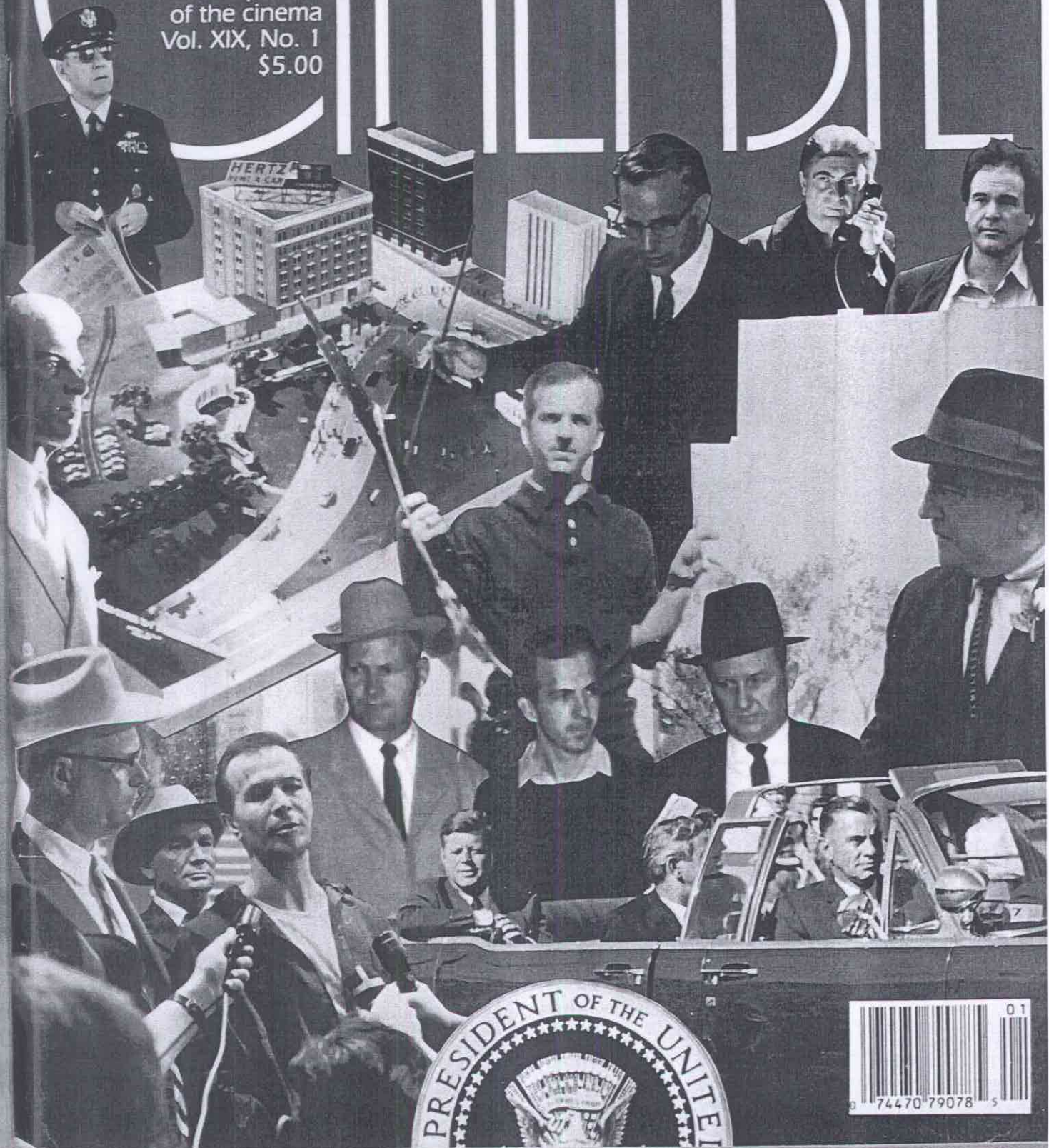


CINEASTE

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on the art
and politics
of the cinema
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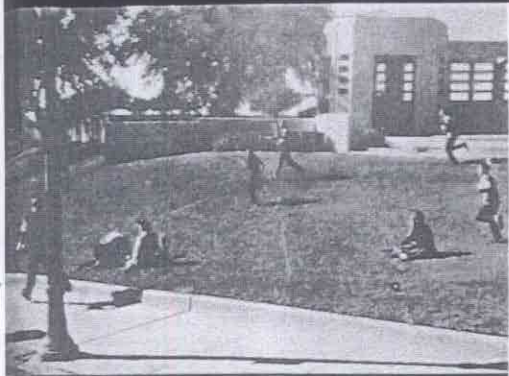
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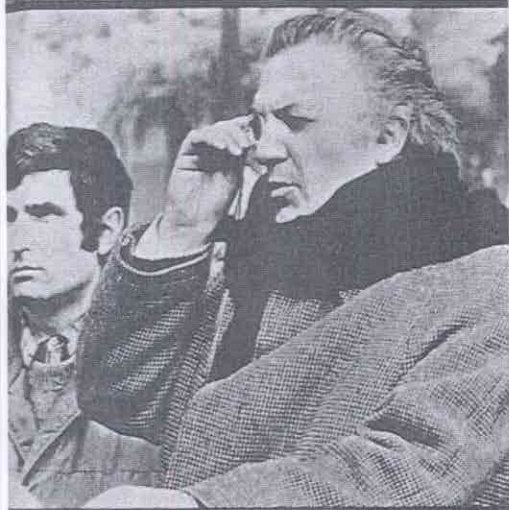
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JFK is arguably the most important political film ever made in the United States. With state of the art cinematic techniques, an all-star cast, and major studio financing and distribution, the film has challenged the government's version of the national crime of the century: the assassination of the thirty-fifth President of the United States. In so doing, the film has given dramatic expression to the belief of the vast majority of Americans that John F. Kennedy was killed as the result of a conspiracy, and has spotlighted the findings of scores of assassination scholars who have labored in relative obscurity for more than a quarter of a century.

Given the film's audacity, it is not surprising that it has been subjected to an unprecedented attack by the mass media. While the film was still in production, a purloined first draft version of the script became the basis for a lengthy newspaper article aimed at killing the film in its cradle. Weeks before its release, a second attack was mounted in which supposed studio misgivings were the focus. Once the film was actually available to the public, every major publication called out its top guns for an all-out assault. Just as *The New York Times* had annointed Flora Lewis as a film critic to savage Costa-Gavras's *Missing* some years ago, so Tom Wicker was commissioned to do the *Sunday Times* entertainment section denunciation. Liberals Anthony Lewis and Russell Baker joined in what became an almost daily attack, with more than a dozen articles appearing in the *Times* during the first month of the film's release. The pattern at *The New York Times* was typical of all mass media. Even Andy Rooney, the comic curmudgeon of CBS's *Sixty Minutes*, tossed a few verbal grenades.

This barrage has proven ineffective and perhaps counterproductive. *JFK* has enjoyed enormous box office success since its December 1991 national opening, and since then no less than five books at odds with the Warren Commission Report have made *The New York Times* national best sellers list. The impact of the film and director Oliver Stone's spirited defense of it in articles, interviews, and a speech before the National Press Club have led some

Congressional figures, including Senator Ted Kennedy, to agree that it is now time to release all government files on the assassination. If that should indeed happen, Stone will have succeeded in getting access to data that was meant to be kept secret for another fifty years.

Our current issue surveys the various charges against *JFK* and the various charges mounted by *JFK*. Whether one agrees with the full range of Stone's indictment or his interpretation of various historical figures, his film has finally demolished the myth of the lone assassin. The sheer weight of evidence regarding Lee Harvey Oswald, the 'magic bullet,' the botched autopsy, the missing brain, the CIA operatives, and the extraordinary death rate of witnesses is overwhelming. Any one element might be explicable, the configuration is not. The question for most Americans now is which of the conspiracy theories is correct. Closely linked to that concern, of course, is why the official story of the lone assassin has stood for so long. One obvious reason for the mass media's hostility to Stone is that his film implies that, whether through design or incompetence, the American mass media has failed its public trust.

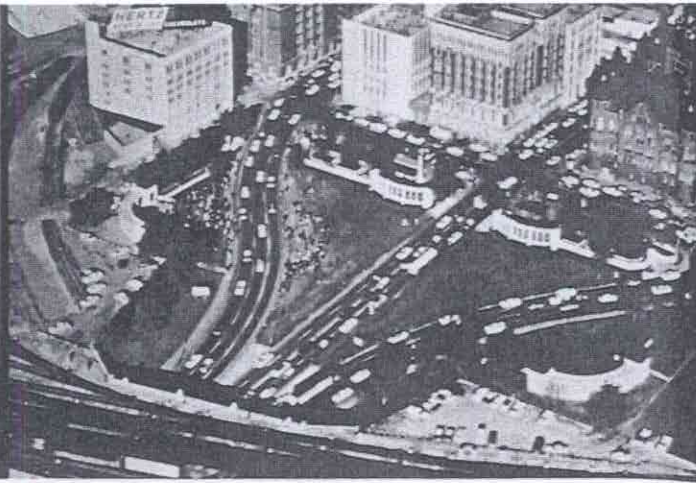
Technically innovative and politically powerful as *JFK* is, however, the film is depressingly conventional in many respects. Its casual devaluation of women, its insensitive portrayal of homosexuals, and its apotheosis of the nuclear family and the wise patriarch is typical of popular culture at its worst. *JFK* is awash in sexism in the same way that the technically innovative *Birth of a Nation* was awash in racism. Norman Mailer has rightly called *JFK* "one of the worst great movies ever made."

All of these elements, both positive and negative, guarantee that *JFK* will be discussed for decades. Just as certainly it will be included among those works of art that have had immediate and profound political impact. One thinks of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which arose from and fueled the abolitionist movement, or John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, which exposed the plight of migrant laborers in America. With *JFK*, Oliver Stone surely stands with the Emile Zola of *J'accuse*. ■

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THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS:

A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF OLIVER STONE'S JFK



Aerial view of Dealey Plaza

"NOBODY READS," commented Allen Dulles in July 1964, reassuring fellow Warren Commission members who were concerned that the American public might question their findings. "Don't believe people read in this country. There will be a few professors that will read the record...the public will read very little." Incorrect grammar aside, the former CIA Director's statement was (and remains) sadly true, but Americans do go to the movies, and Dulles could not have foreseen Oliver Stone's *JFK*.

By repudiating the Warren Commission's determination that President Kennedy was killed by a 'lone nut' gunman, and by presenting its own powerfully dramatized conspiracy theory of the assassination, *JFK* has stirred a nationwide controversy unprecedented in its scope and political impact (see Editorial this issue). By speculating not only on the identity of the conspirators but also on their political motivations—presenting itself as a 'whodunit' as well as a 'whodunit'—*JFK*'s polemical dramaturgy has stimulated renewed public interest in the JFK assassination and its broader political implications. The film has received extensive coverage in the mass media, becoming the subject for both laudatory and vituperative commentary not only by film critics but also by journalists, syndicated columnists, and other media commentators throughout the political spectrum—from diehard defenders of the Warren Report upset by Stone's 'distortion' of history, and mainstream liberals agitated over the film's questions about the legitimacy of our government and the fallibility of the press on the assassination story, to some critics on the left who are using historical documents to debate Kennedy's status as a Cold Warrior.

JFK is an uneven blend of radical political critique and mushy-headed liberal shibboleths, of innovative cinematic techniques and tired genre conventions, but, whatever one thinks of

the film, esthetically or politically, there's no denying its power or importance. *JFK* raises so many issues—from fundamental questions about the nature of the U.S. Government (including the suggested existence of a 'shadow government'), the esthetics and ethics of docudrama, the underlying reasons for the extraordinary press attacks on the film, and its controversial sexual imagery—that we felt a single 'film review' could not do justice to this provocative and complex work. We therefore invited several film critics and *JFK* assassination scholars (some of whom fulfill both roles) to address various facets of the film in separate essays. We also spoke to the filmmakers, including director Oliver Stone, screenwriter Zachary Sklar, and research coordinator Jane Rusconi. Reader response to this critical overview is welcomed for publication in our next issue.—The Editors

Last Year at Nuremberg THE CINEMATIC STRATEGIES OF *JFK*

by Pat Dowell

There comes a moment toward the end of *JFK* that embodies at once the film's obsessive power and the elusiveness of the certainties it seeks. Jim Garrison/Kevin Costner is in the courtroom showing the Zapruder film to the jury and the spectators. The fatal bullet strikes John Kennedy's head, which snaps "back and to the left," Garrison intones.

"Back and to the left," the prosecutor and the filmmaker tell us again, "Back and to the left. Back and to the left." A hypnotic refrain on the sound track, a grainy slow motion image dissolving into pink and green and white blobs on the screen. The courtroom audience groans in agony—at the

graphic detail hitherto spared them, at the confirmation of their worst fears about a government cover-up, at Garrison's ceaseless invasion of Kennedy's final moments.

In that melting image and Garrison's chant of "Back and to the left," in that collective groan that can be heard off-screen as well as onscreen at most showings, *JFK* peers into "the secret murder at the heart of America" and sees—something that becomes more illegible the more we look at it.

Moments like that one make it clear that *JFK* is not your usual Hollywood movie, not even your usual Oliver Stone movie. It is not a documentary nor a legal brief. It is not a Frank Capra movie nor a whodunit. And yet it is all of these and something else besides—a radical visual barrage combined with the familiar shapes and voices of mainstream Hollywood. Call it *Last Year at Nuremberg*, for it embodies both the narrative dissonance of Alain Resnais's metaphysical whodunit, *Last Year at Marienbad*, and the "significant kitsch" (Pauline Kael's memorable phrase) of a Stanley Kramer homily like *Judgment at Nuremberg* or *Inherit the Wind*. All this and Kevin Costner, too.

Oliver Stone's movie starts with facts and newsreels, as any Walter Cronkite report might, while an omniscient narrator sets the historical stage for Nov. 22, 1963. It ends, like any good liberal problem film, with a moral imperative—a brave prosecutor raising his eyes from the jury to the camera to say, "It's up to you." Sometimes the movie's earnest melodrama resembles Mr. Smith's naively stirring crusade against the Washington polis. Its round-up-the-witnesses shape echoes *Citizen Kane*, and, like Welles's meditation on the American character, it begins with an unanswered question about a prominent man's dying moments (and thus his life).

The characters are Hollywood bred as well, from the star-powered cameos on up to Kevin Costner, in a most discipl-

It would be easy to see JFK's flaws as mere melodrama, its use of Hollywood conventions as a concession to the Terminator-trained film tastes of a public which, perhaps, needs a familiar foothold to set foot on any unknown cinematic territory. The movie's conventional devices, however, employed sometimes badly and sometimes with subtle subversion, are held together in an astounding editing plan that embodies the movie's most deeply held ideas and assertions. The montage is the message in JFK, you might say, and the editing style of the film is Hollywood-radical. JFK shuffles disparate photographic realities together like a pack of cards, creating a fragmented, byzantine narrative. There are flash-

back scenes that are as much a part of the movie's texture as they are of its plot. JFK's assassination is a complex, multi-layered event that is explored in a way that is both thorough and surprising. The film's use of flashbacks and its focus on the lives of the people involved in the assassination are particularly noteworthy. JFK is a film that is both a historical document and a work of art. It is a film that is both a reflection of its time and a commentary on it. JFK is a film that is both a record of the past and a warning for the future.

Stone attempts a similar transition of the reaction shot, a Hollywood cliché so much a part of film grammar that we hardly notice it any more. Reviewers have deplored the heavy-handed cuts of radicalized bystanders in JFK, as though they were mere gestures of self-congratulation. They are self-serving—Stone's a showman, and he likes the big emotions, the Moments of Truth—but the reaction shots follow a pattern that shapes the film.

Garrison is at first the movie's chief re-actor, watching TV on Nov. 22, 1963, and then, afterwards, reading the Warren Report. As Garrison begins to doubt the official story and to do his own research—as he steps into history—reactions to him are what we see, at first from his family and his coworkers. They, in turn, also become actors, not re-actors, acting on others more removed. The circle widens ultimately to include the courtroom spectators and the jury, and, finally, to embrace us. In that last warning of Garrison's summation, his stare into the camera breaks the frame: it is one side of a two-shot that would turn the camera around onto us. If followed to a logical cinematic conclusion, it's up to us to do as he has, to step into history ourselves—the visual equivalent of the film's admonition that each individual must make justice himself.

While the movie succeeds in transforming some Hollywood conventions, it is overwhelmed by others. Garrison's domestic life, the least satisfying strand of JFK, finds poor Sissy Spacke struggling with one of Hollywood's most banal bio-pic roles, the wife who can't see the big picture. Usually found holding back frontiersmen, soldiers, and test pilots, she merely signifies woman's frailty and limited horizons; JFK, even with Spacke in the role, never makes her more than a score-board registering Garrison's progress. She is Garrison's most important confidante to his conspiracy theory; though he forgets sex while studying the War-

ren Report—have far greater importance than history has assigned them. Thus, in JFK, when that small-time operator turns out to be Jack Lemmon, you know his story must mean more than it seems to—and why didn't the author-ities figure that out the first time? Some cameos convey mythic as well as market value—Guy Banister, the neo-fascist ex-FBI agent who floats over John Kennedy's death, is played, ironically, by Ed Asner, an actor who has all but sacrificed his career to left-liberal activism. And, like Costner, these big names also lend credibility to Stone's scandalous challenge to history. Stone makes the cameos do quadruple duty.

Stone turns some of these conventional devices to unconventional purposes. The cameo, for instance, is a Hollywood gimmick that embodies incongruity even as it adds p.r. value and tides up the careers of superannuated stars. It consists of a contrasted thematically and in terms of screen time, and the Significant Actor, who, according to the political economy of the film industry, shouldn't stoop to play so small a role. Cameos dovetail neatly with JFK's agenda of contradiction, reinforcing the script's assertion that details overlooked by the official story—the Warren Commission Report—have far greater importance than history has assigned them. Thus, in JFK, when that small-time operator turns out to be Jack Lemmon, you know his story must mean more than it seems to—and why didn't the authorities figure that out the first time? Some cameos convey mythic as well as market value—Guy Banister, the neo-fascist ex-FBI agent who floats over John Kennedy's death, is played, ironically, by Ed Asner, an actor who has all but sacrificed his career to left-liberal activism. And, like Costner, these big names also lend credibility to Stone's scandalous challenge to history. Stone makes the cameos do quadruple duty.

