

WHO KILLED JFK?

AND
WHY WE
STILL HAVE
TO ASK



The fatal 1963 ride in the Dallas motorcade, left; and as recreated in Oliver Stone's film, below.

President Kennedy died almost 30 years ago—but the controversy over who killed him never has.

Now a new film is reigniting a passionate debate on the subject.

Everybody agrees that at about 12:30 P.M. on November 22, 1963, John F. Kennedy was struck by a bullet as his motorcade passed in front of the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas's Dealey Plaza and that a few moments later he was struck again by another bullet. But almost every remaining detail of the shooting is in dispute: who fired the shots, why they were fired, where they were fired from, exactly where Kennedy was hit. These and dozens more such questions have both fascinated and tormented Americans for more than 28 years. They are likely to be revived once again by the release in late December of Oliver Stone's new movie, *JFK*, and the fierce controversies that have surrounded it for the past year.

Almost as soon as the Warren Commission released its 1964 report concluding that Kennedy was shot by Lee Harvey Oswald acting on his own, independent researchers—from recognized forensic experts to the "lunatic fringe" of conspiracy buffs—began digging into the case. They raised questions about how Oswald could have done it, what his motivations could have been, what witnesses in Dealey Plaza saw and heard, what photos and films of the events actually revealed.

Each potential answer, however, has only inspired more questions. A recent *Washington Post* poll found that 56 percent of Americans



Photographs, Top to Bottom: Courtesy of Neilson



All-American Kevin Costner as Jim Garrison, above; Oliver Stone, left.

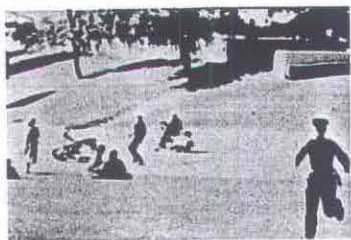


believe Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy of some kind. Says Harold Weisberg, author of *Whitewash*, one of the earliest critical books on the Warren Commission, "Interest in the case today is higher than it has been for ten years. People are dissatisfied that a president so many loved—including generations who never knew him—has been consigned to history with so dubious an epitaph. People care."

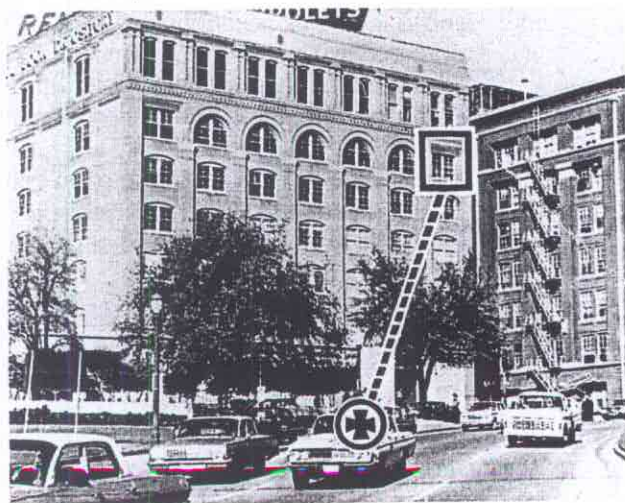
JFK stars Kevin Costner as former New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison, who, after a controversial 1967 investigation, indicted but failed to convict a New Orleans businessman (and, according to Garrison, CIA operative) named Clay Shaw. According to Garrison, Shaw had conspired with Oswald and members of the U.S. intelligence community to assassinate Kennedy, presumably in retaliation for what they believed were Kennedy's efforts to reverse United States Cold War policies. Though the investigation still has its defenders, others consider it to have been not only a fraud but a sideshow that made it far more difficult for other Warren Commission critics to be taken seriously. Says Josiah Thompson, author of the 1967 book *Six Seconds in Dallas*, "I feared for a long time that the silliness, the disaster, of Garrison's investigation might put out the fire of the whole critical movement. And for a few years it did."

