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Oliver Stone Talks Back

'JFK' has created a storm of controversy. Here, the director answers his critics and explains the thinking behind his film

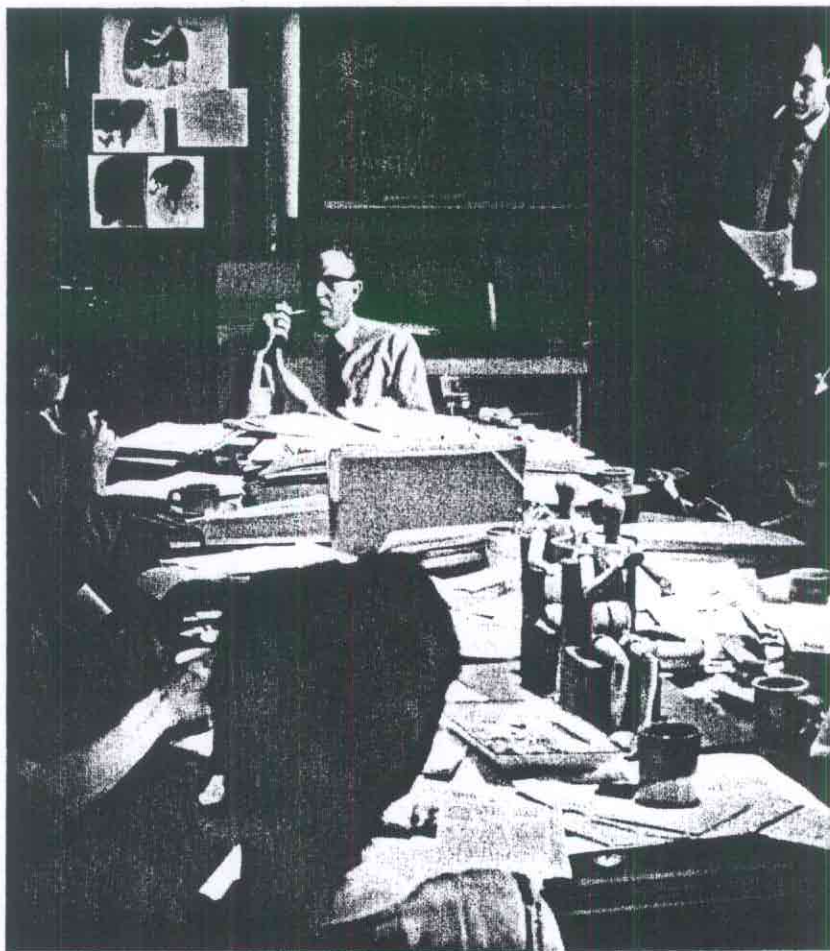
BY OLIVER STONE

THE DIRTY little secret of American journalism is that whenever you watch a TV news

program or read a newspaper that includes coverage of something you saw or knew about or in which you actually participated, even a baseball game, it's generally wrong. Sometimes just a little, sometimes a lot, but wrong.

Now, if that's true, what about all the stories of which we don't have any firsthand knowledge? For that matter, what about history itself? According to Herodotus and Homer, history is gossip, stories heard around a campfire, passed down from bard to bard, father to son. Are we to believe our George Washington texts from primary school or Howard Zinn's multicultural *People's History of the United States*? In most textbooks, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy is reduced to a few short paragraphs following the party line and featuring the obvious names: J.F.K., L.B.J., Jackie, Earl Warren, Jack Ruby, and, of course, Lee Harvey Oswald, the "lone assassin." This is supposed to be "the truth."

There is a saying: "A lie is like a snowball—the longer it is rolled, the larger it is." The Warren Commission conclusion—that Oswald, acting alone, killed Kennedy—is that lie. America's Official Story. "History," in its original Greek



PREMIERE JANUARY 1992

sense (*historia*), means "inquiry," and in that light, my film, any film, any work of art, has the right to reexplore an event. Nevertheless, just by talking about a movie dealing with those events and preparing a first draft script, we had touched a raw nerve.

BY LATE MAY 1991, BARELY SIX WEEKS into the shooting schedule, it was clear that *JFK* was no longer a film but a matter of "national security." I found an article entitled "ON THE SET: DALLAS IN WONDERLAND" splashed across the front page of the political Sunday Outlook section of *The Washington Post*, written by George Lardner, Jr., a reporter with considerable experience covering the CIA. A grotesque cartoon topped the article, demonizing me like Saddam Hussein. It added 30 pounds to my girth, enlarged my fingers into sausages of greed; all that was missing was the foam dripping from my mouth.