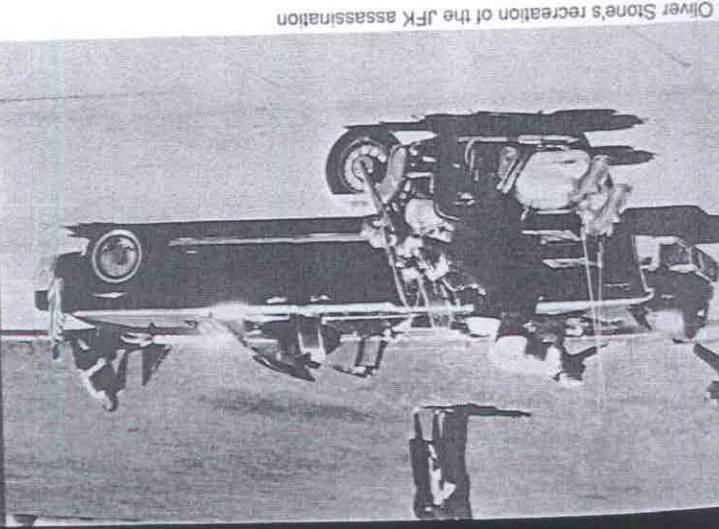
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Gmm movie image of assassination taken by Orville Nix

Oliver Stone's recreation of the JFK assassination



Timing Oswald's alleged shooting exploit

Gary Oldman (center) as Lee Harvey Oswald meets the press in *JFK*

wards, flashbacks, illustrated speculations (spoken and unspoken) by various characters about what might have happened (some of them competing with each other as the truth), as well as simultaneous contradictions of stated testimony, even as it is stated.

Throughout *JFK*'s three hours and eight minutes, we see both real and recreated TV news footage shot mostly in 16mm, home movies shot in 8mm (and recreations of same), still photographs, diagrams in close-up, photographs of a miniature model of the shooting site, black and white drama, and, of course, the usual color Hollywood movie that weaves through it all. Images are slowed and frozen, processed, cropped, and distorted. Often these different frame sizes, textures, and colors hurtle in fragments under, and intercut with, a spoken conversation or a reading of a report.

Sometimes it seems a pattern is emerging in the way events are presented in *JFK*. Many of the speculations (the placing of the bullet on the hospital gurney, Oswald's palm print applied to the rifle in the funeral home, a conspiratorial meeting with LBJ in the White House) are presented in monochrome, although others are not. The shots of someone faking the famous *Life* magazine cover photograph, showing Oswald with the rifle, are in color, just like the restaurant meeting into which they are woven, where the possibility of fakery is first suggested. In fact, the first incomprehensible close-ups of the fakery appear just before the photo is brought up in conversation.

The film does not explain the jump-cut transitions in that scene or indeed in others, in which a narrative thread may be expressed in unmatched shots, but they have an import all their own. They accumulate like the layers of a geological record, traces of a story that we experienced just this way, as a series of disconnected fragments—television spots, radio announcements, documentaries, newspaper articles,

home movies, books, whispered rumors, or shocked announcements from friends and family. Indeed, I remember well being awaked in Dallas, where we lived, early on a Sunday morning by my mother, who reported in hushed alarm, "Patricia, they've killed Oswald." Even then, "they." This is how we lived it, and how *JFK* preserves it.

As Costner/Garrison says, reading the twenty-six and a half volumes that tried to make a seamless narrative of it all, the facts, theories, and testimonies are there but are all broken up in little pieces so that you can't make them into a coherent whole. Stone tries to put the pieces together again, but lets each one keep its provenance—each one is tagged visually with its place of origin, appearing in a different color, size, or grain—so that the audience will not mistake the screen for a window on the past.

And yet. When it comes time to wind up for the punch that will drive the message home, Stone relies on Hollywood haymakers. Donald Sutherland's monolog as X is a classic movie scene, one man letting another in on the secrets of the universe, harking back to *Deep Throat*. It propels us forward from the events of the Sixties, when the film is set, to *All the President's Men* and to Watergate, the scandal that would confirm the downward spiral begun with *JFK*'s assassination, and justify public distrust of government based on national security and executive privilege politics. *JFK*'s finale, too, is right out of the archives (not the National, but rather MGM/UA), a stirring courtroom summation that Spencer Tracy might have delivered in another era. In these two scenes, Stone presents in the simplest and most urgent form his own overview of what happened that day not just to John Kennedy, but also to the American public.

It is here perhaps that Stone's limitations as an observer of the American scene become most evident. In *JFK* as

in *Platoon*, he sees Vietnam (and flowing from it, the assassination) as the watershed event in America's recent history. If the public does not punish this aberration from American ideals, Garrison says, "This is not the country I was born into." But, of course, it is precisely this America he is heir to, where business interests and corrupt politics have produced a bloody history most Americans have cheered for. The death of American innocence, if such a thing ever lived, did not begin on Nov. 22nd, although the bright, shining lies we live by did begin to tarnish. Kennedy's assassination raised widespread public doubts about our government in its aftermath; it was a watershed not in the way the government operated but in the delusions of the electorate. And we still ended up with Reagan and Bush.

For Stone, the discrepancies and contradictions flowing from the Kennedy assassination clearly stack up in a readily identifiable conspiracy, but the effect of the shattered photographic narrative is more disorienting than didactic. Stone does not force his conspiracy scenario down your throat with the aid of Hollywood's classical style, a story told with 'invisible' editing. Instead, he employs the staccato pacing of commercials and music videos, designed to stimulate a jaded palate and grab attention. But Stone, bent on knocking us out of complacency and complicity with the image for a different purpose, infuses that stylistic attack with political meaning, even philosophy. The editing of *JFK* is an epistemological assertion about the world, a statement about what we know and can know. Every cut produces only one conviction, that the past we thought we shared is a mosaic of conflicting histories, a History just this side of Chaos.

History is *JFK*'s subject as much as, perhaps even more than, a twenty-eight-year-old murder. History and the ascendancy of the secret government that has attempted not only to make



Oswald moments before his shooting by Jack Ruby

DA Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) brings in David Ferrie (Joe Pesci) for questioning

our history for us but also to write it and rewrite it and then make it classified. No wonder the policy-makers and their pundits are insulted by *JFK*. A mere filmmaker dares to poach on their territory, and to trumpet the heresy—which millions now will contemplate—that the History they cherish and construct is no more than a cover story.

When was the last time anyone in Hollywood dared to tell us that? ■

Debunking the Official History THE CONSPIRACY THEORY IN JFK

by Christopher Sharrett

The numerous, unremittingly hostile attacks by the mainstream news media on Oliver Stone's *JFK* are not unfamiliar to those who have followed coverage of 'conspiracy theories' of the domestic political murders of the 1960s, but it is useful to understand this particular outrage within the current context. The Kennedy assassination has, after all, been represented in popular culture dozens of times in the past quarter century, often in outlandish or degraded ways. While Warren Report supporters always have their say (in very showcased media venues), rarely does an assassination narrative meet the kind of vituperative onslaught as has greeted *JFK*. It appears that Stone's principal sin is his rejection of the official public version of the assassination in favor of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's 'thoroughly discredited' late Sixties investigation of an assassination conspiracy.

In his Afterword to Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*, Carl Oglesby remarks that the radical conclusion of Garrison's argument (the assassination as coup d'état) is challenging, even frightening, to contemplate. In its

refusal of obvious bogeymen/scapegoats (KGB, Mafia, et al.) and its insistence on the assassination's continuity within the development of the intelligence apparatus and the clandestine state, Garrison's thesis undermines the very notion of constituency-based, representative democracy. Garrison's 1967-69 investigation of the assassination was roundly condemned not for legal impropriety, but for its assertions about the legitimacy of the state. Oliver Stone's rendition of the Garrison case provokes the same attacks, with media commentators suggesting that further conspiracy talk might push a nation already suffering a profound legitimization crisis into catastrophe.

The radical aspect of the Stone/Garrison approach to the assassination is its insistence on the murder's central political moment, something most contemporary JFK historians (Herbert Parmet comes to mind) deny, to the point of suggesting that the assassination has no relation whatever to Kennedy's life or administration. Not only does *JFK* refute this, its explanation makes us contemplate political assassination in clandestine America (that is, America from the dawn of the Cold War to Iran-Contra) rather than various, cabalistic notions of 'conspiracy' articulated by the media in a grab bag, inchoate form.

Representative are the numerous, frequently snide surveys of supposed candidates for conspiracy preferred by assassination hobbyists. In the shopping list format of these presentations (KGB, Mafia, Castro, Texas oilmen, Cuban exiles, CIA, military, the far right), the media reduce the case to absurdity rather than attempt a coherent methodology. The KGB and Castro have been the choices of officialdom and the media, not researchers. Not one shred of evidence has associated the Soviet Union or Cuba with the Kennedy murder, but the Commies as preferred fall back position after the disintegration of the lone nut model is

obvious. Regarding the CIA, the military, Mafia, and anticommunist exiles, the assumption under this shopping list is that there are no commonalities of interest among these groups. Media comments on *JFK* and Garrison's original case often involve the disingenuous assertion that conspiratorialists create an enormous submarine sandwich without rhyme or reason, and that their argument represents the general chaos and disagreement of conspiratorial thinking.

On the contrary, *JFK* rearticulates what most legitimate researchers have believed about the assassination for over twenty years. The murder was part of, in Nixon's famous expression, "the whole Bay of Pigs thing," the worst episode in a series of clandestine activities that included a joint CIA/Mafia attempt to destroy the Cuban Revolution and accelerate clandestine activities throughout Latin America (in his Watergate memoir, *The Ends of Power*, former White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman makes a just-this-side-of-litigation suggestion that the real worries of Nixon and the CIA were new revelations about the Kennedy assassination).

The commonalities of interest in the assassination can be understood by footnoting briefly the much maligned simulations/reconstructions in *JFK* that Stone opted for to allow greater dramatic cohesion. The film's X (Donald Sutherland) is actually retired Col. L. Fletcher Prouty, a former Pentagon liaison officer to the CIA who had not yet broken ranks at the time of the Shaw trial, but who has been a key source to Garrison and numerous researchers since the early Seventies. His very thinly-veiled assertion that his former boss, Major General Edward Lansdale, was a prime mover in the Kennedy assassination complements information gathered by two Congressional studies, the 1975 Church Committee of the Senate, and the 1976-79 House Select Committee on Assassinations. Lansdale's malevo-



JFK and LBJ

Oswald, Ferrie and Ruby conspire over drinks in Ruby's club in JFK

lence is by no means a figment of Stone's imagination. Lansdale was principal overseer of Operation Mongoose, the umbrella for CIA-sponsored attempts to invade Cuba and assassinate Fidel Castro, which continued even after the Cuban Missile Crisis and JFK's order to shut down anti-Castro operations. The CIA-funded training camps in Florida and Louisiana where David Ferrie and Oswald cavorted, as depicted in *JFK*, were run by Lansdale; their existence is substantiated by photographic evidence. The Mongoose operation included a variety of "buffer" groups protecting the CIA and the U.S. military; Mongoose has been well-documented for its employment of Mafia types, Cuban exiles, and American mercenaries of an extreme rightist stripe.

The House Select Committee on Assassinations, for all its failings (its former Chief Counsel, G. Robert Blakey, is the key proponent of "The Mafia Did It" theory—he denounced *JFK* as "leftist fantasy"), provided information that not only gives X more authority and resonance, but may also point to, in the words of British researcher Anthony Summers, "the heart of the matter." HSCA staffers strongly believed that a Lansdale colleague, David Atlee Phillips, using the pseudonym "Maurice Bishop," was a mentor to Lee Harvey Oswald while Phillips was supervising phases of the Mongoose scenario. An HSCA witness to this effect was Antonio Veciana, organizer of the anti-Castro paramilitary organization Alpha 66; Veciana claimed Bishop/Phillips (Veciana's case officer) tried to coerce Veciana into assisting with the framing of Oswald, but Veciana declined. Although Veciana nervously declined to name Phillips as Bishop outright, the HSCA, particularly chief investigator Gaeton Fonzi, believed Phillips (who became CIA Chief of Western Hemisphere Operations and orchestrated the coup against Chilean President Salvador Allende) and Bishop

were the same man.

Among the film's more nitty-gritty issues provoking protest-too-much media outrage are the connections alleged between Lee Harvey Oswald and Clay Shaw. To suggest that these connections actually existed, and were of a political/ clandestine nature rather than a personal/casual nature, is to vindicate Garrison entirely and allow a view of Shaw that the media and the Justice Department (of both Johnson and Nixon) refused mightily from the first moments of the investigation. To this day Shaw is an unjustly maligned, "Kafakesque" figure (Shaw's own favorite expression), a victim of a McCarthy-style (and antigay) persecution (as if Garrison's key attackers held anything but reverence for McCarthy).

A few points need to be made country-simple. First, Louisiana law prescribes that a prosecutor bring his/her case before both a three judge review panel and a Grand Jury before the accused can be brought to trial. Garrison did this in the Shaw case; after the Grand Jury examination, Garrison was forced to proceed with the trial. Contrary to popular anti-Garrison narratives, the trial was postponed two years not by Garrison (who was forced to watch his witnesses and evidence disappear) but by the Justice Department and conservative governors (including Ronald Reagan) who refused to extradite witnesses. As *JFK* suggests, by the time of the trial Garrison's case had been so picked apart and compromised that he used it chiefly to demonstrate the nature of the conspiracy. Surprisingly, the film makes little use of the most compelling evidence Garrison had against Shaw. Among Garrison's Grand Jury and trial evidence were dozens of eyewitnesses who saw Oswald with Shaw, Ferrie, and Guy Banister in the summer of 1963, including a number of CORE volunteers who witnessed Shaw, Ferrie, and Oswald disrupt a voter registration drive in Clinton, Louisiana (an important moment the

movie strangely overlooks) in one of the most bizarre episodes of the JFK assassination story

Second, although the Shaw jury moved for acquittal, few commentators have paid close attention to the trial's outcome. The jury felt that (a) Garrison proved a conspiracy took the life of President Kennedy, and (b) Shaw had perjured himself on a number of issues, including his relationship to David Ferrie (Judge Haggerty, who heard the case, later said he believed Shaw lied on all substantive issues). In an unprecedented move, the Justice Department blocked Garrison's prosecution of Shaw for perjury. Shaw's jury was unable to convict him beyond a reasonable doubt for a role in the JFK murder since Garrison failed to demonstrate the key motive of Shaw's affiliation with the CIA. Since the early Seventies, a wealth of information has become available demonstrating Shaw's CIA connections, most importantly former agent Victor Marchetti's 1973 revelation that, at the time of the Garrison inquiry, then-CIA Director Richard Helms expressed great concern about suspects Clay Shaw and David Ferrie, regularly asking senior officers "if [we] are giving them all the help we can." Both Helms and William Colby (who succeeded Helms as Agency head) admitted under oath to Congress Shaw's CIA affiliation, but insisted that he was merely an occasional informant in the CIA's Domestic Contact Division (an informant about what?). The point is that Shaw was always adamant in denying any CIA association.

In fact, research shows that Shaw was more than an international businessman giving occasional tips to the CIA, nor was he merely the shadowy proctor observing David Ferrie's gang of young anticommunist, anti-civil rights provocateurs (the main role the movie ascribes to him). Cumulative research, including work done by the French and Italian governments, shows that Shaw worked for U.S. intelligence since his



Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones) Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) meets with Colonel X (Donald Sutherland)

Guy Banister (Ed Asner)

service as an OSS Colonel in WWII. Through the 1950s, Shaw's principal CIA function was to construct false-front overseas corporations (the most famous of which was Permindex) whose only business was to launder money and provide cover for various espionage, counterintelligence, and assassination activities (the movie notes, all too briefly, that the Italian government saw through Shaw's impeccable liberal credentials and expelled him and his phony Centro Mondiale Commerciale for suspicion of espionage). Shaw's antics now seem quaint in light of the intelligence community's more recent use of fake corporations and even reasonably legitimate businesses for its activities (Iran-Contra, the S&L debacle, and the BCCI horror story all contain representative examples).

Suffice it to say that *JFK* is quite grounded in fact, even if events are compressed or changed in sequence; one might paraphrase the old saw that the truth, in this case particularly, is far stranger than Stone's half-fictions. As X/Fletcher Prouty might suggest, wondering about whether or not Ferrie, Ruby, and Oswald met together (they did, and there is a chain of evidence beyond the reliable testimony of former Ruby stripper Beverly Oliver, the show-girl who talks to Costner's Garrison) is far less germane than understanding the case as a political assassination. The media emphasis on 'The CIA did it,' or 'The Mafia did it,' or 'The Cubans (which ones?) did it,' emphasizes the assassination as murder mystery, where the audience takes its pick and solves the case ("You be the judge," in the words of a recent *48 Hours* broadcast).

The compartmentalization of assorted bad guys removes an essential fact: the CIA, the military, Mafia, and anti-Castro Cubans can be seen as one group working with the same interests (to reclaim Cuba as ancillary U.S. territory and tourist industry, and to fire an intransigent yet self-doubting head of

state). Indeed, far right millionaires easily slip into the act—H. L. Hunt and Howard Hughes gave money to anti-Castro operations when Operation Mongoose was forced to become "privatized" (sound familiar?) after Kennedy ordered a crackdown on exile training camps in Florida and Louisiana. We might also note that media magnate Henry Luce and his wife Claire Booth walked out on a JFK luncheon when they became fed up with the President's waffling on their favorite anticommunist cause (to which they donated more than a little cash). The media assault on conspiracy theory is certainly about the failure of the press's adversarial function, but it may also represent old school ties that make the media an apparatus of the state in ways far more direct than usually analyzed by current critical theory.

This is not to say that all media magnates, CIA agents, exile leaders, oil millionaires, or Mafia dons fired rifles in Dealey Plaza or knew who loaded them. We can understand, however, particularly in light of the half-baked Watergate and Iran-Contra investigations, why the cover-up of this murder is as important to understanding the nature of the current state as the murder itself. A genuine understanding of the assassination, of the utter intolerance of even mildly progressive leaders, is to upset the apple cart of the American political economy. That so many Democratic members of Congress (and media) should effectuate the neoconservative economic game plan of the Reagan years speaks to (and demystifies) the nature of conspiracy from a politically informed perspective. *JFK*'s essential understanding of various reactionary forces playing the same game (the covert acquisition of power) is a fairly extraordinary accomplishment for a Hollywood film.

And yet, for all the attempts of the Stone/Garrison thesis to cut through the malarkey of fall back positions, the narrative of *JFK* could be further radi-

calized. Stone's preoccupation with hero worship (of Garrison and JFK) reduces the assassination to a simplistic, epic contest of good vs. evil, something that Garrison's more streetwise and jaundiced approach (in *On the Trail of the Assassins* and his earlier *A Heritage of Stone*) avoids. Further, Kennedy-as-savior forces the film away from a more sophisticated discussion of the assassination as internecine warfare within the power structure, rather than Stone's contest of hawks and doves. As important as the professional war machine has been to the economy of late capitalism, Stone's focus on Eisenhower's military-industrial complex (and on Kennedy as peacenik) separates the state's warmaking capability from the assumptions of capitalism itself. The radical scholar knows that the duplicity of the Bay of Pigs to Iran-Contra epoch grew lawfully out of capital's disbelief in and distrust of a social contract; the military/industrial/intelligence/media apparatuses become, even in their labyrinthine operations, mere reflections of economy.

The upheaval the film has provoked suggests that a radical interpretation of the Sixties' assassinations is finally being offered to a mass audience. Particularly in his interviews (where he draws obvious parallels between the assassination and Iran-Contra/October Surprise), Oliver Stone manifests the ambitions of the mid-Seventies New Left, which saw the Kennedy assassination as a means of mobilizing an issue-oriented population into a radical critique of the American political economy. When the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal ended, so did public concern for social and economic justice. It was hoped that the assassinations, involved as they are in the long-term development of the clandestine foreign policy and executive policy structure, would provoke serious, continued investigation and reflection resulting in political change.

