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Oliver Stone Versus Mainstream Media

'JFK' director defends film's political viewpoint

By Oliver Stone

The media establishment gets upset when art gets political, especially when they disagree with the politics and fear the viewpoint.

When this priesthood is challenged as the sole or privileged interpreters of our history, they bludgeon newcomers, wielding heavy clubs such as "objectivity" and charging high crimes such as "rewriting history."

The leading detractors of my film "JFK" have not been film critics but political journalists such as Tom Wicker of the New York Times, George Lardner of the Washington Post, Dan Rather of CBS News and Kenneth Aulichness at Newsweek, all of whom covered events of that period.

The Artist's Right

I think what is clear from their efforts to destroy my film's credibility is that history may be too important to leave to newsmen. And that artists certainly have the right — and possibly the obligation — to step in and reinterpret the history of our times.

Was it not Dan Rather who, upon viewing Abraham Zapruder's film of

that Lee Harvey Oswald was not simply mentally ill.

In its stead, the dramatic cover story, with Oswald as sole assassin and Jack Ruby as earnest vigilante, was immediately substituted and accepted by almost the entire American media (in sharp contrast to the foreign media).

Political Motives

A great John Wayne movie, but why? Why was the possibility of a political motive rarely discussed (or only vaguely attributed to diversionary theories like a pro-Castro or Mafia plot) after it was clear that the evidence undercut the Warren Report?

Whether there was a fundamental difference between Kennedy's and Johnson's Vietnam policies deserves more debate.

For years most historians assumed there was no basic difference. But people such as John Newman, an Army major in intelligence who has written a book on the subject; Fletcher Prouty, a former Air Force colonel who served as director of special operations at the Pentagon in the early '60s; and Peter Dale Scott, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, should have their day in court.

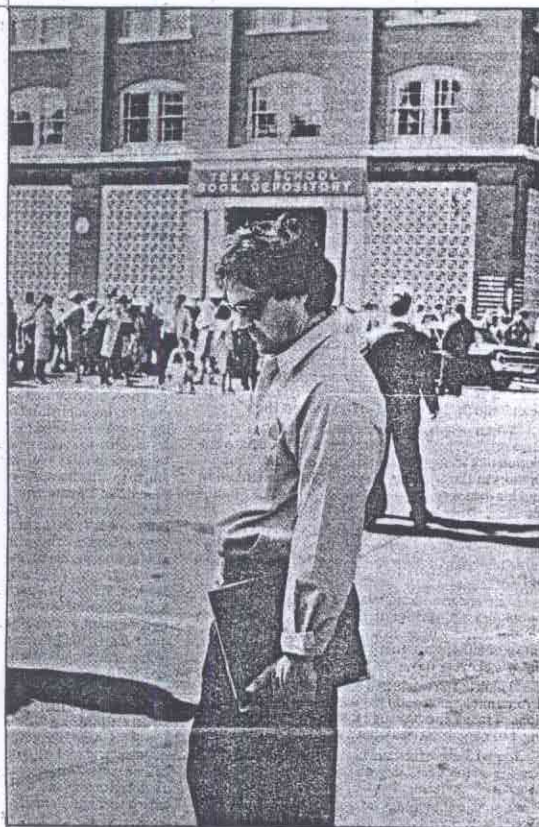
A basic chronology underlies their view. In June 1963, in a speech at American University, Kennedy envisions a world without the Cold War and the arms race. He sets the stage for detente, defying the "military-industrial complex," a phrase coined by Eisenhower.

Kennedy and Khrushchev have already negotiated the first step: a modus vivendi on the Cuban problem (no Soviet missiles, no U.S. invasion).

In July 1963, they install the nuclear hotline and in August sign the first-ever nuclear test-ban treaty.

Later in August, General Charles de Gaulle of France proposes a reunited, neutral Vietnam and plans to visit Kennedy in February to talk about it.

In September, Kennedy states the war is Vietnam's, not ours, to decide, and then he approves secret negotia-



Oliver Stone at the Texas School Book Depository on the Dallas location of controversial film 'JFK': 'History is too important to be left to newsmen'

COMMENT

the assassination, reported that the fatal shot to the head drove President Kennedy "violently forward"?

Years later, when the film was finally shown to the American people, it was clear that Kennedy's head was going backward.

Outraged Critics

My critics are outraged that I pose the view that Kennedy's desire to wind down the Cold War and the Vietnam War is a possible motive for the murder.

When a leader of any country is assassinated, the media normally ask: "What political forces were opposed to this leader and would benefit from his assassination?"

It seems a little strange to me, 28 years later, that such a question was rarely asked once it was established

tions with Fidel Castro outside State Department-C.I.A. channels.

Troop Withdrawals Planned

In October, the White House forecasts that 1,000 men would be withdrawn from Vietnam by the end of 1963 and that the U.S. military mission would be over by the end of 1965.

That same month, Kennedy authorizes the pullout in a national security action memo — NSAM 263. The government projects major Pentagon cuts.

Kennedy is killed on November 22.

Two days later, Lyndon Johnson meets with Henry Cabot Lodge and the

Joint Chiefs of Staff about the Vietnam "crisis."

Four days after the assassination Johnson overrides NSAM 263 with NSAM 273 — step one in reversing Kennedy's direction.

A "withdrawal" occurs on paper — 1,000 men are rotated home — but more are sent back to Vietnam by February.

Johnson's NSAM 273 opens the way for air attacks on North Vietnam and increased covert warfare.

Finally, in August 1964, Johnson uses the bogus Tonkin Gulf incident to start the air war and win a congressional mandate to do as he sees fit in Vietnam.

By March 1965, less than 15 months

after Kennedy's death, the first combat troops are sent, something Kennedy refused to do.

Hundred-Billion-Dollar War

Was there no difference between Kennedy and Johnson on Vietnam? With the nexus of interest — military, business, political — standing to profit from the hundred-billion-dollar war, there's ample reason to believe that therein lies the motive.

Jim Garrison sought that motive and in suggesting the possibility of a nightmare unacceptable to our official historians, he has been vilified through time.

The failure of his case against Clay Shaw cannot be equated with a full vindication of the Warren Report.

To bring a case against the cover-up apparatus of this country was nearly impossible then, as it is now with Lawrence Walsh's failure to find the light of day against Oliver North and the Iran-Contra plotters.

Protecting Democracy

The issue of our times — as the media keep repeating — is democracy.

Real democracy is not some illusion. It must be based on truth told to the people.

We applauded the Soviets when, in the name of democracy, they finally told their people the horrible truth of Stalin's murders, yet we ignore the murder of our president.

Do our people deserve any less? If Kennedy was killed by a political conspiracy of his opponents and it has been covered up, then our so-called democratic system has betrayed us.

The Real Issue

The real issue is trusting the people with their real history.

The real issue is opening all the files of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, embargoed until 2029, today.

The real issue is opening all CIA, FBI and military intelligence files, held for all eternity, on Oswald, Ruby, Kennedy and Dallas for 1963. All of them — with the crucial parts blacked out.

Only then can we start to have a real democracy. "JFK" strikes a blow for that open debate.

Oliver Stone, director of "JFK," has won three Academy Awards. This piece originally appeared on the Op-Ed page of the New York Times.