Lardner's article accused me of both distorting and profiting from the J.F.K. murder, meanwhile quoting liberally from what I consider to be a stolen first draft of the script that he had acquired from a bitter researcher in the J.F.K. conspiracy community, who, I hear, continues, illegally, to sell copies of the script for \$30 each. (Like all writers, I constantly revise my work—the shooting script was the sixth draft, different in crucial ways from the first.) Lardner seemed to be advocating precensorship of *JFK* or trying to discourage people from seeing the movie. He made it quite clear, given his reporting on the Jim Garrison investigation and the 1976-79 House Select Committee on Assassinations, that he did not want the event investigated any further by me, or by anyone else for that matter. Oddly enough, in the course of his attack on my film, he casually acknowledged that experts said there was a fourth shot (fired from the grassy knoll, not Oswald's Texas School Book Depository) and thus a conspiracy to kill J.F.K.!

Taking Lardner's cue, a *Chicago Tribune* columnist pronounced me a threat to history, and *Time* quickly followed with a full page-and-a-half review of the unseen film, giving it far more space than it normally allocates to a finished film.

Of course, *Time* has its own dubious history in the J.F.K. affair: *Time* Inc. paid a huge sum for the 8mm film Abraham Zapruder shot at the scene and kept it locked in a vault for twelve years, refusing most requests to see it, on the grounds that the public would find it upsetting. *Time* has persistently misstated some of the facts of the case—some say for its own nonartistic purposes—to make sure that Jim Garrison is ensconced in the lunatic fringe of the paranoid conspiracy buffs.

Kennedy's death only becomes more troubling with time. Virtually every aspect of the case is fraught with questions that won't go away. Why did the crowd in Dealey Plaza, including the Dallas police and sheriffs, run up the infamous grassy knoll immediately after the shooting stopped? If Oswald was a lonely drifter, why did he have so many apparent ties to the U.S. intelligence community? How could Ruby walk into the Dallas Police Station and shoot Oswald with more than 70 policemen standing guard? If the assassination really was the work of a single disil-



ARND BRONKHORST



Top: The real Jim Garrison in 1967. Above: Kevin Costner playing the New Orleans D.A.; Stone made Garrison's Capraesque story the spine of his movie.

Puzzle

Oswald
remains
an enigma,
so I took



FLIP SCHULIKER/BUCKSTAR

his lines ver-
batim from tran-
scripts and news
footage.



Center: Mug shot of the real Lee Harvey Oswald. Above: Gary Oldman as Oswald

lusioned Communist, why is the government still withholding the records of the HSCA and some of the key Warren Commission files, on the grounds of "national security"?

It is completely beyond me, as a twice-wounded combat veteran, that grown men on government panels, some supposedly experts in wound ballistics and firearms, can sit through the 22-second Zapruder film and say that it looks like the fatal head shot came from behind. Or that the solitary, infamous "magic bullet" could cause seven wounds in Kennedy and Governor John Connally, breaking two dense bones, and emerge with virtually no metal missing, not to mention traveling along a path that defies the laws of physics. In the face of such implausibilities and new acoustics evidence, the 1979 *HSCA Report* acknowledged the 95 percent probability of a grassy-knoll shot, but immediately the government and the Establishment media downplayed those official "fourth shot" findings in favor of the comfortable, altogether unlikely Oswald-did-it-alone scenario.

You'd expect that the press would be as vigilant on the glaring problems with the Official Story and the lone-nut theory as they have been to our movie. But just as the government has failed twice at investigating the assassination, the national media have failed both at getting to the truth and at selling their "truth" to the public. According to a recent Gallup poll, 73 percent of Americans think there was a conspiracy to kill Kennedy. Only 16 percent believe the Warren Commission's conclusions.

The Washington Post, without even a hint of shame, ran a curious editorial just after the disclosure of the fourth-shot conclusion, warning the American public that simply because at least two "malcontents" were shooting at President Kennedy at the same time, it didn't necessarily mean that there was a conspiracy.

AFTER READING WIDELY IN THE assassination literature, I chose to make the story of former New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison (played by Kevin Costner) the narrative framework of the movie. I was taken with the way in which a man starts to investigate one small corner of the conspiracy—in this case, the summer of 1963 in New Orleans, where Oswald passed the time—and comes to realize that a small-town whodunit has global repercussions. And moreover, he finds that his life and his family's life are darkened forever, all because he has opened up the floorboards and let in the light on a taboo subject that some powerful people wanted to remain hidden. Like a Capra everyman, he is darkened and sacrificed, yet wins his soul in the end. There are many flaws in the real Garrison (arrogance and paranoia, to name a couple), but we did not deal with them in the film, because you either had to make Garrison the issue or make Kennedy the issue. I chose Kennedy.