Stone's film appears to resurrect



Gary Oldman and Ed Asner in *JFK*

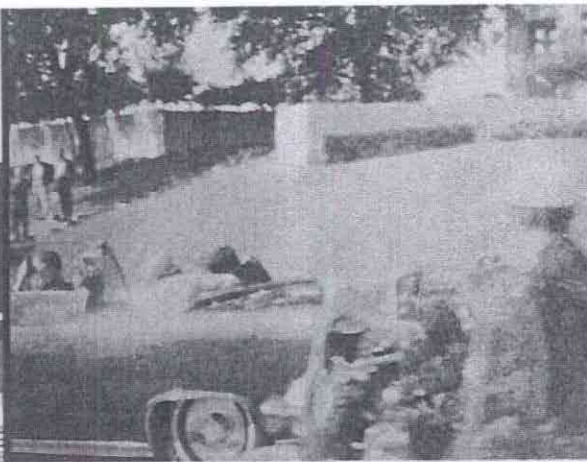


Photo taken during assassination by Mary Moorman



Oswald: authentic snapshot or forgery?

that faith (making it the most adversarial mainstream film in decades), but it is a bit disturbing (although hardly ironic) that the assassination is retained in the court of the spectacle. As if to admit to the collapse of (in Frederic Jameson's words) civic idealism and the assassination of politics itself after the public execution of so many liberal or progressive leaders, the film acknowledges that public outrage can be rediscovered only in the channels of privatized fantasy. We get myths and countermyths (so far), not political activity. *JFK* may serve a purpose which few works of art have recently fulfilled if it merely continues to stir controversy and provoke further study of the effectuation of power in the United States. ■

The Making of Alert Viewers

THE MIXING OF FACT AND FICTION IN *JFK*

by Art Simon

Perhaps no single aspect of *JFK* has incurred more wrath from critics than Oliver Stone's choice to combine archival images such as the Zapruder film or Kennedy's autopsy photographs with filmed reenactments of the crucial events. In January, when *The New York Times* accused Stone of using "trick photography," the paper was echoing an attack which had been levelled against the film throughout its first month of exhibition. When *JFK* opened, *Newsweek* warned of the "Twisted Truth" resulting from "a film in which the real and the imagined, fact and fiction, keep shading into one another." The magazine continued: "Only the alert viewer will be able to distinguish real documentary footage from reconstructed scenes." Yet this cautionary remark serves better as a commentary on the anesthetized state

of American film audiences (or at least *Newsweek's* view of them) than it does as a critique of Stone's visual strategies. Indeed, for a film that can be criticized on many fronts, not the least of which for its substitution of the lone assassin theory with a lone investigator theory, its most redeeming elements are those sequences in which Stone montages the historical evidence with footage he shot for the film.

Those montages aptly characterize the near thirty years of postassassination inquiry, a contest over which individuals or institutions should write the official history of such an event. It has been a struggle which has frequently revolved around contrary interpretations of semilegible imagery. Partisans on both sides of the single bullet controversy have been forced to make sense of a diverse set of representations—grainy 8mm film, still photographs, X-rays, hand sketched medical diagrams, acoustics and ballistics tests. To offer up a coherent scenario of events or to refute those put forth by the government, these disparate elements have been repeatedly collaged and cross-checked. Stone's mixing of the Zapruder film with his own reenactment mirrors this process. His film is more faithful to this aspect of the historical record than it may be anywhere else. At the same time, the integration of old and new footage suggests the dual time frames in which the investigation has always operated, the way in which historical revision is locked in the present while working with fragments from the past. Researchers have repeatedly returned to the scene of the crime, either through the incessant looping of the most critical film frames or actual refilmings of a motorcade driving through Dealey Plaza. In reenacting the events for the camera, *JFK* references, unwittingly perhaps, the Warren Commission's own reenactment in 1964 or the slightly less farcical reenactment in *The Eternal Frame* produced by the Ant Farm Video group in

1975.

Mixing historical footage with his own allows Stone a filmic means by which to question the identity of Lee Harvey Oswald. Although images of Oswald in the Dallas Police Department exist and have been widely televised over the last several years, Stone chooses to reenact the brief interview between Oswald and the press and the well-known shooting by Ruby. Gary Oldman recites, almost line for line, Oswald's remarks in the basement of the police station and elsewhere Stone uses only a few photographs of the "real" Oswald, images published in *Life* magazine after the assassination. As such, *JFK* is able to suggest that Oswald's identity is more difficult to document with certainty, underscoring the way in which theories about doubles and stand-ins have complicated the evidence surrounding the alleged assassin.

The problem becomes more complex with scenes depicting events which may or may not have taken place, incidents which could be evidence of conspiracy. Of course, fictional scenes of Garrison's home life are not the issue so much as scenes of Lee Harvey Oswald meeting David Ferrie at Jack Ruby's club or reenactments of the murder of Officer Tippit. Lacking the kind of photographic record associated with the motorcade, these alleged episodes have always been a greater mystery, their authenticity relying upon the testimony of human rather than camera witnesses. In *JFK*, these scenes, often registered in black and white, serve as compensation for a type of visual evidence the conspiracy case has always required. It is also these scenes in particular which demand of spectators a critical stance they should always assume when going to the cinema, a stance which resists associating that which is seen with that which is true. Throughout *JFK*, Garrison and his cohorts are fueled by the assumption that things are not as they appear,



Liz and Jim Garrison in *JFK*



DA Garrison (Kevin Costner) is angered by Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones)



Jim Garrison, circa 1967

a point made repeatedly by images of an unidentified pair of hands doctoring the famous back yard photos of Oswald holding the alleged murder rifle. Viewers need to apply the same skepticism to Stone's film. That various scenes freely interchange archival footage with contemporary reenactments is hardly as threatening as critics have suggested. The fact remains that "alert viewers" do not just exist but are made, often by confronting images which challenge such problematic categories as documentary and fiction.

The political implications of *JFK* may reside primarily in how it poses this challenge, whether it succeeds in prompting viewers to consider how central to the writing of history are questions about access to and the organizing of images. Given Stone's penchant for scripting preachy monologs or passing off citations of evidence as dialog, it is probably good that these issues are not foregrounded in the film with a speech by Garrison/Costner. The investigation is so fraught with the blending of mediums that what critics fear to be a dangerous technique is, in fact, a built-in necessity for any film which takes the assassination as its primary subject matter. The point seems lost on the filmmaker who in countless interviews speaks vaguely about the politics of creating a countermyth. Fortunately, after the multimillion dollar publicity wanes and the attention of the press wanders elsewhere, the rhetoric of Stone's intentions will fade and *JFK* will be considered, as it should be, within the everexpanding collage of assassination documents. ■

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The Discrediting of the Fifth Estate
THE PRESS ATTACKS ON JFK

by James Petras

No film (or filmmaker) in recent history has been subject to the range and depth of vitriol, even before it was completed, and continuing almost on a daily basis after its release, as Oliver Stone's *JFK*. As early as last May 14th, in *The Chicago Tribune*, Jon Margolis characterized the film as "an insult to the intelligence" while the film was only in its first weeks of shooting. A few days later (May 19), George Lardner wrote the lead article on the front page of the Outlook section of the Sunday *Washington Post* (using a stolen copy of the initial draft of the screenplay) to ridicule and dismiss Garrison's conspiracy theories, and Stone's portrayal of his investigation. In a similar vein, Anthony Lewis, in *The New York Times*, expressed outrage at the film because it "tells us that our government cannot be trusted to give an honest account of a Presidential assassination." *Washington Post* columnist George Will followed by describing Stone's *JFK* as "an act of execrable history and contemptible citizenship by a man of technical skill, scant education and negligible conscience." As the film was about to open, *Newsweek's* cover was emblazoned with the headline, "The Twisted Truth of *JFK*," and, in case its semiliterate readers missed the point, the subtitle, "Why Oliver Stone's New Movie Can't Be Trusted." This was followed by four pages of apology for the Warren Report, accompanied by the predictable ad hominem attacks on Stone, Garrison, et. al by Kenneth Auchincloss.

The fact that the film was attacked in the mass media for its politics

MEDIA ASSASSINATION

Cineaste Associate Pat Dowell recently found herself becoming part of the ongoing controversy over Oliver Stone's *JFK*. Although Dowell has reviewed films for *The Washingtonian* for ten years, her 34-word capsule review of *JFK* for the January issue was rejected by Editor John Limpert. Explaining in his letter that he felt *JFK* was a "preposterous" movie and that he didn't want the magazine associated with a review which described it as "a brilliantly crafted indictment," he nevertheless urged Dowell to "continue to call them as you see them."

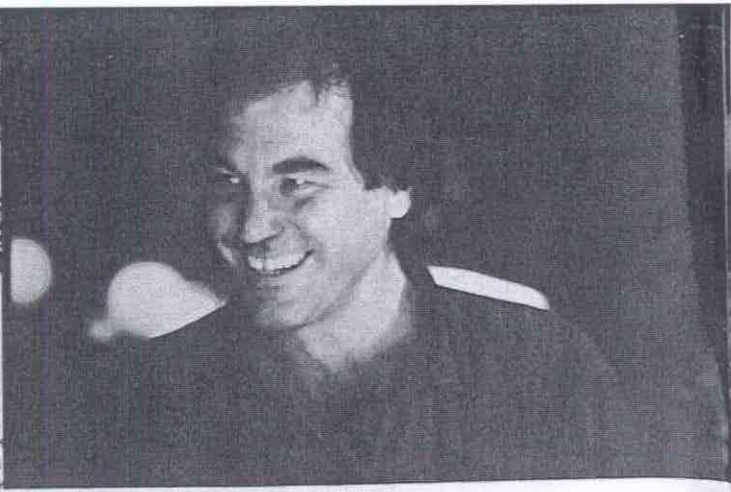
Dowell responded to Limpert that such advice "won't do me much good...if the way you see them determines whether my call gets into print...It never occurred to me that *The Washingtonian* might not aspire to standards set by other publications in these matters. The editors of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *[Washington] Post*, for instance, have all spluttered in protest about *JFK's* controversial speculations, but those editors felt no need to soften, censor, or omit the rave reviews of the movie by their film critics." Dowell further commented that unless her review was published, she would have no choice but to resign as *Washingtonian* film critic, explaining: "A critic has only her professional opinions as her stock in trade, and there is an understanding in journalism that editors will not tamper with their content. I cannot in good conscience keep my job at the price of tailoring my evaluation of a film's merits to fit someone else's idea of political (or cinematic) correctness."

Limpert accepted Dowell's resignation, commenting: "My job is to protect the magazine's reputation and it seemed to me that Stone's film went to the heart of what kind of city this is." Dowell told *Cineaste*: "He identifies the heart of Washington as the people accused in *JFK* of conspiracy—the people in the CIA, in the government, the policy elite—instead of the people who suffer the effects of these policies. I'm sorry my editor identifies with those

continued on p. 62



Editorial cartoon by Steve Benson



Oliver Stone hasn't lost his sense of humor

months in advance of its screening by critics who had neither viewed nor even read the final screenplay speaks to the knee jerk political reflexes that have become so much part of the mass media's subservient defense of the American political elite. These intellectuals in uniform are prepared to do battle in the name of state truth, even before they know their adversary's message, facts, or logic: it is a question of what Anthony Lewis so delicately describes as "trust" in our government "to give an honest account."

One would have thought that the conspiracies and state cover-ups that accompanied Watergate, Irangate, the CIA assassination manual for the Contras, and the bombing of working class *barrios* in Panama would have precluded these sanctimonious and tedious pieties toward "our government." But it is precisely because of all the past and present deceptions and covert operations (euphemism for government conspiracy acceptable to the mass media) by the state that this film is being attacked; it brings the overseas and domestic perpetrators of violence into public focus. Stone was right in telling the National Press Club audience that Washington, D.C. is "the wrong city to ridicule people who believe in conspiracies." The sustained attack over seven months in at least two dozen articles and editorials in *The New York Times*, which was matched by similar drum fire in *The Los Angeles Times*, speaks to an effort to create a political climate to prevent the film from reaching the public. It is a warning to other filmmakers of the abuse that will fall on their heads if they challenge what Stone rightfully calls "the settled body of history," the myths that sustain established power.

What makes Oliver Stone's *JFK* particularly relevant and subject to extraordinary abuse by the political journalists and editorialists of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the like, is that it occurs at a time of growing disenchantment with both political parties, revul-

sion at the avarice of the financial and business classes, and large-scale corruption and deceit among leading public officials. In 1991, politicians were generally distrusted. The presidency has hit a new low in its handling of the economy, and the current recession is affecting white collar as well as blue collar workers.

Thus, Oliver Stone's film portrayal of the case against the Warren Commission Report falls on receptive ears, reaching an audience that is already beginning to sense that the political system is rigged against it. Fear that the public will make a connection between private discontents and the public sphere at its highest levels has provoked the semiofficial media mongers to launch an unprecedented preemptive attack on the making of the film, followed by a series of vicious ad hominem and political attacks on Stone himself.

Most recently, members of the media have engaged in blatant attempts to pressure film studios to exercise censorship in the making of films that question official state versions of the "truth." Two of the most egregious examples of such hatchet jobs appeared in *The New York Times* on consecutive days, just after the opening of *JFK*. The first, by Bernard Weinraub (Dec. 24, 1991), was an open call for studio censorship. Weinraub wraps his authoritarian views around anonymous 'authoritative' sources, beginning with his title, "Hollywood Wonders if Warner Brothers Let *JFK* Go Too Far," and goes on to suggest in his article that "the film community is asking about the ethical, artistic and even legal responsibility of the studio."

All of Weinraub's unidentified sources are, however, only a prelude to his real mission: to attack the filmmaker's freedom to make films questioning the state, and to bludgeon film studios into exercising censorship. According to Weinraub, "At the moment the issue confronting Hollywood is does a studio—or for that matter its parent com-

pany Time Warner—view its role as merely giving free rein to a prominent director and, in the process, hoping to turn the movie into a financial success? Or at what point does a studio exercise its leverage and blunt the highly charged message of a film maker like Oliver Stone?"

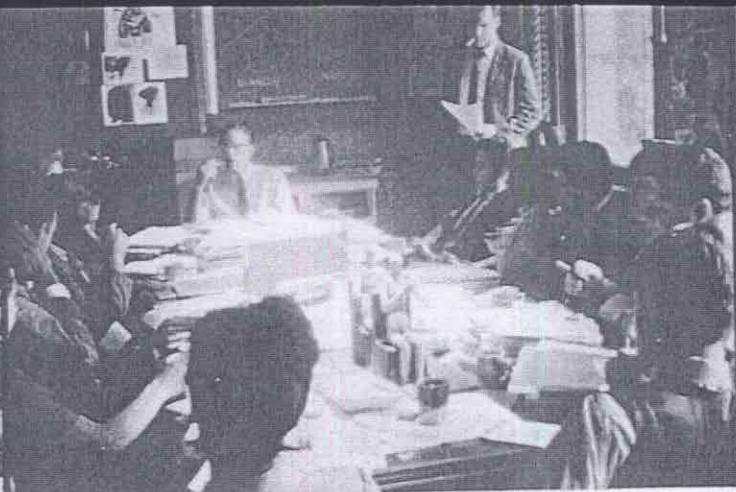
Weinraub's reference to "leverage" is reminiscent of the Stalinist vocabulary: the Party was mandated to exercise its 'leverage' to correct cultural deviation. Weinraub's call "to blunt the highly charged message" is almost a parody of the kind of media arm-twisting that the film exposes. Stone will soon have ample material with which to make a sequel to *JFK*.

Bertram Gross once wrote that in America fascism would come with a smiling face. In *The New York Times* version, censorship is accompanied by references to the First Amendment. Weinraub allows a former U.S. Attorney, one Thomas Baer, to wield the hatchet in what is perhaps the most tortuous piece of legal chicanery this side of Alan Dershowitz's defense of Michael Milken's honesty: "The First Amendment which is often cited in these circumstances has nothing to do with the relationship between the government and individuals. Accordingly there is greater opportunity for studios to control film makers than there is for the government to control citizens. In this particular instance, since a living family's nightmare and a nation's torment are perceived by one person's skewed imagination, I would have hoped more control would have been exercised." [emphasis mine]

The use of private institutions rather than the state as instruments of censorship has been common in the West, particularly in the United States. In the 1950s the CIA funded a range of private groups. The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the FBI intimidated most major film studios into banning film writers who wished to deliver "highly charged messages." Pressured by the state, which thus avoids the label of



The DA visits Kennedy's grave



DA Garrison (Kevin Costner) meets with his team of investigators



Earl Warren (Jim Garrison) in JFK

state repression and trivializes the issue of political repression as representing 'loose cannons' or 'private idiosyncrasies,' the private institutions in turn carry out firings or impose censorship. The Weinraub article is inadvertently quite informative in a way not intended by the author: it reveals the mode of censorship and the control through which the state exercises its power in the privately owned media.

The code word for attempting to keep the private owners of the film medium in line with state policy, "responsible," is liberally sprinkled throughout Weinraub's article. Weinraub quotes anonymous studio chiefs—supposedly speaking on behalf of other anonymous studio chiefs—as saying, "[Warner Bros. is] saying this movie is the truth. It's not irresponsible to make the movie, it's irresponsible to say 'this is the truth.'" But are film studios supposed to disavow their films? Does *The New York Times* disavow its role in supporting the Vietnam War, the cover-up during the U.S. invasion of Panama, or its support of the Allende coup?

The real sore point for the *Times* is not the issue of truth, but the film's portrayal of the depth and scope of political responsibility in the assassination, implicating major institutions of contemporary American society—the Pentagon, the CIA, the FBI, and the presidency. Weinraub admits as much when he cites anonymous producers as saying that "the studio bears a special responsibility in releasing a movie that makes such sweeping allegations."

JFK is not just a denunciation of corrupt officials within a sound political system, like *All the President's Men*, nor is it a film about U.S. officials abroad who are implicated in death squads and terrorism. It is a film about death squads at home, operating at the highest levels, with the approval of the respectable mass media. The reason for the sustained vituperation directed at *JFK* is that Oliver Stone has made a major film that will reach millions of Americans, involving, in Weinraub's

terms, "a divergence from the official record."

Stone's blowing the cover off the "official record" about the assassination of President Kennedy, and arguing convincingly that top officials were implicated, are what has enraged the editorialists and political journalists of the *Times* and the *Post*. Nowhere do the *Times* or the other media provide any convincing counterevidence to substantiate the theory that a 'magic bullet' could enter two bodies from seven different directions. In the meantime, in Orwellian fashion, *New York Times* editorial writer Brent Staples states that the "movie suppresses information well known to students of recent history," and then proceeds two paragraphs further on to continue to refer to Clay Shaw as a "retired businessman," even though Shaw was publicly identified after his death in the late 1970s by CIA director Richard Helms as a CIA agent, a point emphasized in the epilogue to the film. Who represents a "malevolent force"—Jim Garrison, who early on identified Shaw for what he was, or *The New York Times* editorialist, who persists in repeating myths disowned even by the Agency?

The mass media, having failed to prevent Stone's film from reaching the public, are now working to pressure the studios not to make future films of this kind. At a deeper level, the media are fearful that questions and indictments such as those shown in *JFK* might be raised and echoed by a political figure and movement that would take up the larger issues of state responsibility for the savings and loan swindle, the role of the military-industrial complex in diverting domestic resources to global conquest, and the responsibility of the elite for the current economic depression.