The criticism hurled at Stone for his reliance on the Garrison case has been intense, ranging from that of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, which called Stone "a gullible from La-La Land," to the *Chicago Tribune's* commentary that Stone and his movie were "morally repugnant." In response Stone complained that his critics (whom he called "Doberman pinschers trained to protect the government") were trying "to kill off the film, precensor it and maximize negative advance impact. . . . It gets tiring having my neck in the guillotine all the time." But it's not only those who "protect the government" who are apprehensive about the film. Says Paul Hoch, a longtime conspiracy researcher who coedited *The Assassinations: Dallas and Beyond*, "What I'm concerned about is the mythologizing of Jim Garrison—people will think of Jim Garrison as Kevin Costner. On the other hand some people are hopeful this film will stir up something productive, like a drive to get more of the [government's] files opened to the public."

How confusing are the questions surrounding JFK's death? Very. Oswald's biography, for example, became so complex that some critics suspected the Oswald arrested in Dallas was not the same person as the Oswald who was born in New Orleans to Marguerite Oswald in 1939. And material basic to critics of the Warren Report,



Bystanders running toward the soon-to-be-famous "grassy knoll," above; the window of the School Book Depository from which Oswald allegedly shot the President, right.



such as the Abraham Zapruder 8-millimeter film of the assassination, has been called into question: Critic David Lifton argued, in his 1980 book *Best Evidence*, that Zapruder's home movie was in the possession of the CIA by the night of the shooting and may have been photographically altered. (See "The Clues Yet to Come," page 74.)

Adding to—rather than solving—the mystery, the House Select Committee on Assassinations reopened the government's inquiry into the murder in the late 1970s. Its most important evidence, discovered years after the Warren Commission issued its report, was a Dictabelt recording of events in Dealey Plaza made from a police motorcycle microphone that was stuck open. Acoustics experts concluded the tape showed that, contrary to the Warren Commission conclusions, a shot *had* been fired from the grassy-knoll location—but that it had bypassed Kennedy. The committee did conclude in 1979 that there was a probable conspiracy to assassinate the President, though it did not conclusively finger the participants.

Then there is the forensic controversy. Observations of Kennedy's body by Parkland Hospital emergency-room personnel in Dallas conflict with the results of his autopsy performed in Bethesda Naval Hospital on the night of November 22. In *Best Evidence* David Lifton argued that the body was surgically altered before the autopsy to "prove" a single gunman and that JFK left Dallas in one coffin and arrived at Bethesda in another.

While this ranks among the more ghoulish theories, facts that would support Lifton have been testified to by witnesses from both hospitals.

Although the terrain is slippery, here are some of the explanations that have been set forth to account for the events in Dallas so many years ago:

(RELATIVELY) MAINSTREAM THEORIES

The Lone-Nut Theory: The Warren Commission concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald, perhaps motivated by a twisted desire for fame, acted alone in shooting Kennedy and that Jack Ruby, also acting alone, shot Oswald to spare the Kennedy family the grief of a trial. Critics noted immediately that several witnesses believed gunfire had come from a direction other than that of the School Book Depository, where Oswald was presumably situated. Although the commission's report has fallen into wide disrepute, it has always had its defenders. David Belin, a Warren Commission lawyer, blames the wide public doubt on the secrecy of the commission's proceedings. "I am convinced," he says today, "that if the hear-



Revenge? Jack Ruby, above, and as he shot Oswald, right.

ings with witnesses had been open to the public, with the press in attendance, there wouldn't be such doubt and that Oliver Stone wouldn't have a film today." Not so easy, says Josiah Thompson. "If there was an immensely plausible answer to the problems the Warren Commission critics have thrown up, it would have been offered in the public arena," he argues. "The case doesn't work."



belief in the Warren Report and the more outlandish theories of some of the conspiracy buffs.