Personally, I've never found Garrison to be the "kook" pictured by a hostile press. Despite the caricatures of him as a modern Huey Long, he is an extremely well read author of three articulate books, an eloquent and witty speaker, a street-popular, thrice-elected DA, a patriotic 27-year military man, an ex-FBI agent, and an

appellate judge.

Oliver Stone Talks Back

I took the dramatic liberty of having Garrison and his staff uncover much of the evidence that was really uncovered by other, uncredited researchers, such as Sylvia Meagher, Josiah Thompson, Mark Lane, Robert Groden, Peter Dale Scott, Paul Hoch, and Mary Ferrell. (It is typically Capraesque that private citizens have done the work while government bodies stagnated.) As a result, the film brings together several layers of research from the '60s, '70s, and '80s, we hope, in a seamless jigsaw puzzle that will allow the audience, for the first time, to understand what happened and why. As an outsider to conspiracy theories until the late '80s, I was always confused by competing theories—involving the Mafia, the CIA, Castro, anti-Castro Cubans, etc.—which, of course, allow the Lie to continue.

Today, even Garrison acknowledges the mistakes in his investigation and expresses doubt that the man he charged with conspiracy to kill the president, Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones), was ever more than a fringe player. However, he did have evidence that appeared to connect Shaw and Oswald, and even more intriguing leads suggesting that Shaw was the mysterious "Clay Bertrand," who called a New Orleans attorney the day of the assassination and asked him to go to Dallas to represent Oswald.

Shaw appeared to have good intelligence-community connections—he served in the OSS in World War II and had a position on the board of a trade-show company expelled from Italy for espionage activities, among them raising funds for an assassination attempt on French president Charles de Gaulle, according to Italian and Canadian newspaper reports. There was also the puzzling business in rural Clinton, Louisiana, where, several people state, Shaw and right-wing activist David Ferrie were seen in a black Cadillac, chaperoning Oswald to a Congress for Racial Equality voter registration demonstration.

By getting the case into court, Garrison saw a chance to make the federal government talk truthfully about the assassination, or at least explain the fascinating relationships that Oswald cultivated. Garrison was trying against the odds—and perhaps wrongly—to reach a point of critical mass that would cause a chain reaction of people to come forward and talk, with the hope that the government would then crack and finally deliver the goods.

It was a calculated risk; the legal community condemned Garrison for his tactics. But even worse, it didn't work. The U.S. attorney in Washington declined to serve Garrison's subpoenas on members of the intelligence agencies. Governors from four states refused to extradite witnesses, and Shaw lied repeatedly on the stand, denying any association with Ferrie, Oswald, or members of the intelligence apparatus. Garrison had set out to prove conspiracy—first that there was one in Dealey Plaza and then that Shaw was a part of it. By wresting the Zapruder film from the vaults of Time Inc. (he subpoenaed it), Garrison managed to undermine the claims of the Warren Commission. In posttrial interviews, the jurors indicated they were convinced that there was a conspiracy to kill Kennedy.

Despite some persuasive testimony, howev-

er, Garrison could not convince the jury that Shaw knew Ferrie or Oswald, and he was acquitted. Shortly after the trial ended, Garrison came across two photos of Shaw and Ferrie together at a party—proof positive that they knew each other. We include restagings of the photos as well as the situations in which they were taken, but we do not pretend Garrison had knowledge of them before the trial.

In the same frustrating vein, Shaw's CIA ties were confirmed in later years by ex-CIA director Richard Helms, who admitted Shaw had worked for the agency, and his executive assistant Victor Marchetti, who confirmed Ferrie's CIA ties. Marchetti noted that during the Garrison investigation, Helms repeatedly voiced concern for Shaw's defense, urging the agency to do all it could to help him. These were the breaks Garrison never got.

I TOOK THE LIBERTY OF EXPANDING ON the thrashing Garrison administered to the Warren Commission Report, using the trial as a forum for presenting all the evidence of the J.F.K. case across the board—the Dealey Plaza witnesses, the medical evidence, Oswald's background, photographic evidence, the troubling murder of Dallas policeman J. D. Tippit, the government cover-up. While in no way claiming I now know everything, I allow my Garrison character to speculate to his staff and in the trial on what *might* have happened.