Stone has turned the negative reviews of *JFK* into a powerful indictment of the mass media. In his memorable appearance before the National Press Club, Stone answered the attacks of Dan Rather, George Lardner, and

others by challenging their failures to question J. Edgar Hoover and Richard Helms or to research Oswald's movements in and out of right wing organizations and official U.S. intelligence institutions. He openly defended the role of intellectuals (filmmakers, journalists, writers) to subvert "settled bodies of history" that are myths legitimating existing power. He excoriated the hypocrisy of the venerable body of scribes who praise the truth-seeking about political crimes in Russia but resist similar efforts in the U.S. regarding the Kennedy assassination.

Stone's confrontation with the politically repressive side of the mass media has clearly touched a creative impulse, one that could produce another eye-opening film. At the close of the National Press Club meeting, the chair posed an interesting question to Stone: "You have taken on the most powerful institutions, when will you take on the press?" Stone responded cautiously: "It is doomed to negative reviews. I will have to think twice." Then he turned it around: "It's a great subject. Possibly I will."

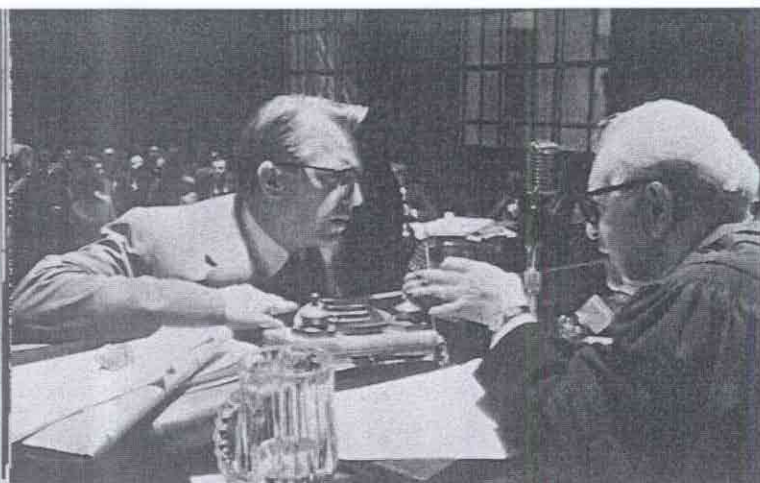
There was nervous laughter from the audience. ■

Deconstructing the DA

THE GARRISON IMAGE IN JFK

by George Michael Evica

J*JFK* is the cinematic equivalent of a tragic epic of national pride which recalls *The Iliad* and the political myths of the Middle Ages, legends articulating humanity's sense of its own sacred identity. The Kennedy of Oliver Stone's film, neither archetypal king of Camelot nor revisionists' failed chief executive, embodies the best hope of the nation—but also threatens a dark alliance dedicated to greed and



Garrison is overruled by the judge (John Finnegan) in *JFK*



Jim Garrison at 1967 press conference announcing Clay Shaw's trial date

power.

So it becomes necessary to kill him. Just as the film's President Kennedy is the target of malevolent forces and is killed, so Stone's fictional Garrison battles those same forces in a losing but heroic battle. Less a Quest myth (or Search for the Lost Father legend), *JFK* is a Wasteland story—a maimed leader is sacrificed, a land is turned barren and dark, and an all-too-human hero strives to cleanse his stricken country.

In the film, Kennedy and Garrison both function as metaphors, the first embodying the meaning of his own dying, the second embodying the experience of that death through knowledge. Garrison as the tragic protagonist of Stone's film travels through the stages of the monomyth—initiation, transformation, and return, ultimately defeated in his greatest conflict but bringing back a boon: the wisdom necessary to face the truth of the assassination. For the viewer, Stone's Garrison becomes both surrogate and guide.

For every reductionist argument of the Warren Commission, Stone (through his fictive Garrison) offers multiplicities: a half dozen rifle rounds pouring into the unprotected limo; two, even four shooters; and sufficient political motivation to implicate everyone who hated JFK. Opposing the official pseudomyth of the President's death, Stone employs excess, irony, and inversion, the ancient weapons of the social reformer.

Inversion is Stone's key organizing idea: "Black is white, white is black," says Stone's Garrison (as did the real Garrison), and inversion figures in the film's casting. The historical Jim Garrison was six foot six inches tall, weighed 220 pounds, and, although hampered by eye problems, chose not to wear glasses in public. Played by Kevin Costner, Garrison (Stone's central inversion) is less than six feet tall, trim, and wears his glasses throughout. These eyeglasses (plus other reflecting surfaces) are part of another powerful organizing principle in the film, intensi-

fying its theme of knowing through seeing, suggesting the fictional Garrison's (and our own) developing insight into the truth of JFK's death. Both sound and sight are of course relevant to the film's organization, but *eyewitnessing* is especially significant in *JFK*.

Costner's portrayal of Garrison and the actual Jim Garrison have much in common, sharing (as Stone has said) a "fundamental decency...and integrity." The film's Garrison has the air of a well-organized university lecturer, especially in the crucial and moving courtroom scenes. The historic Garrison is also literate, even scholarly. His two books on the assassination are coherent, well-written, and persuasive, often praising populist values with the same strength and pride as the fictional Garrison. Both Costner's Garrison and Stone's are charming, articulate, meditative, passionate, and outspoken. But Costner's Garrison is almost seamless, a commanding presence whose sense of his own rectitude grows incrementally through the film despite his familiar problems. Not so the historic Garrison, called "contradictory," "unpredictable," and "incautious" by many of the people who knew him when he was District Attorney. These complexities of character are faintly explored by Stone, but only faintly; Kennedy and his death were the critical issues for the director, not Garrison.

When Clay Shaw was arrested and prosecuted, charges of homophobia and closet anxiety were aired against Garrison. Similar accusations have been made against Stone for his portrayal of gays in *JFK*. The historic Garrison controlled crime and vice in New Orleans using a string of street informers—small time hoods, prostitutes, and gays (the latter figuring in Garrison's actual JFK investigation). And though Garrison now admits that Shaw was a minor character in the assassination story, his evidence did suggest Oswald (with the aid of an Oswald double) was being framed by some members of the gay community who, more importantly,

had ties to the CIA, the Mafia, or both.

But Garrison was not the first to examine a possible homosexual dimension in the Kennedy murder. The Warren Commission's staff itself, particularly several of its lawyers, explored reputed gay links to Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Ruby, and their associates, questioning a number of witnesses closely on the subject.

Garrison's official staff members were serious, confident, and assured. Only one regular investigator abandoned Garrison, though several researchers and volunteers quit the Garrison team (some stealing files and giving them to the Shaw defense team). Journalists close to Garrison during the JFK inquiry could not believe Garrison would risk self-destruction unless he were absolutely confident of his correctness. And how could an intelligent, able, and dedicated staff be so badly mistaken?

The actual Jim Garrison (who was not so well prepared for trial as the film's Garrison) believed the government would never allow Clay Shaw (actually a CIA asset) to be brought before the bench. Indeed, both the federal and state governments deliberately blocked Garrison, acts of obstruction of justice. The real Garrison felt strongly that, under pressure, the power structure would either give up vital information and precipitate a new federal investigation, or it would sacrifice Shaw.

Neither happened.

Both the historic and the fictional Garrison presented the same case for conspiracy invalidating the Warren Commission's conclusions: an impossible single bullet theory; too many wounds to Kennedy and Connally (at least eight); multiple origins for the shots; a controlled and suspect autopsy; Oswald as a U.S. intelligence agent, impersonated in New Orleans (and in Texas and Mexico), and patsied; a subsequent cover-up and suppression of evidence; and political motives for murdering the President (including



JFK at 1961 press conference



JFK in Dallas motorcade moments before the fatal shots

Kennedy's exploration of peaceful options in U.S. relations with Cuba, Southeast Asia, and the Soviet Union.

"Stone...re-invented Jim Garrison," *New York Times* film critic Janet Maslin has said. On the contrary, Oliver Stone has deconstructed both the Garrison investigation and Garrison himself, ridding them of all the double agents, disinformation sources, competing researchers, and intemperate and often contradictory statements issued (sometimes falsely) from Garrison's office.

The essential argument of the film is given in the fictional Garrison's stunning courtroom summation, uniting politics and passion: a recognition of treason in high places, a rejection of the power structure's false history, and a call to populist action.

The ancient myths were sacred stories, but they were also script for ritual dramas enacted by the people in cleansing and renewing their community, nation, and world. Costner's Garrison urges us to perform such a rite of political renewal, and so he also functions as our tribal shaman, guiding us through a major change in political consciousness.

"Nobody owns history," Barbara T. Roessner has said. Oliver Stone's Garrison challenges us to reject the largest historical lie of the twentieth century: the official version of the JFK assassination. ■

The 'Threat' of the New Frontier:

THE KENNEDY IMAGE IN JFK

by Dan Georgakas

One troubling aspect of the popular success of *JFK* is its perpetuation of the Kennedy myths. Those of us who were radical political activists in the early 1960s generally viewed Kennedy as a dedicated Cold

Warrior who gave only lip service to civil rights and other social reforms. If *state* is substituted for *country*, his most famous injunction—Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country—becomes a recipe for fascism. Kennedy promised to pay any price for American national interests and proved that conviction in his handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis. To see him cast as a tribune of the people who was slain for his efforts to end the Cold War and withdraw from Vietnam is vexing. We need not, however, revise our personal view of the real Kennedy to accept the political scenario Oliver Stone offers. How radical or how conservative a politician appears depends very much on where the evaluator sits in the political spectrum running from right to left.

For the men Stone accuses of plotting the assassination, Kennedy's New Frontier was an alarming prospect. The 1950s had seen the Taft-Hartley Act defuse labor militancy and McCarthyism savage intellectual dissent. Military advisors and CIA operatives had brought inexpensive foreign policy victories in Greece, Iran, Guatemala, and the Philippines. Korea had been a stalemate, but one without significant domestic fallout or loss of international face. Imaginary missile and nuclear gaps had proven sufficient to win public acquiescence to an ever-bloating military budget.

Now came a John F. Kennedy who bragged he would smash the CIA into a thousand pieces, a President who had refused to take the hard line during the Bay of Pigs invasion, and who had given a pledge of no further invasions to end the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kennedy had signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty as "a step toward reason" and was using unofficial sources to open negotiations with Castro. He was telling antiwar senators that he wanted to leave Vietnam, and he had begun the paperwork for the withdrawal of 1,000 troops. Domestically he was talking with Martin Luther King, Jr. rather

than letting the FBI and other agencies go forward with their plans for destabilization. To make matters worse, brother Robert Kennedy stood ready to carry on what could become a Kennedy Dynasty.

If Stone is correct in thinking that right wing fears of Kennedy's policies led to the assassination conspiracy, he has raised appalling thoughts of just how ruthless and just how powerful a small (or not so small) segment of the permanent government really is. That these conspirators considered Kennedy a dangerous reformer speaks volumes about their own points of reference. The range of allowable policy options would seem to be very narrow and the subsequent assassinations of leaders such as Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. inevitable.

Filmmaker Stone, like District Attorney Jim Garrison before him, did not begin with an inflated view of Kennedy's New Frontier. Stone has commented that he considers Kennedy a cunning and shrewd politician, less opposed to the Vietnam conflict than ambivalent. Garrison, a tough prosecutor in a tough town, also understands that the Kennedy of the Peace Corps and VISTA was also the man who gained his office through electoral improprieties in Illinois and conspired with the Mafia to bring down Castro. Garrison also understands that the Mafia and other suggested shooters could not have changed the motorcade route, rigged the autopsy, or carried out the cover-up he ran into with his own investigation. Such power rests only in secret agencies at the highest level of national government.

Stone reached the same conclusion when he shifted his focus from seeing his film as a whodunit (the mechanics) to a whydunit (the motive). This line of thought also leads to the military-industrial complex and the intelligence agencies (military as well as CIA). No other group could have handled Oswald as he had been handled or mount the cover-up symbolized by the Warren



Garrison (Kevin Costner) presents his conspiracy theory in court



David Ferrie (Joe Pesci) offers a questionable alibi in *JFK*

Commission Report. Subsequent testimony by L. Fletcher Prouty (the basis for X of the film), who had served as a liaison between the Joint Chiefs and the CIA during the 1960s, and new evidence about the plans to withdraw from Vietnam offered in John Newman's *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue and the Struggle for Power* gave substance to what Garrison could only surmise over a decade earlier.

The clarity of this assassination hypothesis has been badly compromised in *JFK* by the sexual iconography Stone employs in his dramatic narrative. Rather than showing Kennedy as a complex personality whose policies were still in formation, Stone opts for the myth of Camelot. The screen is filled with wholesome family images suggestive of the loving husband and devoted father. The Kennedys are seen as role models for sophisticated couples of the 1960s. No Marilyn Monroe or girlfriend shared with a mobster mars the fantasy. No hint that Jackie will go on to wed the notorious Aristotle Onassis, a shipowner whom the OSS, forerunner of the CIA, had labelled as a fascist sympathizer in the 1940s. No hint either of the murky political past of Joseph Kennedy, the clan patriarch.

Stone also chooses to sanitize Garrison. His family, while in some turmoil over daddy's obsession with Kennedy's assassination, is a wholesome family unit. Like the mythical Camelot family, in the end, wife and children will unite with the father. This is nothing less than a Reaganesque equation of goodness and morality with the traditional nuclear family. In his courtroom summation at the Shaw trial, Garrison speaks of Kennedy as the father of the nation. We risk a tragic Hamlet complex, he says, less because the slain king was so noble than that we have failed to avenge him.

Juxtaposed to the Camelot families are the shadowy conspirators. The plotters are sexless blue suits and military jackets, depersonalized abstractions rather than impassioned humans. The

only mechanics we see repeatedly are homosexuals who live in the garish sexual underworld of New Orleans. Their environment is that of the cheap hustler (male or female) and nightclub characters. The Cuban counterrevolutionaries who might be mechanics are seen only fleetingly. They are without families, national passion, or personal injury. The picket fence shooters are anonymous hit men. All we know about them (or is it the Cuban mechanics?) is that they tossed a woman from a moving car a few days before the assassination. These images are based on actual events and photographs of the persons involved; but the manner in which they have been marshalled creates a false dichotomy between the good men of Camelot and the bad sexual misfits.

Stone's dramatic and visual strategies result in a film that melds radical political analysis with reactionary social dogma. Many viewers will find it hard to separate the two themes, accepting or rejecting them as a single visual package. Nor do these choices help viewers let go of their own Kennedy myths to comprehend how others may have viewed him. That the plotters never speak for themselves, expressing their own sense of patriotism and honor, compounds the problem.

Ultimately, however, the many ways we might see Kennedy from the perspective of the 1990s is irrelevant to the film's central concern. So, too, are our judgments of Ferrie's sex life, Garrison's wife, Oswald's strange marriage, Banister's brutality, or even Stone's machismo. Despite his many dramatic simplifications and his dubious social vision, Stone has offered a credible motive and plausible suspects for what amounts to an American coup d'état.

Stone's conspirators seem to have accepted the reality of the New Frontier and the glamor of Camelot as surely as the director and his cinematic Garrison have. Kennedy might easily have proven to be mainly bluff and surface charm. Or he may have only favored

more elegant means than theirs to achieve long-established ends. We will never know. And we will never know if he had indeed somehow summoned the wisdom and the courage needed to shatter the CIA and terminate the war in Vietnam. ■

Gays, Women and an Abstinent Hero

THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF *JFK*

by Roy Grundmann
and Cynthia Lucia

A picture speaks a thousand words," proclaims Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) in his courtroom summation speech, emphasizing the apparently self-evident character of the Zapruder footage. Within its multiple layers of storytelling, conflicting images and versions of truth, *JFK*'s dichotomous imagery places homosexuals on trial, associating them with artifice and deception and pitting them against "the real"—Garrison's version of the truth.

It is not wrong that *JFK* depicts Clay Shaw and David Ferrie as homosexual (in fact, they were homosexual); what is wrong, however, is the fact that these "bad guys" shoulder the burden of vicious subliminal implications.

David Ferrie (Joe Pesci), for example, is a wretched creature who never reconciled his homosexuality with his thwarted aspirations to become a priest. In the course of the film, he becomes increasingly pathological, from the first interview sequence when he appears edgy and comically inept, to the sequence shortly before his death when he appears crazed, paranoid, and mentally unbalanced.

The film ridicules Ferrie, asking us to see him as silly and impotent, particularly in contrast with Garrison, the emotionally stable, interrogating patri-



Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones) goes on trial in *JFK*



Prison inmate Willie O'Keefe (Kevin Bacon) offers information on the conspiracy

arch whose fertility and potency are paralleled with that of Kennedy. As Ferrie leaves Garrison's office after being questioned, the film cuts to the TV screen in Garrison's office just as young John Kennedy, Jr. salutes his fallen father. A close-up of Garrison watching this image emotionally emphasizes the importance of his truth-seeking mission. The image of the son is the true image which stands in contrast to the images the film uses to visualize Ferrie's false alibi.

The movie likewise confers the status of truth upon Garrison as he roams Ferrie's apartment after his death, discovering the full extent of the artifice and incongruity of Ferrie's world, cluttered with religious icons, hairpieces, drugs, and laboratory mice. In this respect, *JFK*, along with Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*, reflects a recent tendency in some mainstream films, placing artifice, mannerisms, and the wish to perform and to change one's body on a par with the idea of the hazardous, the facile, and the inept. Sexual and gender fluidity are seen as destabilizing.

Then there is Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones), whose world of artifice, unlike Ferrie's, does not evoke a sense of the ridiculous but of the dangerously decadent, representing the kind of power associated with European feudalism. His home, crowded with baroque furnishings, is the setting for a boisterous, gay Mardi gras party, complete with eighteenth century costumes, gold-painted bodies, drugs, S&M, and snapshots capturing these 'depraved' carryings-on. Although the visual rhetoric *JFK* imposes on Shaw and Ferrie varies, this Mardi gras celebration sums up their one shared weakness: anyone with such a deviant, narcissistic sense of gratification, the film suggests, is morally suspect and politically irresponsible. This scene alone renders Clay Shaw guilty as charged, and the snapshots (the actual equivalents of which Stone used for reference) become the film's anchor to its own 'rush to

judgment,' blurring the line between gay subculture and the criminal underworld. A picture, indeed, speaks a thousand words. Whether intentional or not, Stone caters to that sense of distrust that most of the film's viewers feel toward homosexuals.

Homosexuality combined with social and economic power, as it is in the case of Shaw, becomes closely associated with fascism, following a long tradition in film history. Garrison interprets the threat Shaw and the military-industrial complex pose to democracy as fascism. In *JFK* this fascism consists of Shaw's self-serving, shortsighted greed which echoes the recurrent historical debate about who was responsible for Hitler's rise to power. Some claim it was the socially eminent German industrial magnate, Alfred von Krupp, whose homosexuality was an open secret, and who put his steel empire at Hitler's service. In *JFK*, big business, in the service of the military-industrial complex, is seen as a potential catalyst for the formation of a clandestine fascist network at the time of Kennedy's assassination and subsequent U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Willie O'Keefe (Kevin Bacon), another gay character in *JFK*, is a composite of several of Garrison's actual informers and witnesses. O'Keefe, who knows how to sell himself in the power play, exposes Shaw and Ferrie as liars. His character is not about artifice; he flashes an outspoken, down-to-earth cynicism which becomes a performance in its own right. O'Keefe's narcissism merges with racism and cynical pragmatism, making him a cryptofascist, a KKK wannabe.

