



WARNER BROS. PHOTO

Kevin Costner portrays District Attorney Jim Garrison in "JFK."

The 'JFK' version

Assassination film sparks word war

By Charles E. Claffey
GLOBE STAFF

Against the background of a withering crossfire of criticism from the media and some members of the ever-expanding Kennedy assassination conspiracy theory club, Oliver Stone's "JFK" opens tomorrow in Boston.

A blend of fiction and a pot-pourri of conspiracy theories fea-

turing the widely disparaged speculations of former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, the maverick moviemaker's film has stirred up almost as much pre-release publicity as David O. Selznick's "Gone With The Wind" more than a half-century ago.

Most of the free publicity has been negative. Stone's critics
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have expressed anger and concern that

his reliance on the Garrison theory will create a distortion of history that constitutes artistic irresponsibility. They charge he is playing a

deceitful and dangerous game with a ghastly episode in American history.

Stone casts himself in the role of a truth-seeker. He and his defenders take the view that the movie may bring about a much-needed reexamination of President John F. Kennedy's murder.

His detractors cry exploitive commercialism - made worse in his case because of the Oscar-winning director's past reputation for artistic honesty.

Tom Wicker, the respected New York Times columnist, wrote last Sunday that "of all the numerous conspiracy theorists and zealous investigators who for nearly 30 years have been peering at and probing the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Mr. Garrison may be the most thoroughly discredited..."

Wicker complained, and so do others, that the film treats "matters that are wholly speculative as fact and truth, in effect rewriting history."

As far back as last May, George Lardner Jr., a veteran political reporter for the Washington Post, wrote a piece from Dallas during the filming of "JFK" that charged Stone with "chasing fiction. Garrison's investigation was a fraud."

In that piece, Lardner quoted Harold Weisberg, the 78-year-old dean of Kennedy assassination investigator-writers, as saying of the film: "To do a mishmash like this is out of love for the victim and respect for history? I think people who sell sex have more principle."

In June, the Post printed in its Outlook section a letter by Stone in which he retaliated against the Lardner article, blaming the newspaper for "sticking by the Warren Commission Report" and supporting "an account of the assassination more fictional than I could ever imagine."

A call of "vigilance"

Stone wrote that his purpose in making the movie was not to solve the mystery of the murder but to "remind people how much our nation and our people lost when President Kennedy died, and to ask anew what might have happened and why." He quoted Thomas Jefferson: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

The price of the Stone film is said to be about \$40 million and, his critics say, the opening of a film with

such an unholiday-like theme during the usually profitable Christmas season is exploitively commercial, not to mention aesthetically inappropriate.

In an article in Esquire magazine, Robert Sam Anson charged that Stone was probably instrumental in railroading a competing film based on Don DeLillo's novel "Libra," a critically acclaimed best-seller, that threatened to appear in theaters before "JFK."

"Actors who'd seemed ready to sign with 'Libra' suddenly changed their minds, reportedly after receiving calls from Stone's agency, Mike Ovitz's powerful Creative Arts Agency, cautioning about questionable career moves," Anson wrote.

Stone disavowed any involvement in impeding the making of "Libra," but few in Hollywood believed him, Anson said.

The conspiracy theory of the Stone film neatly coincides with Stone's obsession about the Vietnam war, which, the movie posits, motivated the killing because the president was believed to be about to withdraw US troops from Indochina. The movie is said to implicate the CIA, the military-industrial juggernaut that stood to lose heavily if the US abandoned Vietnam, and even Lyndon B. Johnson.

In 1967, Garrison prosecuted Clay Shaw, a New Orleans businessman, in the only Kennedy assassination case that went to criminal trial. Shaw was acquitted in a case in which Garrison tried to prove that right-wing CIA agents and anti-Castro Cubans conspired to murder the president. The 69-year-old Garrison is now a judge in New Orleans.

Many theories

In the 28 years since Kennedy's murder in Dallas' Dealey Plaza, a plethora of books has emerged that presents countless theories questioning the veracity of the Warren Commission's finding that Lee Harvey Oswald alone shot and killed Kennedy from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository.

One assassination theorist who is angry at the Stone film is G. Robert Blakey, former chief counsel to the House Select Committee on Assassinations and co-author of "The Plot To Kill The President."

Blakey drew on the Bible to express his contempt:

"As an artist, Stone has a free-speech right to say whatever he

wants. But the Bible tells us that that those who lie to the young should have millstones tied around their necks and be thrown into the sea," Blakey said in a telephone interview from South Bend, Ind., where he is a professor at the University of Notre Dame Law School.

Blakey noted that the House committee, in existence from 1977 to 1979, "carefully examined the performance of the Warren Commission," named for Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren and created in 1964 to investigate the president's slaying.

