

28 Years After Kennedy's Assassination,

By CLIFFORD KRAUSS

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 4 — Nearly three decades after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the film director Oliver Stone has revitalized an American obsession with conspiracies.

Mr. Stone's movie "J.F.K." liberally mixes fiction with fact, and some have dismissed it as an outrageous distortion of history. But the monstrous web of political, government and corporate interests that the film portrays as being behind the killing does reflect widely held suspicions that more than a single gunman was responsible for the slaying.

Public opinion polls taken over the last several years have shown that fewer than one-third of the American people accept the findings of the Warren Commission that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. Unanswered questions about the investigations and the disposition of certain evidence, like autopsy notes that were burned, have only fed the doubts.

A Lawmaker's Doubt

"Will we ever know all the facts and circumstances?" asked Representative Louis Stokes, Democrat of Ohio, the chairman of the former House Select Committee on Assassinations, which conducted its investigation into the slaying in the late 1970's. "No. We don't know all the facts and circumstances about the Lincoln assassination. Assassinations fascinate the American people."

Conspiracy theories began to circulate almost immediately after Kennedy was shot, when broadcast commentators reporting the shooting speculated that Dallas right-wingers might have plotted to kill the President on that sunny Friday afternoon in November 1963.

Since then, the Mafia, Cuba, the Soviet Union, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation have been linked to the crime, both in purportedly serious investigations as well as in various expressions of pop culture over the years.

"MacBird!", a 1960's off-Broadway play, held Lyndon B. Johnson responsible. A recent documentary broadcast by A&E cable television network asserted that Oswald was innocent and that three mob contract killers imported from Marseilles, France, actually shot the President.

A Hasty Investigation

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., an historian and former adviser to Kennedy, noted that "Americans have been susceptible to conspiracy theories" since at least

SUNDAY, JANUARY 5, 1992

Conspiracy Theories Refuse

to Die

the 1830's when many Americans thought Masonic plotters were trying to take over the country. He said that this susceptibility to paranoia was fortified in the Kennedy case by the fact that the Warren Commission investigation was hasty and incomplete.

"Whether a more adequate investigation would have produced a different conclusion," Mr. Schlesinger said, "is a matter of question."

A kaleidoscope of possible motives for the assassination ranges from right-wing disgust at Kennedy's civil rights record to left-wing anger at his Administration's repeated attempts to assassinate President Fidel Castro of Cuba. Complicating the task of determining a motive are the varying interpretations ascribed to the actions of both Kennedy and Oswald.

Much of the available evidence clouds the issue. James J. Humes, the Kennedy autopsy surgeon, burned his notes taken at the time of the autopsy, saying later that he did not think they were important. In addition, the President's brain was lost after it was examined by doctors. Some witnesses to the assassination told investigators they heard three shots; others said they heard four, one of which was fired from a grassy knoll. Then there is the question of why Jack Ruby, a striptease club owner with mob connections, murdered Oswald if not to protect a conspiracy.

Conspiracy buffs say that a home movie filmed by Abraham Zapruder, a dress maker who was at Dealey Plaza the day of the assassination, dispels the Warren Commission contention that

one gunman could have hit Kennedy and Gov. John B. Connally of Texas with the same bullet. But scientific tests commissioned by Congress have shown that fragments found in the Governor's wrist match a bullet that passed through the President.