O'Keefe tells Garrison he is imprisoned because he is a hustler. In terms of the film's psychology, however, he is locked up because he is the most threatening of the three gay characters—his psychological instability is presented as a dangerous, unpredictable force that can't be ridiculed like Ferrie's. His notorious line, "Mr. Garrison, you don't know what the

world is like because you ain't ever been fucked in the ass," means nothing, yet it means everything.

For a movie to flaunt a line like this, especially in a homophobic society such as ours, is irresponsible enough. Suggesting that Garrison doesn't understand the politics of self-interest and self-advancement, the line may also contribute to the homophobic impression that homosexuality and fascism are indeed linked.

If the film's homosexual characters represent diverse facets of fascism, Garrison's wife Liz, in her apolitical disinterestedness and shortsightedness mirrors the inertia of a German population that provided the fertile ground on which fascism grew. The movie structurally aligns Shaw's character with Liz Garrison's discontent. Liz deplors Shaw's being "dragged in" on the conspiracy charges since "he's done so much for the city." Liz figures as an obstacle to her husband's factfinding mission, in one scene literally obstructing his view of the TV report of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, as she confronts him about his negligence as a husband and father.

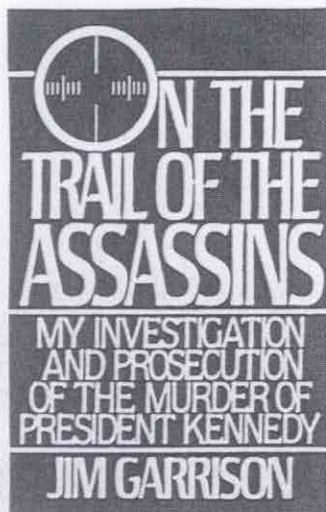
The difference between the heterosexual Liz and the homosexual Shaw is that Liz can be recuperated to a sense of history through a good fuck. Her restoration, which is the resolution of one of the film's central crises, is accomplished in the post-RFK assassination/sex scene in which Garrison wakes her with the terrible news of Robert Kennedy's death and then, having restored her faith in him, makes love to her. What is restored, however, is much more: Liz has her eyes opened. Standing for everything conventional and domestic, she is indispensable as a member of the nuclear family and must be 'won over' by history. She comes to realize that history is consequential.

Although the extreme gravity of this scene backfires, rendering it forced and embarrassing, it is meant to claim history for the nuclear family. Only through sexual reproduction can histo-

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ry continue to be told. In this rhetorical framework, straight sex is bestowed with historical responsibility, while gay sex is seen as a dead end. As the only time in the film in which we see Garrison and his wife make love, this scene figures prominently because—in the context of a movie that is a grand exercise in displacing conflicts and agendas—it resolves the private/personal crisis, thereby suggesting the resolution of the public/political crisis.

As the film ends, Garrison, his son, and his wife walk through the halls of justice, defeated in court but courted in their defeat by viewers who know better than the jury and who see the Garrison family restored. Truth becomes an investment in the future that needs to be passed on from generation to generation (Garrison's son in the film is played by Stone's son, who is 'hearing' the truth as told by both fathers—Garrison and Stone).

The film aligns its own notion of truth with images of fertility. A family is shown picnicking on a blanket as we hear Eisenhower warn us of the military-industrial complex; a young black boy and his father are shown visiting Kennedy's grave. The film's gays, however, are doomed to remain in their world of artifice and self-involvement. If fertility is a prerequisite for democracy and historical responsibility, then barren homosexuality cannot connote anything but fascism.

Homosexuality in *JFK* represents not only immediate sexual pleasure but also the only form of sexual pleasure. As the only sexuality that has no purpose other than pleasure, its existence becomes unbearable to a mainstream culture which, in its Puritanism, has enough trouble dealing with straight sex. Thus, a further dichotomy in *JFK* is asceticism versus (homo)sexuality. Garrison channels all his energies into his single-minded, fact-finding mission, a seemingly desirable act of sublimation that the film's gay characters can never achieve. *JFK* thereby denies them the status of politically responsible agents.

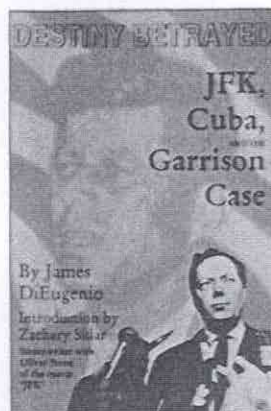
In light of the film's radical political agenda to raise fundamental questions about a conspiracy to kill JFK, it is disappointing that the filmmakers display an insensitivity and an irresponsibility in the socially retrograde way they depict homosexuals. The film identifies Garrison's project with heterosexuality and all that it connotes—family, fertility, and truth that must be passed down from generation to generation. By contrast, homosexuality and all that it connotes in the age of AIDS—promiscuity, sterility, and artifice—is identified as the death of history. ■

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questions - some of which he ducked - omitted

Who Defines History?

Oliver Stone's Address to the National Press Club

I have been accused by a number of people, some of them journalists, of a distortion of history. And, if there is any common thread of attack running through the claims of those critics of JFK, it is a notion that somehow there is an accepted, settled, respected, carefully thought-out and researched body of history about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, all of which I have set out deliberately to subvert, using as my weapon the motion picture medium and taking as my target the impressionable young who will believe anything as long as it is visual.

This 'distortion of history' charge has come at me from all quarters, although almost entirely—it must be said—from people old enough to know better. And it ignores, deliberately and carefully, the fact that there is no accepted history of these events, and that terrible time remains the most undocumented, un-researched, unagreed-upon, nonhistorical period of our history.

One can read in history books the standard two paragraphs that John F. Kennedy was shot by a lone gunman who, in turn, was killed by another earnest vigilante and lone gunman. End of story. But that theory, put forward in twenty-six unindexed volumes by the Warren Commission, was never even believed from the day it was issued by a majority of Americans—and the number of people who disbelieve it increases each year.

Are we really to believe that settled, agreed, sanctified history includes that Lee Harvey Oswald wrote away—under an easy-to-trace alias—for an inaccurate mail-order Italian rifle called, by the Italian Army, the "humanitarian rifle" because it never killed anyone when deliberately aimed, when he could have anonymously bought an accurate weapon at any street corner in Dallas? Is it sacred history that this semiliterate high school dropout from Fort Worth, Texas, professing Marxism, was taken into a secret, highly-trained Marine unit at an air base where the U-2 flights originated in Japan?...given courses in the Russian language and then permitted to leave the Marine Corps on three days' notice on a trumped-up claim of illness of his mother—who, days after his death, was the first to make the claim her son was working for American intelligence? Is it settled history that he then defected to the Soviet Union with a request for travel that



Oliver Stone on location in Dallas for JFK

included a reference to an obscure Ph.D.s-only graduate institute in Switzerland? Are we to believe that it is now history, not to be disturbed except by people like me, that he then went to the United States Embassy in Moscow, announced his intention to defect and to turn over U.S. secrets to the Russians—and was permitted to go his way? Is it part of our history, which cannot be touched, that he then returned eighteen months later to the same U.S. Embassy, announced his intention to resume American citizenship, and was handed his passport and some funds to enable him to return home?

Must one be a Disturber of the Peace to question the history that says Oswald was met by a CIA front representative when he returned to the United States, that he was never debriefed by an intelligence organization, although 25,000 tourists that year were so debriefed? Must one be a Distorter of History to question why he then merged into the fierce anti-communist White Russian community of Dallas although he kept up the absurd front of Marxism? Or into the equally rabid anticommunist circle of Guy Banister in New Orleans? Or how did Oswald just come to have the job a few weeks before at the Book Depository overlooking the precise point in the motorcade where Kennedy's car took that unusual eleven-mile-an-hour curve? Or how Oswald came to be spotted by Patrolman Marion Baker only ninety seconds after the sixth floor shooting, on the second floor, having a Coca-Cola and showing no signs of being out of breath? Or the too neat stashing of the rifle without prints and the three cartridges neatly laid out side-by-side at the window? Or Oswald's cool and calm behavior that weekend, or his claim, his statement, that he was a patsy?

Am I a Disturber of History to question why Allen Dulles, who was fired by JFK from the CIA, which JFK said he would splinter into a thousand pieces, why, why was Mr. Dulles appointed to the Warren Commission to investigate Mr. Kennedy's murder? And so on, and so on, and so on.

To accept this settled version of history which must not be disturbed lest one call

down the venom of leading journalists from around the country, one must also believe the truly absurd single bullet theory of the Warren Commission. This holds that one bullet caused seven wounds in Kennedy and Connally, breaking two dense bones and coming out clean. No metal missing, no blood tissue or anything on it; its path, as you know, utterly ludicrous, entering Kennedy's back on a downward trajectory, changing direction, exiting up through his throat, pausing for 1.6 seconds before deciding to attack Connally, then turning right, then left, then right again, hitting Connally at the back of his right armpit, heading downward through his chest, taking a right turn into Connally's wrist, shattering the radius bone and exiting his wrist. The bullet launches one last assault, takes a dramatic U-turn and buries itself in Connally's left thigh. Later the bullet turns up five miles from the scene of the crime, on a stretcher in a corridor at Parkland Hospital in pristine condition.

No, ladies and gentlemen, this is not history, this is myth. It is myth that a scant number of Americans has ever believed. It is a myth that has sustained a generation of journalists and historians who have refused to examine it, who have refused to question it, and above all who close ranks to criticize and vilify those who do. So long as the attackers of that comforting lone gunman theory could be dismissed as kooks and cranks and the writers of obscure books that would not be published by 'reputable' publishing houses, not much defense was needed. But now that myth is under attack by a well-financed and—I hope—well-made motion picture with all the vivid imagery and new energy the screen can convey. Now, either enormous amounts of evidence have to be marshalled in support of that myth, or else those who question it must be attacked. There is no evidence; therefore the attack is on.

Some journalists of the Sixties are self-appointed Keepers of the Flame. They talk about this history and fight savagely those who would question it. But confronted with the Crime of the Century, with no motive and hardly any alleged perpetrators, they stand mute. Where in the last twenty years have we seen serious research from Tom Wicker, Dan Rather, Anthony Lewis, George Lardner, Ken Auchincloss into Lee Harvey Oswald's movements in the months and years before November 22, 1963? Where have we seen any analysis of why Oswald—who many say adored Kennedy—alone among assassins in history would not only deny his guilt, but claim he was a patsy? Can one imagine John Wilkes Booth leaping to the stage at Ford's Theater, turning to the audience and shouting, "I didn't kill anyone, I'm just a patsy"?

One might ask of the journalists who have suddenly emerged as the Defenders of History what is their sense of history? How much work has the Sage of Bethesda, George Will, done in the twenty years he has been a columnist to try to uncover

the answers to some of the dark secrets in Dallas, '63? Will Tom Wicker and Dan Rather spend their retirement years examining closely the possibility of a second or a third gunman, or will they content themselves with savaging those who do? Why has no one questioned Richard Helms, who led to the Warren Commission when he said the CIA had no knowledge of Lee Harvey Oswald, when we know that there was, as of 1960, an increasingly thick 201 file on Oswald? Or why is no one asking for the files of Operation Mongoose, which may be at the very heart of this conspiracy? Or why is no one questioning Mr. Hoover's memo of 1961 outlining the fact that someone was using Oswald's name while he was in Russia to buy trucks for the Guy Banister apparatus in New Orleans? Why are none of the reporters questioning Col. Fletcher Prouty in depth? Or historian John Newman? Or Marina Oswald Porter, who says her husband was working for something bigger? Or questioned the hit man, Charles Harrelson, who is in maximum security? Let them deny what they will, but at least ask them. There is more truth-seeking going on now in Russia than there is in our own country. What *JFK* has brought out is that those who talk the most of history have no commitment to it either.

The central historical question raised by *JFK*, of course, has to do not with the tramps in Dealey Plaza, not with who might have been firing from the grassy knoll, not with by what coalition of Cubans, exiles, mobsters, rogue intelligence officers that conspiracy might have been concocted, but the darker stain on the American ground in the Sixties and Seventies—Vietnam. It is Vietnam which has become the 'Bloody Shirt' of American politics, replacing the slavery issue of a hundred years before. Just as we did not resolve, if we ever did, the great battle over slavery until 100 years after the Civil War, when we passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, so it becomes clear that the Vietnam War remains the watershed of our time and the divisions of our country among our people opened up by it seem to gape wider and wider with each passing year.

JFK suggests it was Vietnam that led to the assassination of John Kennedy. That he became too dangerous, too strong an advocate of changing the course of the Cold War, too clear a proponent of troop withdrawal for those who supported the war itself. Was President Kennedy withdrawing from Vietnam? Had he committed himself firmly, and against all hawkish advice to the contrary, to oppose the entry of U.S. combat troops? The answer to these questions is unequivocally yes. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. has attested and Major John Newman, a young historian here on this dais who has devoted himself to a ten year study of this, can attest. His book, *JFK and Vietnam*, a major work coming next month, will surely contribute more heavily than any other volume of immediate military history to the solution of these questions.

Major Newman makes it very clear President Kennedy signaled his intention to withdraw from Vietnam in a variety of ways and put that intention firmly on the record with National Security Action Memorandum 263 in October of 1963. Those who try to say it was no more than a call for a rotation of troops or a gimmick and that the Johnson NSAM 273 within a week of the assassination merely confirmed the policy, ignore the obvious question. If LBJ was merely continuing Kennedy's policies, why was it necessary to reverse the NSAM?

So the protectors of Vietnam, the new wavers of the bloody shirt, leap to attack the central premise of *JFK*. Oliver Stone is distorting history again, they say. Even suggesting that John Kennedy was positioning us for a withdrawal from Vietnam—by even suggesting that—I am distorting history. But these Defenders of History had very little to say five years ago when it was suggested, in a motion picture, that Mozart had not died peacefully but had been murdered by a rival and secondrate composer. Where were all our cultural watchdogs when Peter Schaeffer was 'distorting history' with *Amadeus*? The answer, of course, is that it wasn't worth the effort. Eighteenth century Vienna, after all, is not twentieth century Vietnam. If Mozart was murdered by Salieri, it would not change one note of that most precious music. But, if John F. Kennedy were killed because he was determined to withdraw from and never send combat troops to Vietnam, then we must fix the blame for the only lost war in our history, for 56,000 American dead, and for an as yet unhealed split in our country and among our people.

I have been ridiculed, and worse, for suggesting the existence of a conspiracy—as though only kooks and cranks and extremists suggest their existence. But this is the wrong city in which to ridicule people who believe in conspiracies.

Is it inconceivable that a President of the United States could sit at the heart of a criminal conspiracy designed to cover up a crime? We know that happened—we would have impeached him for it had he not resigned just one jump ahead.

Is it so far-fetched to believe in a high level conspiracy involving the White House, the Joint Chiefs, the Air Force, and the CIA to bomb a neutral country and lie about it in military reports to the rest of the country? But it happened. Perhaps more than once.

Is it inconceivable that the National Security Council leadership, with or without the knowledge of the President of the United States and with the collaboration of the Director of the CIA (not just a few rogues), could have engaged in a massive conspiracy to ship arms to our sworn enemy with a casual hope that a few hostages might be released as a result? But it happened.

Does it offend our sense of propriety to suggest an Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America might have regularly lied to Congress about raising money abroad to

perform things the Congress had forbidden us to do? But that happened.

Is it inconceivable that a campaign manager, later to become the CIA director, negotiated with a foreign country to keep American hostages imprisoned until after a Presidential election in order to ensure the election of his candidate? We shall see. But I think no one thinks any more it is out of the question.

So when *JFK* suggests that a conspiracy involving elements of the government, people in the CIA, people in the FBI, perhaps people associated with the Joint Chiefs, all in the service of the military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower warned us about, might have conspired to kill John Fitzgerald Kennedy because he was going to change sharply the direction of American foreign policy, is it not appropriate at least to look there for evidence? What was Allen Dulles really up to in those months, or Charles Cabell, also fired by JFK, or his brother Earl Cabell, the Mayor of Dallas?

Thomas Jefferson urged on us the notion that when truth can compete in a free marketplace of ideas, it will prevail. There is as yet no marketplace of history for the years of the Kennedy assassination and immediately afterward. Let us begin to create one. What I have tried to do with this movie is to open a stall in that marketplace of ideas and offer a version of what might have happened, as against the competing versions of what we know did not happen, and some other possible versions as well. I am happy to say, based not only on the nine million people who have already seen the movie, but on the attitude towards the facts they take with them away from the movie, that our new stall in that marketplace of ideas is doing a very brisk business and we expect, by the time this film is played out in videocassettes, etc., that another fifty or so million Americans will have a little more information on their history.

I am very proud that *JFK* has been a part of the momentum to open previously closed files in the matter of the assassination. Congressman Louis Stokes of Ohio, who chaired the House Select Committee on Assassinations, has announced his willingness to consider the opening of the files closed until, as you know, the year 2029. I am hopeful his consideration will ripen into approval. In addition, Judge William Webster, formerly the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and of the CIA, has indicated his strong opinion that all of the files, all of the files—House Committee, CIA, and FBI among them—be made public, a proposal I was extremely pleased last weekend to see endorsed by Sen. Edward Kennedy. In the meantime, we are grateful to Congressman Stokes, Congressman Lee Hamilton, Judge Webster, Senator Kennedy and others who have indicated a willingness to consider opening these files. Now, if the Army and Navy intelligence services will join suit, it is my hope the American people will have the full truth of this assassination. ■

Clarifying the Conspiracy

AN INTERVIEW WITH OLIVER STONE

by Gary Crowdus



Oliver Stone (photo by George Dondani)

In late January 1992, at the end of a long day of interviews in New York (including Dan Rather for 48 Hours, French TV, and Paris Match, among others), Oliver Stone spoke with Cineaste Editor Gary Crowdus in a limousine as it careened through Manhattan traffic, rushing Stone to the airport where he was catching a flight to Germany, the first stop in a press tour for the European openings of JFK.

Cineaste: JFK mixes facts with dramatic recreations and speculation. Would you say that the film's boldest leap of speculation is the somewhat veiled suggestion that General Edward G. Lansdale was one of the principal instigators of the assassination conspiracy?

Oliver Stone: No, we don't get into the Lansdale business. That was suggested to me by Fletcher Prouty, who worked with Lansdale, but I never mentioned his name. There's no trace of Lansdale, really, unless you go back into Operation Mongoose. We tried to trace Lansdale's movements and one of our researchers actually came up with a scrap of paper that indicated there was a phone message for him in Forth Worth, Texas, on November 12th, about ten days before the assassination. I consciously backed away from the Lansdale business, but obviously it would have been somebody like a Lansdale, and that was the point.