For many scenes, I took dialogue straight from the written record—the Warren Commission volumes and the Shaw trial transcripts—letting history speak for itself. I could not, of course, interview Oswald, Ruby, Ferrie, or Shaw—all of whom died years ago. We tracked down people who knew them. For Oswald (Gary Oldman) and Ruby (Brian Doyle Murray), there is a considerable historical record, audiovisual as well as written. Oswald remains an enigma, so I stuck tightly to the record for his dialogue, taking his lines verbatim from transcripts and news footage. I relied partly on my conversations with his wife, Marina, when we shot scenes of Oswald at home with his family. The picture that emerges is one of a devoted father and husband trying to make a new, difficult marriage work.

Eyewitnesses placed Ruby in Dealey Plaza at various times during the day, at Parkland Hospital after the shooting, and at the Dallas Police Station for a good part of the assassination weekend. Several people also reported seeing Oswald at Ruby's Carousel Club.

Ferrie (Joe Pesci) was a self-styled psychologist/hypnotist/priest, expert pilot, and vehement anti-Communist. He ran a New Orleans unit of the Civil Air Patrol, which had a cadet program that Oswald, as well as many other young boys, joined as teenagers, often to the dismay of their parents and the police. One scene called for Ferrie to make a partial confession to a Garrison investigator, Louis Ivon. The meeting did take place, very shortly before Ferrie's mysterious death, and Ivon remembers it well. The written record indicates that Ferrie was not one for subtlety or sugarcoating ("There is nothing that I would enjoy better than blowing the hell out of

Withdrawal



Kennedy knew that with a 1964 re-election victory, he could move forcefully to end the Cold War.



Did the shots come only from this building? The Warren Commission says yes, but many—including the House Select Committee on Assassinations, Garrison, and Stone—say no.



Lyndon Baines Johnson, with Jacqueline Kennedy, being sworn in as the 36th president of the United States. Under his administration, the U.S. escalated the Vietnam War.

Everywhere

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



Eyewitnesses reportedly

placed Ruby in Dealey Plaza that day and at Parkland Hospital.



Spacek and Costner: Stone charges that Garrison has been portrayed by a hostile press as a kook, a new Huey Long.

UPI/BETTMAN NEWSPHOTOS



Above: The real Jack Ruby and his "girls." Below: The real Ruby shooting the real Oswald

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



every damn Russian, Communist, Red, or what-have-you. . ."), and it looked like he was about to break shortly before his death. In this scene, Ferrie is nervous, anguished, frightened, and vulnerable—and we're not quite sure if he's telling us the truth.

Oliver Stone Talks Back

Depository. But details

FOR ONE OF GARRISON'S STAR WITNESSES, I created the character of Willie O'Keefe (Kevin Bacon), a young friend of Ferrie's and Shaw's doing time in Angola Penitentiary on prostitution charges. O'Keefe's trial testimony actually belonged to an insurance salesman named Perry Russo, who testified he attended a party at which Shaw, Ferrie, and Oswald discussed the upcoming assassination. I introduced elements of two other New Orleanians—Raymond Broshears and David Logan—to explore more fully the Ferrie-Shaw-CIA connections in New Orleans in 1963.

Putting O'Keefe in prison was our choice, and, ironically, it made his character potentially less credible, a problem Garrison knew well. Garrison's critics attacked his witnesses for being gays, junkies, political extremists. Garrison had little patience with this, telling reporters, "There are many attorneys who are brilliant liars, and there are dope addicts who have never learned to lie—and that's the case here."

Two composite anti-Castro Cubans appear in shadowy situations throughout the film, as in the puzzling incident in which they, with Oswald in tow, visit a Cuban woman, Silvia Odio, in Dallas shortly before the assassination. Silvia (like Oswald) is very real, but the two men are not based on anyone in particular and represent the active anti-Castro/Communist underworld of the Kennedy era, a movement not limited to Cubans. American mercenaries, organized-crime figures, right-wing fanatics, and the CIA were all heavily involved in plots to subvert and destroy the Castro regime. To them, J.F.K. was soft on communism, and they made no secret of their hatred for him. Ferrie and Ruby ran with elements of this crowd, and so did Oswald, something highly unusual given his public pro-Marxist facade. The two Cubans, as well as ex-FBI agent Guy Banister (Ed Asner) and his sometime associate Jack Martin (Jack Lemmon), help tie these murky associations together.