Official Versions

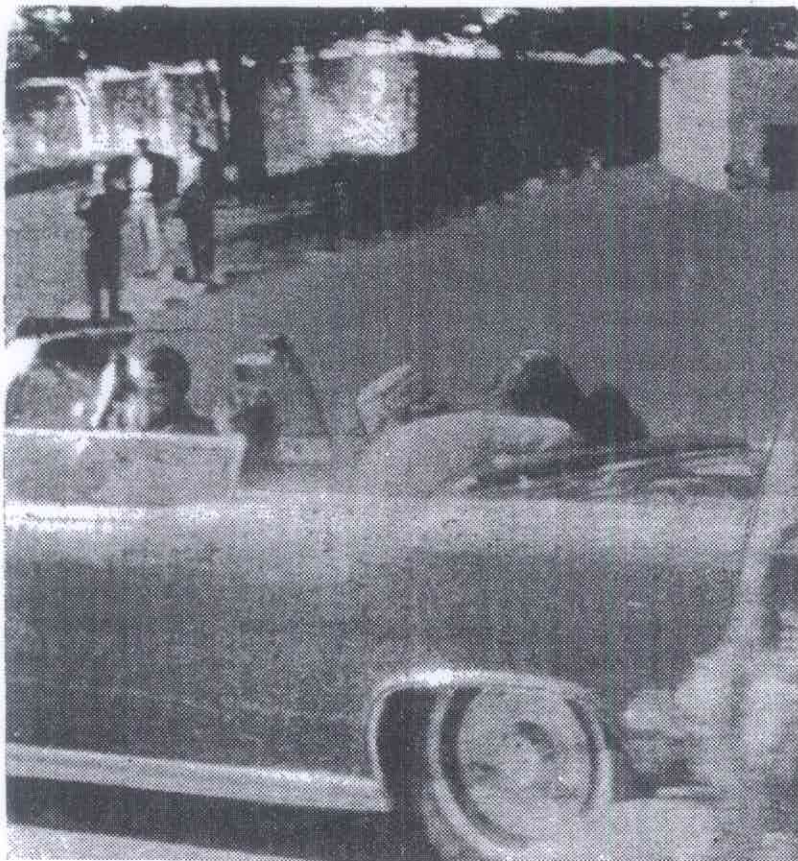
Panel Is Named With Goal in Mind

Johnson appointed a commission headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren to investigate the assassination and calm the public. After interviewing more than 500 witnesses and reviewing hundreds of documents, it concluded that Oswald fired all three shots at the President from a sixth-floor perch of the Texas School Book Depository Building overlooking Dealey Plaza. Citing among other things his palmprint found on the rifle used in the shooting, the commission concluded that Oswald acted alone.

The Warren Commission report has been much maligned over the years as a rush job at best, and a piece of a grand Government conspiracy at worst. Critics have noted that the C.I.A. withheld much relevant information from the commission to avert revelations of its efforts to assassinate Mr. Castro and destabilize his Government, using assets with Mafia connections.

Senator Arlen Specter, Republican of Pennsylvania, who was an assistant counsel to the Warren Commission, said in a recent interview: "I think the commission did a good job. Had there been a conspiracy, I think it would have come to light long ago. You can't keep secrets in America."

A 1979 report by a House Select Committee on Assassinations agreed with the commission that there was no conspiracy involving the Soviet Union, Cuba or any Federal agencies, but it suggested the possibility that the mob might have been involved. It also raised doubts about the one-gunman



United Press International

Oliver Stone's film "J.F.K." has revitalized widely held conspiracy theories in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy despite the findings of the Warren Commission. Above, a photo taken by a parade spectator showed President Kennedy slumped over after being shot.

theory. After examining audio tapes taken from a police motorcycle in Dealey Plaza, in combination with eyewitness testimony, it concluded that there was a second gunman, who fired a fourth shot from the grassy knoll. That shot missed.

However, three years later a panel of the National Academy of Sciences suggested that the audio tape did not support the theory of a second gunman. It reported that the noises earlier said to be gunshots had actually been made a minute after the President was shot. It suggested that the noises might have been nothing more than the static of a police radio.

Representative Stokes, however, said he stood by his committee's findings.

Mafia Conspiracy

Mob Had Reasons And the Ways

Conspiracy theorists have long noted that the Mafia had a motive to destroy the Kennedy Administration. Several Mafia leaders were openly upset with the President's failure to overthrow Mr. Castro, who had closed their lucrative casinos in Havana. In addition,

Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy had begun an aggressive campaign against James R. Hoffa, the president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters who was closely associated with the criminal underworld.

The House assassinations committee suggested that the most likely Mafia leaders to have participated in the plot were Carlos Marcello of New Orleans, a close associate of Mr. Hoffa who was briefly deported to Central America by the Kennedy Administration, and Santo Trafficante of Havana, who was once jailed by Mr. Castro.

Both Oswald and Ruby had Mafia ties. In his recent book "The Crisis Years," (HarperCollins 1991) Michael R. Beschloss, an author, noted that in the months before the assassination, Oswald stayed at the New Orleans home of his uncle, Charles Murret, a bookmaker with mob connections. When Oswald was arrested during a street fight arising out of a pro-Castro demonstration in August 1963, he was probably bailed out of prison by a Marcello associate, Mr. Beschloss wrote.

According to a 1950's Senate investigation of the underworld, Ruby was a liaison between various groups in the Chicago mob. He evidently ran guns for the Mafia to anti-Castro guerrillas. As the conspiracy theory goes, Ruby was sent by the mob to kill Oswald before he could talk. In a polygraph

test taken in prison, however, Ruby denied that he was part of any conspiracy and that he knew Oswald.

"There is one key fact at the center of this," said Jonathan Kwitny, an investigative reporter who said he bases his conclusions on documents gathered by the House assassinations committee. "Once you learn that Jack Ruby and Lee Oswald were both working for the Marcello organization in the months before the assassination, and you know that Marcello had the strongest motive for killing Kennedy, it may not be proof, but you have to start there."

Senator Specter said he did not think it was plausible that the mob hired either Oswald or Ruby because they were "unstable and unreliable."