I want to defend myself against this vague barrage that "Stone has 5,000 conspirators, how can that happen?" There are two conspiracies in the movie—one is the conspiracy to kill Kennedy and the other is the conspiracy to cover it up. The first conspiracy, if viewers listen closely to the film, as outlined by X, is simply put. As he says, "It's in the air, but there's nothing on paper. There's plausible deniability for all involved." Only at the most secret point—he uses those words—is a compromising connection made. And then I cut to a phone call—one phone call—from, let's say, an Allen Dulles type to a Lansdale type, or to a William Harvey or David Atlee Phillips type, who has mechanical abilities, he gets things done. That person—one person in a cellular structure, with nothing on paper—puts the operation into motion by getting mechanics. The mechanics don't know who they're working for, they don't necessarily even know each other, nothing's on paper, they're paid in a certain way. It's done as an espionage operation, similar to a terrorist organization in Beirut. It's cellular, therefore as few as five to eight or nine people can be in on the final job, so the conspiracy itself to kill can be very small, and nothing is traceable. That has not been understood. Whether the conspiracy originated in or was carried out by military intelligence or the CIA, I don't know.

In the conspiracy to cover it up, there is another agenda at work, and I point to a larger series of players, but not with the implication that they knew who killed Kennedy or why.

Cineaste: Is that where you think LBJ, for example, comes in? That he was, in Sylvia Meagher's phrase, one of the "accessories after the fact"?

Stone: Of course, exactly as Garrison said, although a lot of people want me to implicate Johnson as one of the perpetrators. I've heard innuendo here and there about it. It's quite possible, to my way of thinking, that Lyndon Johnson could have been involved, but I never made that assertion. I did say he was involved in the cover-up because he appointed the Warren Commission, and that in itself is the worst single piece of investigation I've ever seen. Obviously the intelligence agencies gave what they wanted to the Warren Commission, and that was the key problem. And appointing Allen Dulles as one of the Warren Commission's chief investigators after he'd been fired by Kennedy, who'd vowed to splinter the CIA into a thousand pieces, is tantamount to appointing the fox to investigate a killing in the chicken coop.

Cineaste: The mainstream press attacks on the film have been outrageous and unprecedented. Have there been any Establishment critics who've surprised you with their perceptive reviews or support?

Stone: I thought David Ansen in *Newsweek* was very bold, as was David Denby in *New York*. Norman Mailer wrote a fascinating, in-depth piece in *Vanity Fair* which shows that he accepts the possibility of what could have happened. He called the movie an "overarching paradigm," which is an interesting concept for it, because it is a hypothesis. I've never said it was the truth. I said it's a combination of facts plus speculation.

There were many critics who surprised me, like Joanna Connors of *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*. I never heard of her, but her first day review of the film was a significant analysis, saying that Stone has "reopened the forum and upped the ante, on both American politics and American movies." I think there are a lot of intelligent critics out there. We got some very good reviews.

New York, except for Denby's review, was the most negative city of all, and it makes me wonder. *The New York Times* was uniformly critical, with something like fifteen to twenty pieces. I've been struggling to get my letters and op-ed pieces in print, and they've been published here and there only after great pressure from us, including the threat to take an ad. I'm going through the same bullshit with the *Times* that I went through with *The Washington Post*. At first they wouldn't publish my rejoinder to Lardner and I had to threaten to sue them. Legal letters were sent—essentially it was a copyright infringement suit—and, after the lawyers negotiated, they agreed to print my response, but then they surprised us by also printing Lardner's response, a two-for-one type of deal.

The same thing happened with the *Times*. They'd print my response only after we threatened to take an ad. I had to respond to Leslie Gelb and, as of this date, I'm still trying to respond to Anthony Lewis, who made outrageous allegations against Garrison [Stone's edited reply eventually appeared on Feb. 3rd—Ed.]. Lewis is supposed to be a liberal, but to me he represents the failure of the old-line liberal establish-

ment to fully investigate the JFK assassination.

Cineaste: *Some of the JFK assassination scholars have taken a very contentious attitude toward your film. Is this another example of specialists who feel that their turf has been invaded by an outsider? Harold Weisberg, in particular, is very negative about the film.*

Stone: Weisberg has always been a strange and cranky type. Years ago he asked Jim Garrison to write the prologue to his book, *Oswald in New Orleans*, but now he seems to think Garrison is the devil incarnate and I am his son or something. He wrote long, rambling letters to us, but I could not understand the basis of his problem with Garrison. It seems to be a minor thing.

Weisberg has never been constructive. He did a good job using the Freedom of Information Act to get information out and he obviously attacked the Warren Commission report as a whitewash. But I have never seen him propose an alternative scenario or even start to have an interest in one. He was never positive about the House hearings and he has been just cranky about a lot of the other researchers' work. I don't think he's a very generous man. I think he's a petty man. *Why I effed him over to Martin Toth records?*

He's the dean of the researchers, the oldest one, and here I am making a film about Garrison's story instead of his own, but he didn't do anything in the public vein like Garrison did. Garrison is the only official to carry out a public prosecution. *Who ever suggested this? A*

Cineaste: *The press has criticized you for attempting a hard-sell of your own specific interpretation of the assassination conspiracy, but isn't the 'author's message' of the film, as you have X say, in so many words, "Don't take my word for it. Think for yourself"?*

Stone: I'm presenting what I call the countermyth to the myth of the Warren Commission report because, honestly, I don't have all the facts. The best 'smoking gun' we have is the Zapruder film, which is a time clock of the assassination. Beyond that, there are all these files that could be opened to bring out more truths. The best I can do is present a hypothesis which will hopefully encourage people to move away from the Warren Commission report and maybe read some books or at least to question the concept of our government's covert operations. What did *The New York Times/CNN* poll show, that fifty percent of the American people believe the CIA did it and eighteen percent believe the military did it? That means sixty-eight percent of the American people believe their own government killed JFK. That's far more than those who believe the Mafia theory.

Cineaste: *Do you believe that the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. grow out of the JFK assassination conspiracy?*

Stone: Yes, as I said at the National Press Club, and I'm speculating. Here are three progressive leaders, three of the most important antiwar leaders of the Sixties, each gunned down by a lone nut, and each of them under suspicious circumstances, with suspect ballistics and forensic evidence. It all happened so fast. The country was in a bloodbath at that time—we had Vietnam going on, race wars—we didn't have much time to connect those two assassinations back to John Kennedy's. Very few people pointed that out at the time.

Larry King told me that he interviewed Garrison in 1968, and when discussing Robert Kennedy's assertion that, if elected President, he would pull out of Vietnam, Garrison commented that Kennedy would die, weeks before he did. So much for Garrison as a kook. He saw it coming. In fact, in his book, *A Heritage of Stone*, in 1969, he pointed to the winding down of the Cold War as a possible motive for the death of John Kennedy.

In this regard, the question constantly thrown at me is, "Why did you invent X"? I didn't invent X, he actually exist-

ed. X is based on L. Fletcher Prouty, who told me this story. He never met Garrison but I took the liberty of transposing it. You must keep in mind that Jim Garrison was reaching essentially the same conclusions in 1968-69.

Cineaste: *Why didn't you use Prouty's name in the film?*

Stone: Because the man does not want to be known. I'm X, he says. He doesn't want to be traced. He's wearing civilian clothes and he's not easily traceable. I will not testify, he says. I can only give you the background, you do the foreground. "Do your own work," he says, and leaves him on the park bench.

I don't agree with everything Prouty says, but he's very intelligent and he makes it clear to me the way the assassination could have been pulled off. He ascribes it to professionals and assassins whereas other people have pointed to Mafia hit-men like Charles Harrelson. I myself really don't know, I'm torn.

Fletcher is...well, you've got to consider the history of the man. He's done a lot, he's seen a lot. He can really tell you how they did things, what the mechanics were, he knows the way things work. He briefed Bissell and Dulles in their homes, as he said. I don't know why, just because late in his life he became a member of the Liberty Lobby, the media won't talk to him, whereas they're willing to talk to Richard Helms who we know lied to the Warren Commission when he said that Oswald had no connection with the CIA when in fact they had a 201 file on him.

Cineaste: *JFK features some remarkable cameo performances by major stars. How did they become involved? Did any performers you approached turn you down for political reasons?*

Stone: I went to Marlon at one point but I don't think he turned us down for political reasons, I just think it wasn't enough money. We had a problem with Robert Mitchum, too. A lot of people turned us down for money reasons because we really didn't have a budget for each star. All the supporting cast really pitched in and I thought it was the best repertory company I've ever had. Best Supporting Actor nominations should be there for a lot of them. They're all so good that, in a way, they almost cancel each other out. Each one is so good, that is, that no one really sticks out.

Cineaste: *That helps carry the film, too.*

Stone: That was my point. Remember *The Longest Day*? It was a black and white movie, produced by Darryl Zanuck, very documentary-like in its approach, but it was filled with stars—I loved it. Since *JFK* is a very cerebral movie, I thought it would help to offset the facts and the dryness of it to have familiar signposts along the way who you felt comfortable with.

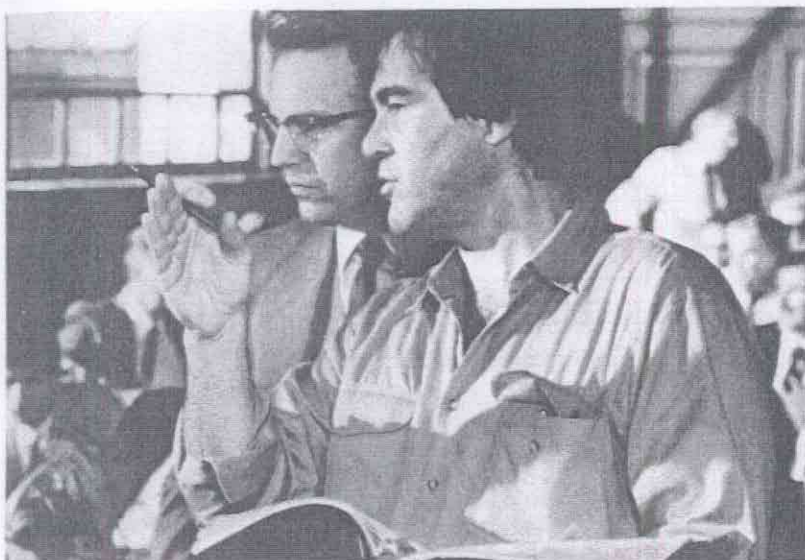
Cineaste: *How long was your first cut of the film and did any major scenes get eliminated?*

Stone: The first cut was about four and a half hours long and many scenes were eliminated. For me, the worst part is cutting stuff you like. We had the Clinton witnesses who made all the important connections between Shaw, Ferrie, and Oswald. We had a lot more Shaw stuff which we dropped because ultimately it's four movies—it's Garrison in New Orleans against Shaw, it's Oswald's background story, it's the recreation of Dealey Plaza, and it's the deep background in Washington, D.C. I mean, the film is so big, but it's important for people to see it in one sitting, so I cut a lot of stuff I liked. I cut the business at the airport where Jim was almost set up in the men's room, and the Bill Boxley thing, and I also had to cut a wonderful scene with a Johnny Carson type.

Cineaste: *Was the editing style of the film preconceived or simply necessitated because you were interweaving so many simultaneous events?*

Stone: Well, it's a bit of both. It was preconceived, there were a lot of flashbacks in the first draft. I wanted to do the

Stone
he is
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most
fascinating



Stone and Costner confer on the courtroom set of *JFK*

I wanted to do the film on two or three levels—sound and picture would take us back, and we'd go from one flashback to another, and then that flashback would go inside another flashback. I wanted multiple layers because reading the Warren Commission report is like drowning.

film on two or three levels—sound and picture would take us back, and we'd go from one flashback to another, and then that flashback would go inside another flashback, like the Lee Bowers thing. We'd go to Lee Bowers at the Warren Commission, and then Lee Bowers at the railroad yard, all seen from Jim's point of view in his study. I wanted multiple layers because reading the Warren Commission report is like drowning. The levels and consciousness of reality created through sound—the work done by Wylie Stateman and Michael Minkler is incredible—was also in the script. But Warner Bros. was confused by the script—you can imagine 158 pages filled with flashbacks like that and I think there are some 2,800 shots in the movie—so I took out all the flashbacks and gave them a simpler script which they liked. Then I and the editors—Joe Hutshing, Pietro Scalia, and Hank Corwin—ended up putting all the flashbacks back in the editing room, and adding quite a few new ones in a sort of prismatic structure.

Cineaste: Did you shoot on the sixth or seventh floor of the Book Depository?

Stone: We did both floors. We shot most of the scenes from the seventh floor because the tree has gotten bigger in the intervening years and we were also able to build our warehouse there. The sixth floor is now an exhibit, but we were able to shoot some tight stuff out of the window. More importantly, we shot from the street, looking up at the sixth floor.

Cineaste: How much reading and research did you do before beginning production? In writing the script, how did you work with Zachary Sklar and your team of researchers and technical advisors?

Stone: I read everything I could get my hands on after Jim's book—everything that was credible. I couldn't read everything because I had to direct the movie. I went from Jim's book to Marrs's book, *Crossfire*, which I think is a good overall compendium, well written and generally well researched, and then Sylvia Meagher's *Accessories After the Fact*. We hired Jane Rusconi, right out of Yale, and while I must have read about two dozen books, she probably read one or two hundred of those books, and she became an expert in the files.

Zach and I didn't work together, I never do with my writers. I basically asked him to prepare an overall treatment, not really a script, but to give me the book in the full, to flesh it out. I had my own structure in mind from the get-go and I think Zach was quite surprised when he saw my first

draft because it was quite a restructuring. I had my structure in my head—none of which is in Jim's book, by the way, you have to compare Jim's book to the movie to see the differences—which is that we would first see the assassination from a conventional point of view and then, throughout the movie, we would see it again and again and again, like peeling an onion skin, until we get to that final moment, when the motorcade makes that turn, and this time you would *really* see it for the first time, you would get it. It reminds me of *Z*—I remember my feelings when I first saw *Z*, because I understood the movie better as it went along. I wanted people to really feel that sense of dread. I think Denby caught that very nicely in his review where he says, "As the new version of the assassination came together at the end, even God would be frightened."

Cineaste: Having read a few books on the subject myself, I was impressed with the extent of the film's documentation, which a lot of the press doesn't seem aware of.

Stone: We're rushing to publish the screenplay, complete with annotated footnotes, in an attempt to clarify some of the misunderstandings. Some of the press, for example, says Garrison didn't even make his final summation, which is absolute horseshit. He *did* make his final summation and it was brilliant. Garrison is an articulate, brilliant man but he's become almost a nonperson as a result of this press barrage.

Cineaste: You've been very canny in your promotion of the film, such as hiring Frank Mankiewicz, Robert Kennedy's former campaign manager, to do Washington, D.C. press relations, and having a Gallup Poll on the Warren Commission report conducted during the summer. Whose idea was it to prepare a study guide on the film for schools?

Stone: That was Arthur Manson's idea, in conjunction with Warner Bros. We did the same thing for *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*. I think it's a good idea. It's like a war, in a sense, and I feel like we're the VC. The only thing we can do, really, is to get the facts out there about who Oswald really was, to challenge the notion of the "magic bullet" and the moving wounds, to discuss the FBI document which reveals that during the autopsy they stuck their finger in the back and found a bullet hole that went in only two to three inches, and so on. This kind of stuff has to be brought out because people don't know. We believe we have the truth on our side, so the more we can get these facts out there, the more we can begin to debate seriously some of these issues. ■

Getting the Facts Straight

AN INTERVIEW WITH ZACHARY SKLAR

by Gary Crowder



Zachary Sklar is the coauthor, with Oliver Stone, of the JFK screenplay. Sklar edited Jim Garrison's book, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, as well as numerous other books on national security issues, including *Ralph McGehee's Deadly Deceits: My 25 Years in the CIA*, *Melvin Beck's Secret Contenders: The Myth of Cold War Counterintelligence*, and *William A. Reuben's Footnote on an Historic Case: In Re Alger Hiss*. A former Executive Editor of *The Nation* magazine, Sklar has also coauthored *The Eye of the Storm*, on broadcast news in the U.S., and has served for ten years as an adjunct professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Born in Los Angeles in 1948, Sklar is the son of George Sklar, a playwright, novelist and screenwriter, and Miriam Blecher Sklar, a former Martha Graham dancer and founder of the New York Dance Group. *Cineaste* spoke with Sklar in late January 1992 at his Manhattan apartment.

Cineaste: How did you get involved in the JFK project?

Zachary Sklar: I really have to begin with Jim Garrison's book, *On the Trail of the Assassins*. For many years I was a free-lance editor and worked primarily with Sheridan Square Press, a small New York publisher of books about the intelligence community. In 1987 Sheridan Square obtained a manuscript by Jim Garrison that had been commissioned but ultimately rejected by Prentice-Hall. The publishers, Bill Schaap and Ellen Ray, gave it to me to look at.

Jim had tried to write a scholarly work in which he was not a character. He'd done that intentionally because he felt that during the Sixties he had become the focus of attention and he wanted the Kennedy assassination to be the focus. Jim is not a scholar, but he was a major historical player in these events, so I wrote him and said, "There's a lot of great stuff in here, but you've left out the most important part of your own story. You've been slandered over the years, that's the way people see you, and now you have an opportunity to tell people in your own words, without distortion by the media, about the investigation that you carried out. People can then choose to believe it or not, but at least you'll have had your say for the historical record." He was not convinced.

So then I said, "Let's look at it this way, if you can show the transformation of consciousness that you went through—a career military man, a former FBI man, a DA, hardly a flaming radical, from your initial belief in the Warren Report, like most Americans, to your belief that the CIA had been involved in the assassination of the President—if you can take people through that process, show them the evidence that led you to believe that, you'll have accomplished a great educational process."

That persuaded him. So he rewrote the book in the first person with a narrative structure like a detective story—a whodunit. I edited it, and it was published on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the JFK assassination in 1988. The following month Ellen Ray met Oliver Stone at a film festival in

Havana, where he was getting an award for *Salvador*, and gave him a copy of the book. He read it very quickly and called to say, "You know, this is a really good book. Somebody's going to buy this, but I'm going to the Philippines right now to film scenes for *Born on the Fourth of July*, could you hold off for just a few days?" Three days later, after he'd read the book twice more, he called to say, "I want to option this," which was terrific from our point of view. How could you get anybody better, in terms of a political filmmaker in mainstream America?

He wanted to write the script himself, but since he was busy with *Born on the Fourth of July*, he told Bill and Ellen he needed someone who knew the material to push it forward, and they recommended me. I was thrilled to do it, although I had never written a screenplay before.

Cineaste: Did Stone give you any instructions or guidance?

Sklar: During our initial phone conversation, before I had even met Oliver, I asked, "How do you envision this film?" He said, "Well, I see the models as *Z* and *Rashomon*. I see the event in Dealey Plaza taking place in the first reel, and again in the eighth reel, and again later, and each time we're going to see it differently and with more illumination." I immediately went to the library and checked out the screenplay of *Rashomon*. The screenplay of *Z* is not published, but I rented the video and studied it. I realized that each of them, *Rashomon* in particular, is basically people telling stories, with flashbacks weaving in and out to show what they're talking about from different points of view, and we ended up doing a lot of that. *NOT FIRST SCRIPT*

Oliver had told me to put in more scenes than could possibly fit in a movie and make the scenes longer, throw it all in. So I spent a year researching and writing 550 triple-spaced pages, three times as long as a normal screenplay.