In reality, Garrison's legal staff consisted of a few assistant DAs and a fluctuating number of volunteer investigators, some of whom doubted his case and gave files and confidential information to the defense. Although I wanted to show the dissension within Garrison's office—and how it might have affected the trial—I needed to limit the number of people involved. I scaled down the investigative force to four assistant DAs and one chief investigator. One of the assistants is Garrison's Judas, and another is a woman, a deliberate nod to the corps of women researchers whose relentless efforts have helped keep the J.F.K. case alive.

SO FAR AS RECREATING THE SCENE OF THE CRIME (Dealey Plaza) is concerned, we employed painstaking detail in turning the three-acre site back 27 years, moving streetlights and signs, cutting back trees, laying railroad tracks, printing exact replicas of the boxes in the Texas School Book

real issue was where the shots were coming from. Taking into account all the available photographic, eyewitness, and acoustic evidence, we hypothetically placed our shooters and fired our shots in an attempt to show mysterious figures, strange occurrences, and an all-out ambush on November 22.

But ultimately, I had to take the assassination out of Dallas and the conspiracy out of New Orleans and bring it all back to Washington, where it really began. To tell the bigger story—the reasons why, as opposed to who or how—I drew from my own personal experience and from Garrison's posttrial writings. Three years ago, I met retired Air Force colonel L. Fletcher Prouty, whose 1973 book, *The Secret Team: The CIA and Its Allies in Control of the United States and the World*, has become something of a classic on the inner workings of the government. Fletcher told me about his experiences as chief of special operations in the joint staff during the Kennedy Administration, the crucial early years of the Vietnam War. We loosely based a character known only as X on him. X meets with Garrison once before the trial and once after, to fill him in on the true meaning of Kennedy's murder.

Unfortunately, Prouty's long and loyal service to his country has been ignored by some today, who cite his association with the far-right Liberty Lobby. As offensive as this group is, Prouty's error in judgment in his later years in no way detracts from his insights into the highest levels of the American intelligence community during the '60s.

Just as production was starting, I had the good fortune of being contacted by John Newman, an academic historian finishing up fifteen years of work on the Vietnam War during the Kennedy years. (His book, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue and the Struggle for Power*, will be out this month.) Newman's thorough policy analysis and dozens of interviews with military and government officials backed up a lot of what Prouty knew from first-hand experience and went way beyond it in scope and documentation. I added Newman's material to the X scenes.

The facts are that Kennedy was deeply ambivalent about the war in Vietnam. He said so privately to a number of his confidants—among them Kennedy aide Kenneth O'Donnell, senators Mike Mansfield and Wayne Morse, and National Security Council staffer Michael Forrestal—and took tentative public steps toward withdrawing our combat advisers. There are three critical documents—National Security Action Memos (NSAMs) 111, 263, and 273—in Kennedy's Vietnam history.

In November 1961, the Joint Chiefs of Staff requested combat troops for Vietnam. Kennedy had turned down a similar request for Laos some months before, and with NSAM 111, he put more advisers into Vietnam but specifically *made no mention of combat troops*. The Joint Chiefs were not placated. How can we justify troops in Vietnam while ignoring Cuba, Kennedy asked. The pressure came to a head in the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, when the Joint Chiefs again pushed Kennedy to invade Cuba. He refused, instead cutting a highly criticized deal with Khrushchev that included a promise not to invade Cuba if all offensive weap-

Exposed



Garrison let in the light on a taboo subject that some very powerful people wanted to remain hidden.



Clay Shaw was tried by Garrison for conspiring to kill President Kennedy.



Lyndon Johnson receiving the "Warren Commission Report" from Earl Warren

Stone says former Air Force colonel L. Fletcher Prouty provided some of the research that he used.



Stone setting up the fatal motorcade

Oliver Stone Talks Back

continue to reverberate in our nightmares.

ons were removed. Less than a year later, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the United States signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, a move that Kennedy called a "step toward reason." He also sought negotiations with Castro through back-door channels; meanwhile, the CIA continued—without his permission—its clandestine program with organized crime to assassinate Castro.

Sometime in 1962, Kennedy started to contemplate a withdrawal from Vietnam by 1965. While maintaining a strong public anti-Communist posture, by 1963 Kennedy knew that with a 1964 reelection victory, he could consolidate his grip on power and move more forcefully to end the Cold War. On October 11, 1963, he showed he meant business, issuing NSAM 263, a "top secret" directive that actually implemented an unannounced 1,000-man withdrawal by the end of that year.