"That they [members of the commission] made mistakes is clear. That they were dishonest is a damnable lie," he said. Blakey agrees with the commission's conclusion that Oswald fired two shots that hit the president from the back. He was not hit from the front, as some theorists contend, he believes.

"Jim Garrison's investigation had some elements of truth but they were so minimal compared to his falsifications that they pale into insignificance," Blakey said.

Blakey's theory is that organized crime - the mob - probably masterminded the Kennedy assassination.

Weisberg, author of "Whitewash" and other books about the assassination, said in a telephone interview from his home in Frederick, Md., that last February he wrote Stone a letter advising against using the Garrison book, "In The Trail of the Assassins," as the basis for a movie. He never received a reply, Weisberg said.

"Stone had plenty of time to get a new script but he chose not to," said Weisberg, who obtained a copy of the "JFK" script.

"It is impossible to get a decent, honest script from the Garrison book," Weisberg said. "He [Stone] is one of the most unscrupulous, amoral and exploitive commercializers who ever came down the crooked pike." Weisberg noted with contempt that Stone named his company Camelot Productions and entitled the film "JFK" - "all of this invoking John Kennedy's name to everybody even though it's not really about Kennedy."

Words of praise, support

The Time magazine film critic



WARNER BROS. PHOTO

Gary Oldman portrays Lee Harvey Oswald in a scene from "JFK."

had no problems with the ethics or artistry of "JFK," describing it as a "a knockout. ... Stone's picture is, in both meanings of the word, sensational: it's top-tabloid journalism. In its bravura and breadth, 'JFK' is seductively enthralling; in its craft, wondrously complex." Among Stone's defenders are Carl Oglesby of Cambridge, founder/director of the Assassination Information Bureau, who has written an afterword to the Garrison book.

"The real issue with the movie is not whether Oliver Stone has adhered to the factual record but whether or not he has touched the soul of truth," said Oglesby, who has not seen the film but has read the shooting script and seen a couple of scenes.

"If it's not the truth, then has he given body to the beliefs of the American people? I think he has," said Oglesby, noting that "the power of the movie lies in the fact that 65 to 70 percent of the people believe that the assassination was a conspiracy that was covered up."

Oglesby adds that "I have watched Stone in action and I am under no illusions that he is very much a commercial movie-maker. He wouldn't touch a project if he didn't think it would make money.

"On the other hand, there is no doubt that he is unique among big league movie makers in that he does

have a well-developed social conscience. Look at the pattern of his movies. He is always trying to probe the culture from a critical standpoint. I think he is right in thinking that the coverup of the JFK assassination has gone a long way toward poisoning American attitudes toward politics in general. That we are in the grip of malaise is attributable to

Dealey Plaza, and Stone has realized this."

Panel's findings

In its final report in 1979, the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that President Kennedy was "the victim of a probable murder conspiracy that might be traced to an individual organized crime figure or a small underworld group."

The report named Carlos Marcello and Santos Trafficante as the "most likely family bosses of organized crime" to have participated in such an assassination plan, although it could find no evidence that either had conspired to murder the president.

Some assassination trackers feel that one positive effect of the Stone film could be to exert pressure on the US government to open the committee files, which the committee ordered sealed until 2029, 50 years after the panel finished its work.

James Lesar, director of the Assassination Archives and Research Center in Washington, said that "the remarkable dilemma is that so many people are talking about the Kennedy slaying without appreciating the fact that largest single body of findings that found a conspiracy is still under embargo. It also would help if the film resulted in pressure being put on the CIA to reexamine its policy of virtual total suppression of records relating to the Kennedy assassination."

It may be worth considering why, if there was a conspiracy and Oswald was a patsy as he claimed, no solid information relating to such a plot has emerged nearly three decades later to discredit the lone-gun-

man-on-his-own theory.

In a slim, thoughtful book called "Conspiracy Interpretations of the Assassination of President Kennedy," published in 1968, Alfred Goldberg quoted Freud as writing that "it takes a high degree of sophistication to believe in chance; primitive fears are allayed more easily by a devil theory of politics."

Deprecating all the conspiracy theories, Goldberg wrote that "to accept the mountain of improbabilities in these conspiracy hypotheses required a far greater suspension of logic and judgment than does the Warren Commission report with its imperfections. Indeed, it is the presence of these real life imperfections which is one of the strongest arguments for the fundamental honesty and soundness of the Report."

"If there was a conspiracy," Goldberg concluded, the Warren Commission never found it out, nor did any other government agency. "It is, of course, perfectly possible, even probable, that they never found a conspiracy because there was none. But this will not discourage others from continuing the search, for to many people suspicion and search are an end in themselves."