Cineaste: Stone then did a scaled down version?

Sklar: Yes, he rewrote it from top to bottom and got it closer to the size of a normal screenplay. The basic storyline was from Garrison's book, but he also wanted to incorporate information that had been subsequently gathered by citizen researchers and which had not been available to the real Jim Garrison in 1967-69. A lot of documents had been released through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), some of the witnesses interviewed by the Warren Commission said their statements were altered, and other witnesses were never interviewed. To give us the benefit of current knowledge, Oliver optioned another book, *Crossfire* by Jim Marrs, which is an excellent compendium of a lot of the research that's been done. So, in addition to condensing and rewriting what I had written, Oliver added a lot of that new material.

Cineaste: The script then went through at least five subsequent drafts?

Sklar: Yes. After Oliver wrote his draft, he sent it to me and I worked on it, making suggestions for cuts, alternative scenes, and language changes. At that point I treated it as an editor. I went out to L.A. and we sat down at a couple of

lunches, but most of the time we worked separately. We didn't really differ on a lot of issues, so there wasn't a great deal of give and take. Basically, I made suggestions in the text and attached explanatory memos. But Oliver made the final decisions and did the final rewrites.

Cineaste: *During the various rewrites, was the emphasis on trying to incorporate more documentation or to better dramatize the factual incidents?*

Sklar: Both. We wanted to make sure we were on solid ground with the facts in this case because it touches so many raw nerves. Many facts are in dispute and others are simply not known. Of necessity we had to speculate in some places but we didn't want any flying saucers in there that people could latch onto and say, "Oh, look, they put this in, so we can discredit the entire film."

At the same time, Oliver's a real stickler for trying to enrich the dialog, to tighten the structure, and to condense an enormous amount of material in the film. A lot of our effort was to eliminate the extraneous, to get to the essentials. And there are so many directions you could go, there are so many things not touched on at all in the film that are in the books it's based on, and all these witnesses who provided such rich material, but we just had to make choices about what stayed in and what didn't. The final shooting script is much longer than the actual film. Oliver cut a quarter of it after it was shot and assembled, which required some restructuring as well.

Cineaste: *How would you describe the script's esthetic strategy in terms of its mixture of documented facts, dramatic recreations, and speculative sequences? Many of the mainstream press critics have charged that there is something dishonest or duplicitous about this mixing of fact and fiction, even making references to "trick photography."*

Sklar: I don't think it's duplicitous. It's not a documentary film and no one claims it is. On the other hand, documentary films, as well as history books written by highly regarded historians, select some material and leave out other material, they quote those people they give credence to and leave out other people. And they speculate, they make interpretations, they construct hypotheses about what occurred, which is what we did, too.

We've never claimed that we have the answer or the truth—because in this case it's very hard to know the truth since so much information has been withheld—but I think we made a real effort to document as much as we could,

using our best judgment as to what was plausible and what was not.

As for the photography, I don't have any expertise in that, those were choices made by Oliver and the cinematographer, Bob Richardson. The film has been criticized essentially for being too good at what it does. For instance, some people said the autopsy scene was too realistic, it makes people think there were documentary cameramen there. Of course, there were no documentary cameramen there—actually, I wish there had been—but the point is that scene is not a fantasy we made up. It's a recreation based on the sworn testimony of Dr. Pierre Finck, one of the autopsy doctors at Bethesda, Maryland. He described under oath at Clay Shaw's trial how there were Army Generals and Navy Admirals standing around them, and the person in charge was an Army General who was not a doctor at all. Finck said he was instructed not to explore the neck wound by someone who was not a doctor. We're not trying to fool people, we're just trying to give the audience a realistic view of what happened.

Similarly, we recreated some of the theories in the Warren Commission Report, such as the idea that Oswald could have fired three shots within 5.6 seconds with such accuracy. One of the most effective scenes in the film is when Lou Ivon and Garrison are up on the sixth floor of the Depository and they look out the window and try to duplicate the shooting feat. People read the Warren Commission Report and say, "Well, OK, maybe once in a thousand times you could do this"—but when you see it visually on the screen, it has a much greater impact and you realize it can't be done. Or, if he was going to shoot the President, why didn't he do it looking down Houston Street rather than waiting until he had a worse shot on Elm, when he had to fire through the tree? I think it's this visualization that upsets people because it reveals how preposterous the Warren Commission's version was.

Cineaste: *How do you account for the outrageous and unprecedented press attacks on the film which began while the film was still in production?*

Sklar: Well, Jim Garrison went through a similar experience. His book came out in 1988 to a resounding silence because, although he had been a very important player and had made headline news around the world in the Sixties, Garrison had effectively been 'discredited.' What happened to Jim Garrison is exactly what happened to Leon Trotsky in

Garrison and Asst. DA Bill Broussard (Michael Rooker) question Jack Martin (Jack Lemmon) in *JFK*



the Soviet Union—he was made a nonperson, he didn't exist, he was not to be taken seriously. We have our own means of doing that in this country, and FOIA documents that have been released show that Garrison was the target of an orchestrated smear campaign by the CIA.

A key document obtained by Mark Lane is an April 1, 1967 memo from the CIA to its station chiefs, giving instructions on how to discredit critics of the Warren Commission, the most prominent of whom at the time were Mark Lane and Jim Garrison. It says that the Agency should employ its "propaganda assets," meaning writers and editors in the media, to plant stories. It says book reviews and feature stories are particularly good and that they should make the following charges—that the critics of the Warren Commission are politically motivated, they are financially motivated, they are enamored of their own theories, they do bad research, and so on. It goes down a long list.

Now, as soon as you read this memo, you ask yourself, "Does this sound familiar, are these the kind of things that were written about Jim Garrison?" And of course they were. So, having that as a background, I certainly was aware that something similar might happen to Oliver Stone. Jim Garrison had the power of the District Attorney's office, he had subpoena power, and he was dangerous for that reason. Oliver Stone, some twenty years later, is equally dangerous to the powers that be because he has the ability to reach so many people so effectively. He reaches people *despite* the press, and I think some members of the press are very upset about that.

I don't know if the film was attacked in any kind of orchestrated way. But I do think that the CIA has media 'assets.' I don't think that's a thing of the past. In addition, a lot of liberal journalists like Tom Wicker, Dan Rather, and Richard Stolley of Time, Inc.—people who are at the top of the mainstream media today—were young reporters in Dealey Plaza in 1963. They made their careers on that day, and, from our point of view, they missed the story. Naturally they're going to come down hard on anyone who says that.

Tom Wicker was obviously very freaked out about the issue of media credibility in general, and also about a general sense of distrust of the government that this film was going to engender. My answer to that is that our government has to earn our trust, it has to deserve trust, and in this case it didn't. This was probably on Earl Warren's mind—what's best for the country, how do we preserve the integrity of our institutions, and calm people's fears?—all those arguments which make some sense, but which in the end make no sense if you sacrifice the truth.

Cineaste: *The press has been filled with reports recently that the Mafia might have killed Kennedy.*

Sklar: Yeah, that smacks of a disinformation campaign, a fall back position. First the government tells us Lee Harvey Oswald did it, then, when the American people clearly say we believe there was a conspiracy, they have to do something to divert our attention away from the possibility that the CIA or the military might be involved, so they blame it on the Mafia. Recently we saw these stories about Robert Blakey, General Counsel for the House Select Committee on Assassinations, claiming secret FBI tapes would reveal that Carlos Marcello had admitted his involvement in the assassination. But the next day, in much smaller headlines, the U.S. Attorney in New Orleans, who had prosecuted Marcello, and the head of the FBI office there, who had listened to all the tapes Blakey was referring to, both said there was no mention of the assassination on those tapes.

Cineaste: *Some critics do question Garrison's downplaying of Mafia involvement in the assassination, especially since Carlos Marcello was right in his backyard.*

Sklar: Garrison went after the person the Blakey crowd relies on as their main link to the Mafia, David Ferrie. Ferrie

worked both for the CIA and Marcello. Blakey and other critics of Garrison use that information but never mention that Garrison dug it up in the first place. Garrison also acknowledges that Jack Ruby was a Mafia bagman and that he was involved in the conspiracy. So Garrison has never said that the Mafia was not involved. He's simply said that it was at a very low level. The CIA and the Mafia have worked together numerous times—most notably in their attempts on Fidel Castro's life—but, in every one of these cases, it's the CIA that runs the show and gives the orders, not the Mafia.

Cineaste: *Stone has explained that in JFK he was as much if not more concerned with why Kennedy was killed as he was to the questions of who or how. Some critics on the left, who are otherwise sympathetic to the theory of a government conspiracy to kill JFK, reject the idea that Kennedy was really committed to extricating the U. S. from Vietnam. Do you think the film is on shaky ground in this regard? Does the new John Newman book, JFK and Vietnam, make a convincing case for this scenario?*

Sklar: I find the Newman book convincing. That's largely what we relied on. Newman did firsthand interviews with many of the major players and he also got the documents that relate to Kennedy and Vietnam as well as Laos over the entire period of his presidency. We also relied on Fletcher Prouty who spent his career in covert operations as a liaison between the CIA and the Pentagon. He was one of the main writers of the October 2, 1963 memorandum which outlines the withdrawal of advisors from Vietnam.

It's very hard to argue with the fact that Kennedy in his last order signed National Security Action Memo 263 which unequivocally orders 1,000 advisors out of Vietnam by the end of 1963. Critics from both the left and the right argue that Kennedy was a Cold Warrior who would have done just what Johnson ended up doing, but they are the ones doing the speculating in this case. The *fact* is that Kennedy signed that withdrawal order, the *speculation* is that maybe he would have changed course.

Some people also say that NSAM 273, which Johnson signed on November 26th, was no change from Kennedy's original plan, but that's not correct, either. There is a crucial difference between the draft document of NSAM 273 prepared for Kennedy on November 21st and the final document signed by Johnson four days after the assassination. The first draft document says that the U.S. will *train the South Vietnamese* to carry out covert military operations against North Vietnam. In the final document, signed by Johnson, it states that *U.S. forces* themselves will carry out these covert military operations. The Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964 was an example of precisely that kind of covert operation carried out by U.S. forces, so those who say there's no difference between what Kennedy was going to sign and what Johnson eventually signed are the ones on shaky ground.

Cineaste: *Is it accurate to say the thesis of JFK is that Kennedy was killed because he was going to pull out of Vietnam?*

Sklar: Kennedy's position on Vietnam is very important, but it's not the whole story. The film's thesis is based on how the fanatical anticommunists in the Pentagon and the CIA viewed Kennedy—not just in relation to Vietnam but in relation to a number of Cold War issues. Their perception was that this was a man who was elected as a Cold Warrior but who, from the Bay of Pigs on, had taken a different course. He felt betrayed by the CIA at the Bay of Pigs and vowed to "splinter the CIA into a thousand pieces," that's a direct quote. He fired Dulles, Cabell, and Bissell, the three top leaders of the CIA. These people *hated* Kennedy.

During the October 1962 missile crisis, Kennedy came to a secret agreement in which Khrushchev would pull out the missiles in exchange for Kennedy's promise not to invade

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Cuba. Alexander Cockburn argues that Kennedy brought us as close to nuclear war as any President ever has. That's true. But what Cockburn ignores is the fact that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had urged Kennedy to invade Cuba. Kennedy refused and instead made this secret deal with Khrushchev, so the Joint Chiefs of Staff and others in the Pentagon were enraged at Kennedy. They thought he was soft on communism. Then the following year, in the summer of 1963, once again over the objections of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Kennedy signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Soviet Union. Again, they were enraged.

Then, in late July 1963, Kennedy put an end to Operation Mongoose. This was the covert CIA operation training Cuban exiles to overthrow Castro, the operation run by Guy Banister which Garrison stumbled upon in New Orleans. The Pentagon's head of operations for Mongoose was General Edward Lansdale, a man who had spent his entire career in Southeast Asia where he ran covert operations of the most despicable kind, overthrowing governments and assassinating people. Kennedy ordered the FBI to shut down Mongoose's training camps and confiscate all their ammunition and weapons. That's shown in the film. That enraged the Cuban exiles as well as the CIA.

The final thing was that Kennedy had opened a back channel negotiation with Castro to try to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba. This process was under way even as Kennedy was being killed. A journalist was carrying a message to Castro from Kennedy saying we want to open up a dialog and Castro was shocked and very upset by the assassination. By the end Castro had great hopes for Kennedy, which at first, of course, he didn't. It's interesting that Castro was willing to acknowledge Kennedy's change, whereas some people on the U.S. left are not.

All these things together, then, along with the withdrawal of advisors from Vietnam, provide an overall vision of Kennedy changing. This may not have seemed significant from the left's point of view, but it was enormously significant to committed Cold Warriors in the CIA and the Pentagon. The thesis of our film is that those people had many reasons to get rid of John Kennedy. So I don't buy the simplistic notion that, since this is an Oliver Stone movie, it involves only an obsession with Vietnam.

Cineaste: *Some critics have called the film homophobic in that the stereotypical nuclear family portrayal of the Garrisons—and, for that matter, even the Kennedys, as seen in their home movies—is contrasted with the gay lifestyle of the principal conspirators, Clay Shaw and David Ferrie, who are involved in some of the more outlandish aspects of the homosexual subculture in New Orleans. How do you respond to those viewers who are troubled by this good/bad sexual dichotomy the film sets up?*

Sklar: I think it's a legitimate argument—this contrast between Garrison's straight, conventional middle class family life with the so-called decadent life of Shaw and Ferrie in the gay community in New Orleans—but, unfortunately, that is a true and accurate picture. Garrison *did* have five children, and his home life was pretty much the way we portrayed it, which was that he was an absent father, and his wife had to carry the burden of raising all these kids, and she was angry about it. Liz Garrison was a pretty conventional Southern woman of 1963 and she did not share her husband's interest in politics. It's also accurate that Clay Shaw was leading a double life and the only reason that's in the film is to show that he was lying on the witness stand when he said he didn't know David Ferrie.

You know, there's been this whole attack on Garrison as being gay himself. It grew out of an unsubstantiated 1970 Jack Anderson column claiming that Garrison fondled a little boy in the New Orleans Athletic Club where he was a member. Based on that, this theory went around the gay

We wanted to make sure we were on solid ground with the facts in this case because it touches so many raw nerves. Many facts are in dispute and others are simply not known. Of necessity we had to speculate in some places but we didn't want any flying saucers in there that people could latch onto and say, 'Oh, look, they put this in, so we can discredit the entire film.'

community that Garrison was a self-hating gay and the only reason he prosecuted Shaw for conspiracy to kill Kennedy was that Shaw was the queen bee of the gay community. That theory has no basis in fact. Nor did the Jack Anderson column. Whether you like it or not, Garrison was a nuclear family guy, with a wife and five children. He actually had a mistress as well, and maybe it's a valid criticism that we should have shown that if we had time. But Garrison wasn't gay. There's no value judgment involved, it just doesn't happen to be the fact.

There is a legitimate argument that the inclusion of the scenes of Shaw and Ferrie partying was gratuitous. I felt uncomfortable with them myself. But David Ehrenstein went well beyond that point in *The Advocate* when he charged that the film posits a gay cabal behind the assassination. That's simply untrue, as anyone who has seen the film knows. Ehrenstein also referred to "the crucial role homosexuality played in the case: that Garrison tried to use Shaw's gayness as evidence of his guilt." This statement is a disservice to readers of *The Advocate* because it defies the facts. The truth is Garrison *never* raised the issue of Clay Shaw's homosexuality in court, in the press, or in his book—not once, and if Ehrenstein can produce any evidence to the contrary, I'd love to see it.

Let me give you an idea how strongly Garrison felt about this. While working with him on his book, Bill Schaap, Ellen Ray, and I argued with him, saying, "Look, everybody knows that Clay Shaw was gay, you have to say this up front and deal with it." Garrison absolutely refused. He said, "It's irrelevant to the case, I do not want the focus to be on homosexuality, I want it to be on the fact that Clay Shaw was involved with the CIA and with Permindex and Centro Mondiale Commerciale, and that he was involved in some way with the assassination."

Cineaste: *The film seems to have inspired a growing movement to open the JFK assassination files. What's your reaction to that?*

Sklar: Well, we should be clear what files we're talking about. There are the files of the House Select Committee on Assassinations which are sealed until 2029 and there are the remainder of the Warren Commission files which are sealed until 2039. Some of those files have been released

He apparently does not know of extensive FBI releases

under the FOIA but when they release a page, sometimes ninety-five percent of it is blacked out, so is that released or not? According to Jim Lesar, who runs the Assassination Archives in Washington, there are probably 250,000 pages of material being withheld.

The problem is that both the House Select Committee and the Warren Commission relied on information that the CIA and FBI provided them. They did not get the original CIA and FBI files, the raw documents. We now have a CIA document which was released in 1981 which describes Robert Blakey, the General Counsel for the House Select Committee, going to see the CIA files. It says—and I'm paraphrasing here—"He spent about half an hour talking to us, and he spent about half an hour looking at files. He did not go to"—and then there's a deletion—"and he did not go to building"—another deletion—"and he never looked at the nine file cabinets full of stuff on Oswald."

So what we know is that the files that have to be opened are not just those of the House Select Committee and the Warren Commission, but also those of the CIA and FBI that they are supposedly based on. I have very little hope that that will happen. Oliver North gave us a good example of what happens to the important files—they shred them—and I presume that many of the most important files have already been shredded. In his 1967 *Playboy* interview, Garrison mentioned an important document on Oswald which the CIA said burned up during photocopying. This took place on November 23rd, the day after the assassination, and Garrison commented that a great deal of spontaneous combustion must have taken place in Washington that day.

Cineaste: Are there other positive political consequences that could result from the controversy surrounding JFK?

Sklar: Apart from opening the files, we need a citizens' movement to get the CIA and FBI under control, to make them accountable, and to eliminate their covert operations.

Basically what we have is a shadow government totally unaccountable to the American people and I hope the film will heighten people's awareness of that.

I think there could also be a movement to change the way that the history of the assassination is taught in our schools. Currently most high school history textbooks have a paragraph which says that Kennedy was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald, a lone nut or communist or whatever, and there may be a sentence which says that some people think there was a conspiracy. That's not enough. Young people coming out of this film are outraged and they ought to be. That's what history books should do—get them to think, to feel, and to act. A history book that puts people to sleep and tells them lies to boot is not doing its job. That's how a democracy falls apart. If this film encourages young people to do further research—go to the library, read books, talk to people, question the government, learn how history is written—that's all to the good. Parents can also get involved by putting pressure on textbook companies to update and revise the simplistic history that their children are taught.

Cineaste: Do you see the plans to publish an annotated version of the script as a way to rebut some of the film's critics?