THE CLUES YET TO COME

Many experts agree that the most fertile field of investigation regarding the remaining mysteries of President Kennedy's death is forensic. We asked David S. Lifton, author of the 1980 book *Best Evidence* and an upcoming biography of Lee Harvey Oswald, what information future forensic inquiries might yield.

McCALL'S: What's the major remaining forensic question regarding JFK's death?

DAVID S. LIFTON: The location of President Kennedy's large, fatal head wound—which would tell us from which direction he was shot. The doctors at Dallas's Parkland Hospital reported an egg-sized exit

wound at the right rear of the President's head—which, if true, means that, contrary to the Warren Commission's findings, Kennedy was shot from the front (and probably from the grassy knoll). But the Bethesda Naval Hospital doctors who received the President's body on the night of the assassination reported a much larger hole—one that started at the rear of the head and extended to the top—which would mean that JFK was shot from behind, and probably from the School Book Depository. On the other hand, the autopsy photographs show no large hole at the back of the head at all—the exit wound depicted

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The CIA/Mafia Theory: This is premised on JFK's supposed belief that the CIA was out of control, that he intended to destroy it and, most important, that he planned to end U.S. involvement in Vietnam. To stop Kennedy, "rogue" elements in the CIA, working with some combination of the FBI, the Mafia, right-wing extremists and anti-Castro Cubans, killed him, effectively pulling off a coup d'état. There are many permutations of this theory, and Garrison himself was purportedly pursuing one variation of it; to the consternation of many of his critics, however, he omitted the Mafia.

According to John Newman, a consultant to Stone who is a lecturer in East Asian history at the University of Maryland and author of the forthcoming book *JFK and Vietnam*, "There is unequivocal evidence—hard, documentary evidence—that Kennedy was going to withdraw from Vietnam, but he lied

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(continued from page 74)

publicly about his intent to do so." Newman does not link JFK's intentions regarding Vietnam to his assassination but, he says, "It's a very good question to look at. It's an exciting question—and a tragic one, if it's true." Some have suggested that Stone, who fought in Vietnam and also directed *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, is drawn to some version of the CIA-Vietnam theory because of his obsession with the Vietnam War.

FRINGE THEORIES

The KGB Theory: In this theory, Oswald, who defected to the Soviet Union in 1959, was not the same Oswald who returned in 1962 to the U.S.; he had been replaced by a KGB look-alike

whose mission was to kill the President. This theory was advanced in 1977 by British author Michael Eddowes, who gained sufficient support from Texas officials and Oswald's widow, Marina, to have Oswald's body exhumed in 1981. However, the body was identified as that of the "original" Oswald.

The Castro Theory: Fidel Castro, knowing that the CIA wanted to assassinate him, supposedly avenged himself by murdering Kennedy. Castro has denied any connection to the assassination.

The Wall-Street Theory: Fortunes were made on November 22, 1963, by some Wall Street investors whose actions suggest they had preknowledge of the assassination and the likely stock market dis-

THE CLUES YET TO COME

(continued from page 74)

there is confined to the top of the head; and the autopsy X-rays show something still different from all the rest: a large hole at the top front—indeed, so far to the front that the hole extends into the area of the right eye socket.

These divergent descriptions of "hard" evidence indicate that either many people misreported what they saw or, alternately, that somebody faked the evidence.

MCCALL'S: How could the question of the head wound's location be answered?

LIFTON: There are two paths. One is to subject the Zapruder film to a rigorous forensic examination. There are frames where a large head wound is visible on the front of the head—but it's translucent, its boundaries change, it moves about—in short, it doesn't look "real," and it certainly doesn't correspond to what the Dallas doctors reported.

The next step would be exhumation of President Kennedy's body.

