

Accuracy of JFK movie questioned

What bothers Professor David Wrone most about the forthcoming movie "JFK" is that it will "poison the mind of America."

The historian at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point is vehement in his opposition to Oliver Stone's film focusing on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. On Friday, 800 theaters throughout the country will begin screening it.

"This is an instance of great wealth being used to manipulate our past, and that shouldn't be," Wrone says.

The professor, who was rated in 1975 by The Saturday Evening Post as one of the 19 leading researchers on the killing, charges that the movie story is without fact. A million documents, many gathered by investigators and held for years by the federal government, were offered to Stone, who, in turn, declined to use them, according to Wrone.

Instead, "what is brought into the movie are outrageous speculations and theories that people have conjured up and present as reality."

New Orleans district attorney James Garrison, played by Kevin Costner, is the central figure in the movie. In this instance, Hollywood is creating a hero where evidence is to the contrary, Wrone believes.

Of Stone, he says, "The large question is, can a man of extraordinary wealth and calloused indifference to sound and timely information provided him by genuine critics deliberately pervert the facts of the murder to gain fame and make money?"

Garrison, ever a publicity seeker in Wrone's opinion, became a national celebrity when he prosecuted Clay Shaw for allegedly conspiring with Lee Harvey Oswald and others to kill JFK.

The Associated Press described the trial that ensued as a "farce," adding: "One of Garrison's star witnesses died under mysterious circumstances. Another witness related under cross-examination how he fingerprinted his daughter each time she came home from school to make sure a spy hadn't taken her identity. The prosecution consisted primarily of an attack on the Warren Commission report and the testimony of a number of unusual witnesses. It took the jury less than an hour to acquit Shaw, following a 34-day trial."

The reason given in the movie for the assassination is that Kennedy was probably going to pull out of the Vietnam War, and the U.S. military and others had him shot to stop that action. Wrone calls that theory "a whisky dream."

Is Wrone's criticism misplaced, given the fact that many modern movies on historical themes are a mixture of fact and fiction?

The professor answers with an emphatic "no" because, he says, Stone has referred to the movie as an "authentic historical presentation."

The professor says he has good company in his opposition to the movie, including critics at The New York Times, Esquire and Washington Post.

"A lot of things are going wrong in America today, and this is one of them when people deliberately go out to exploit our past," he says.