Sklar: Yes, and I believe it's going to be the complete shooting script, so in that sense it will contain more than the actual film. It will provide the evidentiary basis we used. This isn't to say that the facts we present in the film are undisputed, it's just to say, "Look, we didn't make this up out of thin air. If you think this sounds crazy, well, this is where it came from and here are the sources notes for it." Then people can check the original sources for themselves. Those who attack this film as a pack of lies have no idea how much research went into it. The published screenplay will give them some idea anyway, and if they take the time to check the sources—as we did—perhaps they'll come to a different opinion.

the way they're doing it

K 15 Home

AMARCORD (Continued)

cal recreation. It obviously struck a responsive chord in non-Italian viewers who had never lived under a fascist regime and who had probably never even heard of Mussolini. But there is something quite disturbing in *Amarcord* for any spectator of this film. While the characters in it are obviously comic types and the political regime they lived under has long since vanished, the Amarcordians are nevertheless far more familiar figures than the sexually traumatized conformist Marcello Clerici in Bertolucci's *Il conformista* or the even more abnormal and monstrous fascist killer appropriately named Attila in Bertolucci's *Novecento*. Their ties and manias are not so far removed from our own, and our bemused observation of the humorous antics of Fellini's characters never relieves us of the feeling that there on the screen, but for an accident of historical circumstance, we, too, could well be depicted. *Amarcord* stands as Fellini's most complex visual representation of a political theme, even though the ideological dimensions of the film do not exhaust its artistic achievements. Presenting a human comedy and transcending historical, ideological, or geographical boundaries, *Amarcord* speaks to our common humanity.

END NOTES

- 1 Federico Fellini, *Comments on Film*, ed. Giovanni Grazzini (Fresno: The Press of California State College at Fresno, 1988), p. 15.
- 2 Examples of these early attacks may be found in the previously cited polemics over *La strada* and *Le notti di Cabiria* in Peter Bondanella, ed., *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), and in Federico Fellini, "La Strada"; *Federico Fellini, Director*, eds. Peter Bondanella and Manuela Gieri (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987); a more recent example of this point of view may be found in the broadside attack upon Fellini's "irrelevance" in Robert Kolker's *The Altering Eye: Contemporary International Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
- 3 Cited in Franca Faldini and Goffredo Fofi, eds., *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano...1960-1969* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981), p. 275 (author's translation).
- 4 Fellini, "Amarcord: The Fascism Within Us," in Bondanella, ed., *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism*, pp. 20-21.
- 5 An English version, "Rimini, My Home Town," can be found in *Fellini on Fellini*, pp. 1-40.
- 6 Lallo's nickname, "Il Patacca," is also a slang word from Fellini's province that refers to the female sexual organs and may be translated as "cunt." Its use in the film as a familiar term of address functions in much the same manner as the Venetian *mona* ("cunt") or the Florentine *bis-cherò* ("prick"), two other words with sexual meanings that are also employed by Italians in jormal speech and which may also be used as familiar and affectionate forms of address among good friends.
- 7 Fellini, "Amarcord: The Fascism Within Us," in Bondanella, ed., *Federico Fellini: Essays in*

- Criticism*, p. 21.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
- 10 Cited from Fellini, *Il film "Amarcord" di Federico Fellini*, p. 199 (author's translation). This published script was created from an analysis of the film on a moviola, but the final copy of the film still contains a number of important changes, forcing the scholar to use the script with the usual caution that must be employed with all of Fellini's Italian scripts.
- 11 Fellini, *Il film "Amarcord"*, p. 199 (author's translation).
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 22 (author's translation).
- 13 Millicent Marcus, "Fellini's *Amarcord*: Film as Memory," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 2 (1977), p. 423.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Fellini, "Amarcord: The Fascism Within Us," in Bondanella, ed., *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism*, p. 22.
- 16 While these particular questions were eventually changed in the final dubbed print of the film, Fellini intervenes in the narrative of *Amarcord* on a number of occasions.
- 17 See *ibid.*, pp. 138-139, for the script (which identifies the tormenting voice-over only as "The Voice of a Man." In the dubbing of the film, Fellini inserted his own voice.
- 18 See Gideon Bachman, *Ciao, Federico!* (1969), available on videocassette.
- 19 Fellini, *Fare un film* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), p. 141 (author's translation).
- 20 Fellini, "Amarcord: The Fascism Within Us," in Bondanella, ed., *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism*, pp. 24-25.
- 21 Fellini, *Comments on Film*, p. 39.

Striving for Authenticity

AN INTERVIEW WITH JANE RUSCONI

by Gary Crowdus



Jane Rusconi, who worked as Research Coordinator on JFK, is a 1988 graduate of Yale University where she received her B.A. degree in Philosophy and Psychology. Cineaste spoke with Rusconi in late January 1992 via telephone from the Santa Monica office of Ixtlan, Oliver Stone's production company.

Cineaste: What did your job as Research Coordinator involve?

Jane Rusconi: Oh, everything really, from working with Oliver and the technical advisors, researchers, and historians to locating photos, film, and other information. It involved, for example, getting photos of Dealey Plaza and other locations we'd be using, finding out for the art department what kind of clothes people wore when they testified before the Warren Commission, and getting films of the real people so the actors could hear what their voices sounded like.

Every day I'd prepare material to have on the set for whichever scenes we were shooting that day. If we were filming a scene in a hearing room, we'd have the real transcript there in case we needed to check something. We had a lot of technical advisers, too—if we were shooting a scene in the Dallas police station, we'd make sure we had a retired police officer there.

There are lots of minor things that don't show up in the film. For the scenes in the Book Depository, for instance, we made up 3,000 exact replica boxes, with the same stamps and printing on the side. These are details that few people will appreciate or even notice, but it's an indication of the great lengths we went to for authenticity. That wasn't just me, it extended to the prop man, the art directors — everybody wanted to make this film dead accurate, and I think we did. At least people haven't been criticizing that aspect of the film. Of course, production design is most successful when it doesn't call attention to itself.

Cineaste: Did you actually read a few hundred books on the subject, as Oliver mentioned?

Rusconi: It seems like it [laughs] and, if not completely, I certainly read that many sections of books. It's a tremendous undertaking.

Cineaste: Did you have any previous interest or expertise in the Kennedy assassination?

Rusconi: I knew a bit about it, I'd read a few books, but not terribly much. I wasn't an assassination buff by any stretch. Basically my job was to become an expert on the Kennedy assassination because, as Oliver says, he likes to have all his information in one person's head.

Cineaste: We understand that nearly 600 books have been published on the JFK assassination.

Rusconi: Yes, but after a while you can pretty much tell which ones are good and which ones aren't. The approach I took was to try to read as much of everything that I could. I read David Belin's book which says that Oswald did it alone, and I read the books which say that the Mafia did it, those

which say Castro did it, another which says Oswald was a KGB double, and so on. You read through all of this stuff to see what you can get out of it. I also read books on a lot of other aspects, like books on Vietnam, the CIA or covert operations, the anti-Castro Cubans, and so on. When you start to study the Kennedy assassination, you get an excellent education in the history of the period.

There's also an incredible network of private researchers who have done work on the case and I've gotten to know just about all of them. They were a tremendous help to us and were, almost without exception, extremely generous about sharing information and lending support.

Cineaste: Which researchers and scholars did you draw on most heavily?

Rusconi: That's a tough question because there actually is a convergence of ideas in the research community. In other words, there are basic conclusions about the assassination that most researchers share. Probably the main one is that the government—or elements of it—was involved on some level. There are differences, of course—somebody might think Texas oilmen were responsible, another thinks it was LBJ's cronies, someone else blames it on Division Five of the FBI, etc.—but because of the evidence that's been developed, there is a convergence of ideas.

In terms of good books on the subject, it goes without saying that Sylvia Meagher's *Accessories After the Fact* gives the best case against the Warren Report. Once you've read that, you have no choice but to reexamine the evidence of the whole case. Probably the best compendium of research is Jim Marrs's *Crossfire*, although it's poorly footnoted. Then there's an excellent book on Oswald by Dr. Philip Melanson called *Spy Saga*. It's a terrific book, about 200 pages, which focuses on Oswald and his intelligence connections. For more advanced students, there are some great books by Peter Dale Scott, like *The Dallas Conspiracy* and *Crime and Cover-Up*, really intricate work with lots of odd sources and footnotes.

Cineaste: What sort of fact-checking did you try to do?

Rusconi: We tried to do every kind, although you're not always able to. It went down to the minor points of what color car somebody was driving that day — that's an extreme, trivial example — or in making sure that if we refer to, say, fifty-one witnesses, that there were actually fifty-one.

Cineaste: What sort of documents were you able to go back to? If we're critical of the mainstream press for failing to do their homework on the JFK assassination and instead just citing each other and thereby perpetuating errors and inaccuracies, we must acknowledge that this can also be a tendency amongst the assassination scholars and should be guarded against.

Rusconi: Right, and that brings up one of my biggest criteria for knowing whether a book is good or not, which is the footnotes. If the footnotes are good, then you generally know that the book has a lot of value. If you see something in a

book and there's no footnote for it, you try to find it somewhere else. There are excellent primary sources in Washington such as the Assassination Archives and Research Center, or the Center for Defense Information, a nonprofit organization where you can check things like what the defense budget was in 1960. Another great place is the National Security Archives which can provide copies of all the declassified National Security Action Memos. We also used the volumes published by the Warren Commission and the House Select Committee on Assassinations.

Cineaste: Isn't it true that most if not all of the facts and speculative theories dramatized in *JFK* have been available for years in the various books on the assassination and that the national controversy over the film has flared up because all this information has for the first time been popularized and made available to a mass audience?

Rusconi: Yes, I think that's happened. We shouldn't play down the impact of these books — which started to come out in 1966, when a lot of people stopped believing the Warren Report — and we must give credit to the pioneering work of people like Harold Weisberg, Mark Lane, and Sylvia Meagher. When you write a book, the information lies kind of low, but a movie brings it to everybody's consciousness, it makes it undeniable in a way. You can ignore a book, but you can't ignore a movie. And it's a good movie, too, with three dimensional portrayals of people — Oswald, for example, becomes a real person.

Cineaste: The mainstream press has charged that *JFK* is based on "spurious evidence" and has called it everything from "a fantasy" to "a pack of lies." How do you respond to those charges?

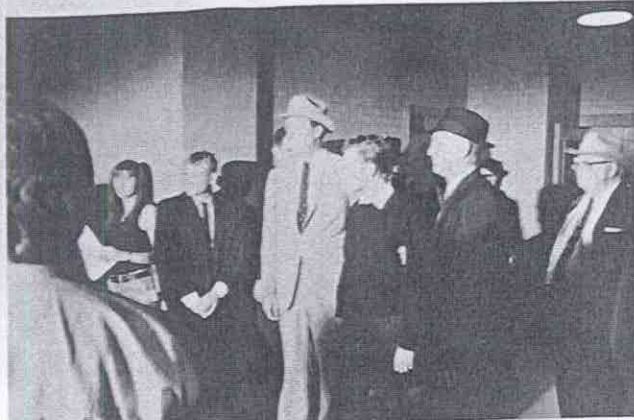
Rusconi: I think what the press is doing is staring their own worst failure in the face, and that's further evidenced by their attacks on the film. Rather than actually going out and checking on the information in the film, they started screaming "spurious evidence" and "trick photography." Running psychological profiles on Oliver Stone has been another popular pursuit.

If you look at *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, they've had a really crazy role in this thing from the start. *The New York Times* always equated its point of view with the government's—they published their own edition of the Warren Report—but this changed in 1979 with the HSCA findings of a probable conspiracy. The *Times* kept defending the Warren Commission, although recently they've begun to refer to Oswald as the "accused assassin," rather than calling him "Kennedy's assassin," as they have for twenty-eight years. Of course, this happens after we pointed it out to them in a letter.

There have been some really good reporters for smaller papers. Earl Golz is probably the best—he was at *The Dallas Morning News*, now he's at *The Austin American-Statesman*. He did wonderful work in Dallas in the 1970s tracking down and talking to witnesses and reporting on the JFK case.

Generally, the media is lazy—most newspapers are content with reporting government press releases as 'news' and they just don't know the subject. Tom Wicker, for example, talks out of both sides of his mouth, condemning the movie as long-discredited and then saying we were right on Vietnam. TV programs like *Nightline* tend to go for the easy, textbook version of events rather than examine the complexities and contradictions in the official story. They rely heavily on government officials or retired officials who, in many cases, will have a rather biased or at least limited knowledge of the subject. We should all know by now that a government official is not always a credible source, especially when you're looking critically at the government's role in something.

For some reason, everybody accepted the official version early on and just dug their heels in. It's hard to know now if



Jane Rusconi (far left) during rehearsal of a scene for *JFK*

they still believe the Warren Commission Report — which is to say that they believe something that the government no longer believes — or if they're so far behind because they didn't get it in the beginning and they didn't keep up with it, they didn't pay attention. Dan Rather actually admitted to somebody off camera — they were doing an interview for *48 Hours* — that he felt bad that he'd screwed up the story in the beginning and that he wanted to set the historical record straight. That's interesting, maybe there's some guilt there.

There are some good reporters out there at some of the news services, like *States News* and *Reuters*, and the reporters at *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* are terrific, they really know what they're talking about. Maybe it's only a matter of time before the Old Guard takes their ignorance into the retirement home.

Cineaste: Considering somewhat darker interpretations, is it possible that some of these journalists are what the CIA calls "propaganda assets"?

Rusconi: Well, they do exist. I'm sure you're referring to Oliver's comment on George Lardner here. Lardner is interesting because he did some very good reporting on the HSCA hearings, some very good questioning of people, but the problem with Lardner isn't that he appears to be some kind of CIA plant. The problem with Lardner is that his brand of journalism makes fun of both sides and tears everyone to pieces. It's totally nonconstructive and that's what's so upsetting. You admire his instincts and his ability to get people to talk to him, but he ends up smearing everybody in a totally snide manner. Who needs that?

In this regard, have you read Carl Bernstein's *Rolling Stone* article on the CIA and the media? It's a fantastic piece and the best thing Bernstein ever did. It discusses the Church Committee revelations about intelligence people in academia and the media. It appeared in 1977, while George Bush was head of the CIA, and he does not come out very favorably in this article. The CIA basically admitted that they were responsible for the writing of over 1,000 books and that they had over 400 journalists on their payroll. Which books and which journalists, we don't know. We do know of a few cases like Hal Hendricks, who was very involved with the CIA, but you can't tell, really. Besides, ascribing such motives to people is never a very good way of responding to them.

Cineaste: Well, it's too easy in a sense, and it's also not the best way to respond if you're trying to defend yourself against charges of paranoia.

Rusconi: Sure, we can say, "No, we're not paranoid, we don't think these people are part of the conspiracy. We chalk it up to ignorance." Then you think, "Wait a minute, which is really worse?" I mean, if they were working for the CIA, at least they'd know the real story. Here we're fighting against people who just don't know the facts. ■

The Allen "NOBODY READS" Dulles Memorial Bibliography of the Ten Best Books on the JFK Assassination

Our bibliography was compiled by inviting a number of JFK assassination researchers and scholars to send us their recommendations, from which we have listed, alphabetically by title, the ten most often cited books. Those polled include Mary Ferrell, independent researcher; Larry Howard, Director, JFK Assassination Information Center; Robert T. Johnson, Assistant Director, JFK Assassination Information Center; John Judge, cofounder of the Committee for an Open Archives, independent researcher, and author; James H. Lesar, President, Assassination Archives and Research Center; Al Navis, Almark & Co., Booksellers; Carl Oglesby, founder, Assassination Information Bureau, and author; Jane Rusconi, Research Coordinator for *JFK*; Zachary Sklar, author and cowriter with Oliver Stone of *JFK*; and David Wrone, coeditor of *The Assassination of John F. Kennedy: A Comprehensive Historical and Legal Bibliography, 1963-1979* (Greenwood Press).

THE TEN BEST BOOKS

Accessories After the Fact: The Warren Commission, the Authorities & the Report by Sylvia Meagher (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1967; NY: Vintage Press, 1976, 1992).

Best Evidence: Disguise and Deception in the Assassination of John F. Kennedy by David Lifton (NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980; NY: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1988).

Conspiracy: The Definitive Book on the J.F.K. Assassination by Anthony Summers (NY: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1980; NY: Paragon House, 1989).

Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy by Jim Marrs (NY: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1989).

High Treason: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the New Evidence of Conspiracy by Robert J. Groden and Harrison Edward Livingstone (Boothwyn, PA: Conservatory Press, 1989; NY: Berkeley Publishing Group, 1990).

Reasonable Doubt: An Investigation into the Assassination of John F. Kennedy by Henry Hurt (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1986; NY: Henry Holt and Co., 1987).

The Ruby Cover-Up by Seth Kantor (NY: Kensington Publishing Corp., 1992) Originally published as *Who Was Jack Ruby?* (NY: Everest House, 1978).

Six Seconds in Dallas: A Micro-Study of the Kennedy Assassination by Jostiah Thompson (NY: Bernard Geis Associates, 1967; NY: Berkeley Books, 1967, 1976).

Spy Saga: Lee Harvey Oswald and U.S. Intelligence by Philip H. Melanson (NY: Praeger Publishers, 1990).

Whitewash series by Harold Weisberg (self-published by the author), including: *Whitewash: The Report on the Warren Report* (1965); *Whitewash II: The FBI-Secret Service Cover-Up* (1966); *Photographic Whitewash: Suppressed Kennedy Assassination Pictures* (1967); *Whitewash IV: Top Secret JFK Assassination Transcript* (1974).

BOOKSHOPS AND OTHER RESOURCES

Almark & Co., Booksellers, P.O. Box 7, Thornhill, Ontario, Canada L3T 3N1, Phone (416) 764-BOOK

Tom Davis Books, P.O. Box 1107, Aptos, CA 95001, Phone (408) 476-6655

The Last Hurrah Bookshop, 937 Memorial Avenue, Williamsport, PA 17701, Phone (717) 327-9338

The President's Box Bookshop, P.O. Box 1255, Washington, D.C. 20013, Phone (703) 998-7390

Prevailing Winds Research, P.O. Box 23511, Santa Barbara, CA 93121, Phone (805) 566-8016

Harold Weisberg, Route 12, Old Receiver Road, Frederick, MD 21702

Assassination Archives and Research Center, 918 F Street, N.W., Suite 510, Washington, D.C. 20004, Phone (202) 393-1917

Committee for an Open Archives, P.O. Box 6008, Washington, D.C. 20005-0708, Phone (202) 310-1858

JFK Assassination Information Center, 603 Munger/Box 40, Dallas, TX 75202, Phone (214) 871-2770

National Security Archive, 1755 Massachusetts Ave., N.W. Suite 500, Washington, D.C. 20036, Phone (202) 797-0082

VIDEOS

Best Evidence (VHS, 25 mins.): Produced by David S. Lifton; available from Rhino Video, 2225 Colorado Ave., Santa Monica, CA 90404-3555, Phone (213) 828-1980.

The Men Who Killed Kennedy: Five one-hour episodes directed by Nigel Turner; originally broadcast Fall 1991 on the Arts & Entertainment Network. For further information, contact A&E, 235 E. 45th St., New York, NY 10017, Phone (212) 210-1331.

Reasonable Doubt: The Single Bullet Theory (VHS, 51 mins.): Directed by Chip Selby; available from White Star, 121 Hwy. 36, W. Long Branch, NJ 07764, Phone (908) 229-2343.

Who Didn't Kill...JFK (VHS, 60 mins.): Directed by Jim Marrs; available from 3-C Home Video, Montebello, CA 90640.

For comprehensive video listings, contact the Assassination Archives and Research Center. ■

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