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Valenti calls 'JFK' a 'hoax'

Ex-LBJ aide says Stone's film like Nazis' 'Triumph of the Will'

By David Kelly

WASHINGTON — In a blistering verbal barrage, Motion Picture Association of America president Jack Valenti fired away with both barrels at the movie "JFK," attacking the veracity of the film and the honesty and integrity of director Oliver Stone.

Valenti, who in deference to the

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Oscar balloting has suffered in silence since the movie publicity campaign began, likened Stone's conspiracy-driven "JFK" to the propaganda films of the Nazis and old-style Soviet revisionist history.

Valenti, who was special assistant to President Lyndon Johnson at the time of President Kennedy's assassination, said he spoke on a personal basis, emphasizing that his viewpoint on Stone's "JFK" has "no connection to my responsibilities in the movie industry."

Valenti accused Stone of wantonly swinging from fact to fiction in the movie but never informing the audience which is which, calling the movie an example of Stone's "intellectual nihilism."

"In much the same way, young German boys and girls in 1941 were mesmerized by Leni Reifenstahl's 'Triumph of the Will' in which Adolph Hitler was depicted as a newborn God," Valenti said. "Both 'JFK' and 'Triumph of the Will' are equally a propaganda masterpiece, and equally a hoax."

Stone would not comment further Thursday on Valenti's open letter. He told the New York Times on Wednesday: "While I respect Jack Valenti's enduring loyalty to President Johnson, I find his emotional diatribe off the mark. The overwhelming majority of Americans . . . agree with the central thesis of my film . . ."

"I am enormously proud of the artistic and political impact which 'JFK' has had. I hope Mr. Valenti, now that he has vented his spleen, will join in supporting the joint House-Senate resolution that all government files in the assassination of President Kennedy be opened so that the American people can have a fuller understanding of that tragedy and its continuing implications for our democracy."

What stirred Valenti's anger was the allegation in the movie that President Johnson had a hand in the coverup of a quasi-cabal among the CIA, the Mafia and the military to murder President Kennedy.

Valenti still has a deep-seated sense of loyalty to his former boss and said he "cannot and will not allow Mr. Stone to foul the memory of Lyndon Johnson."

Valenti charged Stone with buttressing his "quackery" by reading only two books, one by former New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison. According to Valenti, Garrison engages in "hallucinatory bleatings" in a book that resembles a "slag heap of loony theories."

Garrison states that the Warren Commission and LBJ deliberately covered up the assassination plot but, said Valenti, does not supply evidence for this assertion.

"The question this movie doesn't ask, much less answer, is how come Oliver Stone places such faith in Garrison whose wild surmises leaked credibility from the start; whose proof is non-existent; whose loose-fibered charges never found allies among any group, even those who passionately support a 'conspiracy theory,'" Valenti said.

The bottom line, he said, is that he was there and Stone wasn't.

Valenti recalled being in the motorcade when Kennedy was murdered and flying on Air Force One with the flag-draped coffin on the way back to Washington.

As Johnson's special assistant, Valenti said he took part in meetings when key decisions were taken, he read even the most top-secret papers that crossed LBJ's desk and was "ear-witness" to many confidential phone conversations.

"I participated in practically all the meetings on Vietnam from Nov. 22, 1963 to June 1966," Valenti said, adding that he was privy to the innermost thoughts of Johnson.

He recalled being there when the Warren Commission was formed and when Johnson pondered the assassination.

"Does any sane human being truly believe that President Johnson, the Warren Commission members, law enforcement officers, CIA, FBI, White House aides and assorted thugs, weirdos and frisbee-throwers all conspired together as plotters in Garrison's wacky sightings? And then for almost 29 years nothing leaked? But you have to believe it if you think well of any part of this accusatory lunacy," Valenti declared. "Of course, Mr. Stone is himself convinced, which proves that when a man is determined to believe, the absurdity of the doctrine only serves to confirm his faith."

"No matter his brilliant creative skills, and they are more than considerable, Mr. Stone has with deliberate forethought put on the screen a monstrous charade about President Johnson that ranks right up there with the best of the old-guard Soviet revisionist historians," he said.

Like Stone, Warner Bros. also declined to add to its statements made to the New York Times on Wednesday. Robert Daly, chairman of Warner Bros., told the Times that the company supported

Stone but understood Valenti's fury. "We have the utmost regard for what Oliver Stone did. As far as Jack Valenti is concerned, the fact that he's loyal to LBJ is admirable, and I would hope anybody who worked for me for all those years would be that loyal. I have nothing but the highest regard for Jack."

Frank Mankiewicz, who was press secretary to Sen. Robert Kennedy and is vice-chairman of Hill and Knowlton, which represents Warner Bros. and the movie "JFK," said he admired Valenti's loyalty to Johnson but that the movie never said LBJ was involved in the assassination conspiracy.

"I don't think Jack ever saw 'JFK,'" Mankiewicz said. "He's wrong about the movie accusing LBJ as being a conspirator when it never does. The movie takes the position that the Warren Commission was wrong and Johnson was one of the people who did not want anyone to think there was a conspiracy. It doesn't say he was part of the conspiracy." □