Unfortunately, Kennedy had only six weeks to live. Barely four days after Kennedy was killed, there was a change in Vietnam policy when Lyndon Johnson, the new chief executive, signed NSAM 273, dated November 26, 1963. NSAM 273 paid lip service to the 1,000-man withdrawal but in fact contained escalatory language with respect to war policy. "Although 1,000 men were technically withdrawn, no actual reduction of U.S. strength occurred," said *The Pentagon Papers*.

Under the Johnson Administration, our government had no intention of withdrawing. In *Vietnam: A History*, Stanley Karnow quotes Johnson at a Christmas 1963 cocktail party, telling some of the Joint Chiefs, "Just get me elected, and then you can have your war," an anecdote that we take the liberty of transposing to the Oval Office. As we all know, a significant withdrawal from Vietnam did not happen for a full decade after the assassination, and not until after 58,000 Americans and about 1 million South Vietnamese had died. These are the facts, but hardly the history that we learn in school or in the newspapers.

By 1970, without the benefit of knowing Prouty or Newman, Garrison had reached the same conclusion. He believed that a primary reason J.F.K. was killed was because he wanted to end the military buildup in Southeast Asia.

IN THE END, THE IMPORTANCE OF A historical episode is not just its factual content but its emotional and ethical significance as well. Why did it happen? What did it mean? Was it a triumph or a tragedy? For whom? This process of evaluation, when undertaken by a whole society, eventually leads to the creation of a cultural myth. Unlike children's fairy tales, myths have always expressed the true inner meaning of human events. Myths are dynamic. They reinterpret history in order to create lasting, universal truths. For example, artists for centuries have tackled exactly the same historical and religious stories and produced a Christ with a thousand faces.

From Griffith to Kubrick, moviemakers have operated on the principle that the dramatic force of a story transcends the "facts." With *JFK*, we are attempting to film the true inner meaning of the Dallas labyrinth—the mythical and spiritual dimension of Kennedy's murder—to help us understand why the shots fired in Dealey Plaza still

In a sense, the *Warren Commission Report*, inadequate as a record of facts, was a stunning success as a mythical document. This is the real reason it was so widely accepted when it was first published in September 1964. Still grieving over the loss of the president, people wanted to accept its soothing conclusions, regardless of whether these conclusions were true, because they wanted to believe that the death of a president was a tragic accident, like a car wreck or a bolt of lightning. The gods had intervened—an act of a lone madman who, with poetic justice, was himself shot dead by another lone madman.

Our film's mythology is different, and, hopefully, it will replace the *Warren Commission Report*, as *Gone With the Wind* replaced *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and was in turn replaced by *Roots* and *The Civil War*. Our scenario views Kennedy as maturing by the end of his thousand days in office from a Cold Warrior into a visionary statesman (much like Gorbachev two decades later) who passionately sought détente abroad and an end to racial apartheid at home. Tragically, these progressive, humanitarian objectives sealed J.F.K.'s doom.

The assassination was America's first coup d'état, and it worked. It worked because we never knew that it even happened. And we, Kennedy's godchildren, the baby-boom generation that believed his stirring words and handsome image, are like Hamlet in the first act, children of a slain leader, unaware of why he was killed or even that a false father figure inhabits the throne.

MELANCHOLY SONS AND DAUGHTERS, we remain haunted by Kennedy's ghost and his unfulfilled dreams. Through the '60s, we watched in horror as the opponents of those dreams profited from the closing of the New Frontier. Since November 1963, we have endured Vietnam, Watergate, race riots, assassinations of progressive leaders, escalating war budgets, recession, poverty, crime, drugs, loss of trust in the government, and, most of all, fear—the fear that makes law and order so falsely attractive.

Inevitably, J.F.K.'s death will come to be understood as the beginning of terrible times for the United States and that this tragic conjunction was not a coincidence. I think many Americans already suspect that, rightly or wrongly, November 22, 1963, marked the watershed when the enemy within wrested control of the nation's future from the hands of the people and their elected representatives.

We must start to change things. We must start by looking at the '60s not as history but as a seminal decade for the postwar generation coming into power in the '90s. Dan Quayle's thinking was shaped by the '60s as much as my own, and he may be our next president. We still have a choice. What is past is prologue. To forget that past is to be condemned to relive it.

Oliver Stone is the cowriter-director of JFK. This article was written while the film was still being edited. Various characters and events mentioned may not be in the final version.