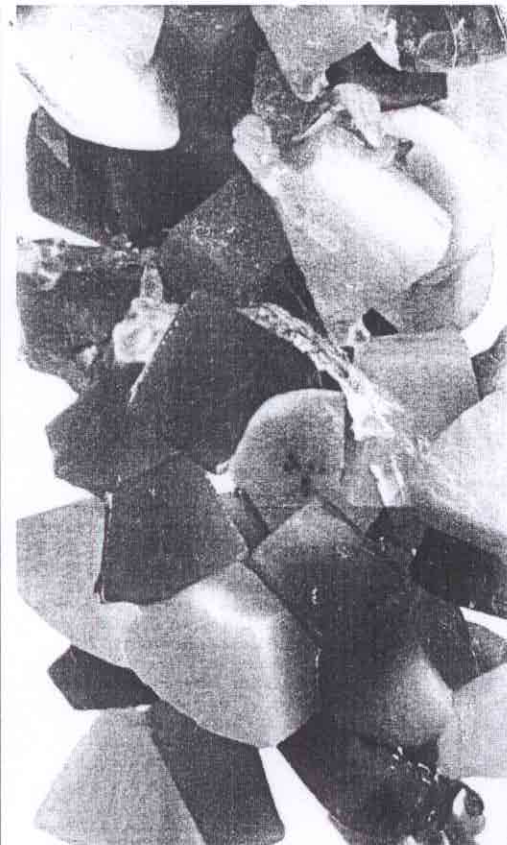
MCCALL'S: What would you look for?

LIFTON: The morticians at Gawler's

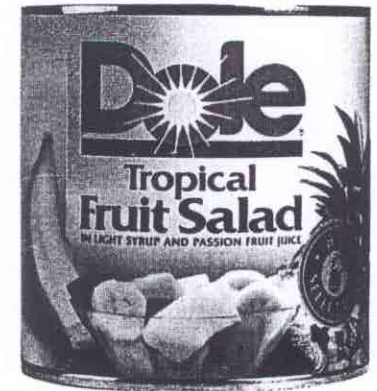
Funeral Home in Washington, D.C., who prepared the President's body, told Jim Bishop, author of *The Day Kennedy Was Shot*, that a wire mesh was used to cover the wound in Kennedy's head. Unlike tissue, wire mesh does not decay. So the mesh should be a reliable guide to where the hole was located.

If the wire mesh is found at the back of the head, where the Dallas doctors saw the egg-sized wound, then that would raise serious questions about the official autopsy X-rays provided by the Secret Service to the Kennedy family, utilized by the House Assassinations Committee, and now stored at the National Archives. But if the mesh matches the hole shown in the X-rays, that would suggest the Dallas doctors were wrong—that they somehow, collectively, misperceived the location of a large wound in the President's head.

But I think political forces—the opposition of the Kennedy family combined with all those who have staked their credibility on the Warren Commission—dictate that an exhumation will never take place. Or at least not in our lifetime.



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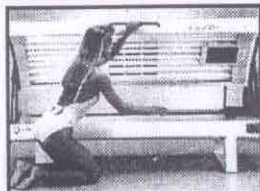
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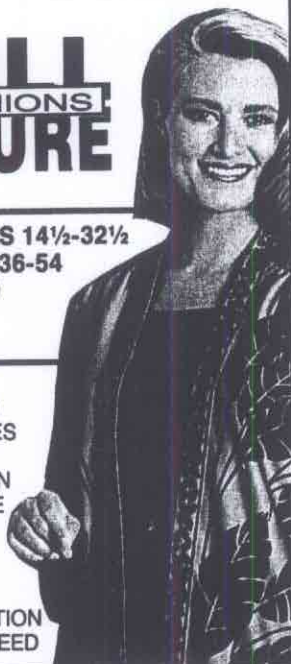
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WHO KILLED JFK?

ructions that would follow. Only one author, writing in 1967 under a pseudonym (Lincoln Lawrence), has suggested that Kennedy was shot in order to set these events in motion, but others have agreed that people with preknowledge might well have also acted to profit from what they knew.

The French Connection Theory: This suggests that a trio of world-class assassins connected to organized crime in Marseilles were imported to kill the President. This theory was most extensively developed by American researcher Steve Rivele, who publicized his findings in 1988 and who has since reportedly gone into hiding.