Communist Conspiracy

Assassin's Ties To Soviet World

Oswald's shady connections extended as far as Moscow, although few analysts have taken seriously the possibility that the Soviet Union ordered the assassination. After serving in the Marine Corps, Oswald defected to the Soviet Union in 1959 for two years. There he married a Russian woman named Marina whose uncle was reportedly an officer in the secret police. Disillusioned with the drabness of Soviet life, he applied for readmission to the United States with his wife.

Back in the United States, Oswald expressed interest in the activities of the Communist Party and a pro-Castro solidarity group. He passed out pro-Castro literature in the streets of New Orleans and traveled to Mexico in an unsuccessful effort to gain entrance to Cuba.

At a news conference at the Brazilian Embassy in Havana only two months before the assassination, Mr. Castro said, "United States leaders

should think that if they are aiding terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders, they themselves will not be safe."

In her Castro biography, "Guerrilla, Prince" (Little, Brown 1991), the columnist Georgie Anne Geyer wrote, "There are simply too many 'accidents' not to assume that there could have been some Castro involvement. Oswald was seen at private parties conversing with Mexican Communists and with Cuban diplomats."

In a variation on Ms. Geyer's contention, Daniel Schorr, the broadcast journalist, noted in his 1977 book "Clearing The Air" that Oswald could have read a news service dispatch in a New Orleans newspaper reporting Mr. Castro's vague threat and taken it upon himself to kill Kennedy to help Cuba.

Johnson said on various occasions that he thought Mr. Castro was behind the assassination, a charge that the Cuban leader has repeatedly denied.

Representative Stokes, who as chairman of the House assassinations committee traveled to Cuba in 1978 to question Castro, returned saying he believed Castro's disclaimers. "Castro summed it up best himself," Mr. Stokes said, "He said, 'I would have to be crazy. They would blow my little country off the map.'"

Government Conspiracy

Intriguing Links In a Bizarre Theory

Of all the conspiracy theories, the most bizarre allege a sweeping plot that included the F.B.I., the C.I.A., the Pentagon or the Secret Service, or all of the above. One variation, promoted by Mark North in his new book "Act of Treason" (Carroll & Graf 1991), ar-

gues that J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the F.B.I., learned of the plot in advance but did nothing to protect the President.

In "J.F.K.," Mr. Stone has popularized what his critics argue is the most paranoid vision of America, one in which a fascistic elite murdered the President. The film dramatizes the investigations of Jim Garrison, a former New Orleans District Attorney who asserted that the Warren Commission report was a tissue of lies, a coverup for a C.I.A. cell consisting largely of right-wing Cubans who carried out the assassination. Their motive was both to propel the Vietnam War and to establish a more vigorous policy to overthrow Castro.

Mr. Garrison's 1967 prosecution against Clay Shaw, a New Orleans businessman who he said had plotted with Oswald and others to kill the President, ended when a jury found him not guilty. But some conspiracy theorists continue to argue that he was on to something. They point out that Mr. Shaw is now known to have been a C.I.A. contact although he had denied having any dealings with the agency. They note that the man Mr. Garrison accused of being Mr. Shaw's co-conspirator, David Ferrie, a former airline pilot who dropped dead during the investigation, had been seen consulting with Carlos Marcello shortly before the Kennedy assassination. And, finally, they argue that it is more than coincidence that a third man accused of being a co-conspirator, Guy W. Banister, a former F.B.I. agent and anti-Castro activist, had an office in the same building as that on the address of pro-Castro literature passed out by Oswald months before.

Such theories are disparaged by an assortment of analysts. Mr. Kwitny said the Garrison and Stone school "convert Kennedy into a flower child"

when he was really a cold warrior. Mr. Kwitny suggested that the C.I.A. and other Federal agencies covered up evidence to avert disclosure of their contacts with the Mafia to kill Castro, as well as information linking Oswald to American intelligence. "But that doesn't mean they were involved in the crime," he said.

He said Oswald, who learned Russian as a marine, was probably inserted in the Soviet Union as a spy, a fact the Government would not have wanted the public and Soviets to know.

Senator Specter said that for "J.F.K." to be true, Robert Kennedy, who was still Attorney General, "would have had to have been a part of or indifferent to the conspiracy. That's ridiculous."

Conspiracy theories will swirl until the C.I.A., the F.B.I. and Congress release all files related to the assassination. The House plans to disclose all its documents only in 2029, saying much of the information in the reports it gathered is full of rumors that will only muddy the matter further. Many analysts say there will be people who believe there has been a Government coverup even after all the documents are released.

"There isn't a single witness left to bring in," said G. Robert Blakey, the chief counsel to the House assassination committee investigation. "The people out there are all people with theories."

Strike Delays 160 Burials

CHICAGO, Jan. 4 (Reuters) — A strike by gravediggers in Chicago has left about 160 bodies unburied over the last two weeks. The strike, over wages and other issues, involves gravediggers at 26 cemeteries, which handle about 20 percent of the area's burials.