It is also possible, of course, to reject the Warren Report without developing an elaborate conspiracy theory. Says Josiah Thompson, "I don't see the Warren Commission report as a sinister conspiracy. Clearly what the commission wanted—what all of us wanted—was that the assassination have no political significance, that it be almost like an act of nature. I see the commission as basically a bunch of old fogies misled by the young turks on their staff who wanted to please them. Only later was it possible to see the contradictions between the report and some of the evidence."

Garrison's 1967 investigation (and his 1988 book, *On the Trail of the Assassins*), on which Stone's movie is partially based, came at an important, perhaps vital, moment in the history of the Kennedy case. Mark Lane's 1966 book, *Rush to Judgment*, had been a best-seller, and other critical studies, such as Edward J. Epstein's *Inquest* and Weisberg's *Whitewash*, had attracted press and TV attention. The newsstands were filled with magazines offering skeptical essays and blowups from the Zapruder film. Everyone had learned the term *grassy knoll*.

All of the skeptics' hopes were raised by Garrison. But although Garrison's statements about cracking the case were consistently confident—he claimed publicly to have "solved" the assassination "beyond the shadow of a doubt"—the

actual trial struck many as a farce. (It was discovered that the man he tried to finger as a second gunman, for instance, had died in 1962.) The case against Shaw was so thin that the jury took under an hour to find him not guilty of anything. That's less than half the time it'll take to sit through Stone's movie.

Last summer, in response to his critics, Stone denied that his film was a paean to Garrison and insisted that the finished film (which he called a "whydunit") will reflect numerous possible assassination scenarios. He compared *JFK* to the famous Japanese film *Rashomon*, which suggests that the truth of any event may, perhaps, never be ascertained.

But others insist that the answers are within our grasp—if we have the courage and the resources to look for them. Says David Scheim, author of *Contract on America: The Mafia Murder of JFK*, "There are 100 aging people out there who may yet break [the case]." Paul Hoch adds, "The biggest area of evidence that is left unsettled is medical. If I had one percent of the money Oliver Stone spent on this film to reconvene a panel to take another look at the evidence..." Josiah Thompson suggests, "You don't have to chase will-o'-the-wisp conspiracies; you can perform scientific experiments that will put the questions to rest."

Why does Kennedy's death still haunt us so? Oliver Stone, age 45, has called JFK "the godfather of my generation." Explains Thompson, age 56, "The experience of that event, and the arduous labor of looking into it, have been a genuine loss of innocence never to be recovered. For most people of my generation, it has enormous power. And whether or not Oliver Stone can make out his argument about its being linked to Vietnam, in some way we feel that all our troubles began there [with the assassination]. If the young king is murdered, and we don't know how or who or why, there's some sort of shadow that's cast over who we are and what our society is. It's sort of like that dank castle through which Hamlet wanders." ■

Charles Paul Freund is a writer and editor at *The Washington Post*.

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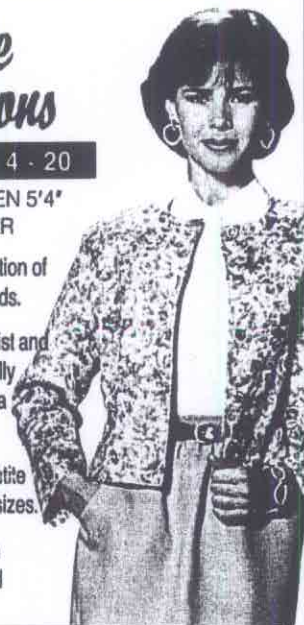
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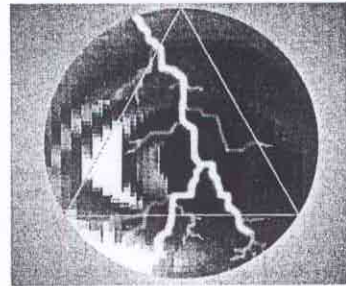
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