

# 'JFK': Truth and Fiction

By ARTHUR SCHLESINGER JR.

What about Oliver Stone's "JFK"?

It comes at you with slam-bang intensity. It bombards you with flashes, images, sounds, like a music video. It is a virtuoso exercise in post-modernist film making.

But what does "JFK" have to do with truth? After all, the movie purports to tell the story of the murder of a president of the United States. What responsibility does a film maker have to the facts? Is even a virtuoso film maker justified in raiding history for his own purposes as if he were Shakespeare ransacking Holinshed's "Chronicles"? Is he justified in weaving fact, conjecture and fiction into an indecipherable mass posing as a bold, quasi-authoritative, historical narrative?

Let me say that Oliver Stone's premise in "JFK" is far from unreasonable. It is that in 1963 President Kennedy began to move toward the liquidation of the Cold War. Kennedy's American University speech that June called for an end to the "vicious and dangerous cycle in which suspicion on one side breeds suspicion on the other, and new weapons beget counter-weapons." He asked Americans to "re-examine our own attitude—as individuals and as a nation—for our attitude is as essential as theirs." He followed this speech by the negotiation of a test-ban treaty with the Soviet Union—an action he regarded as only a first step.

In addition (and Oliver Stone could have strengthened his case by mentioning it) President Kennedy authorized United Nations Ambassador William Attwood to explore the possible restoration of relations with Castro's Cuba. "The president gave him the go-ahead," Robert Kennedy said the next year, "and he was to go to Havana . . . and see what could be done [to effect] a normalization of relationship."

## Strong Evidence

Mr. Stone rests his case primarily on Vietnam. No one can say what President Kennedy might eventually have done about Vietnam. But there is strong documentary evidence as to his long-run purpose. From the beginning to end of his administration, he steadily opposed repeated military recommendations that he introduce an American expeditionary force. Having watched the French army fail in Vietnam in 1951, he had no desire to send the American Army into the same quagmire. "The last thing he wanted," said Gen. Maxwell Taylor, "was to put in our ground forces."

In the hope of enabling the South Vietnamese to save themselves, President Kennedy did agree to modest increases in the number of U.S. military advisers assigned to the South Vietnamese army. But,

as Roswell Gilpatric, the deputy secretary of defense, said later, "Resistance was encountered from the president at every stage as this total amount of U.S. personnel deployment increased."

In July 1962 President Kennedy instructed Robert McNamara, the secretary of defense, to start planning for the phased withdrawal of the American advisers. The target date for complete disengagement was the end of 1965. The military produced an acceptable plan in May 1963. Mr. Gilpatric later said, "McNamara indicated to me that this was part of a plan the president asked him to develop to unwind the whole thing."

President Kennedy's doubts about Vietnam were strengthened by Mike Mansfield, then Senate majority leader, once a professor of Far Eastern history, later ambassador to Japan. The president sent Sen. Mansfield to take a look at Vietnam in 1962 (as Franklin Roosevelt had sent Mr. Mansfield to take a look at Nationalist China in

1944). Sen. Mansfield recommended that the Americans pull out. President Kennedy subsequently told Sen. Mansfield that total withdrawal was the right course, but he could not do it until after the 1964 election. Otherwise, he feared, the Republicans might beat him in 1964 over the "loss" of Indochina as they had beaten the Democrats in 1952 over the "loss" of China.

But President Kennedy went quietly ahead with the first phase of withdrawal. In October 1963 he ordered the return of 1,000 advisers. Then came Dallas. President Johnson, listening to President Kennedy's more hawkish advisers and believing he was doing what President Kennedy would have done, issued National Security Action Memorandum 273 calling for the maintenance of American military programs in Vietnam "at levels as high" as

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before—reversing the Kennedy withdrawal policy. On March 27, 1964, President Johnson canceled President Kennedy's phased withdrawal plan. In early 1965 he ordered in American ground forces.

So Oliver Stone's film has a defensible premise. But the conclusion he draws is indefensible. It is that, outraged by President Kennedy's policy of winding down the Cold War, a cabal of evil men in high government positions organized a great conspiracy based on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CIA, the FBI, the military-industrial complex, anti-Castro Cubans, the mob and Lyndon B. Johnson for the purpose of murdering the president and covering up the deed. Serious conspiracy arguments can be made; but the conspiracy theory in "JFK" is reckless, paranoid, really despicable fantasy, reminiscent of the wilder accusations of Joe McCarthy.

How much need we worry about the impact of "JFK"? Mr. Stone himself has equated history with "Rashomon." "JFK," he suggests, is merely an exploration of "possible scenarios of who killed Kennedy and why." Unfortunately his explosive style defeats the idea of the film as a judicious analysis of alternative theories.

Still, the paranoid thriller is a form that carries the seeds of its own disbelief. Nothing is more ludicrous in "JFK" than the scene in which Major X explains to Jim Garrison with the serene lucidity of a madman how the evil cabal is running and ruining the U.S.

Critics have expressed concern that young people for whom the Kennedy assassination is history as remote as the sinking of the Maine was to my generation will suppose "JFK" to be the literal truth. Maybe some will. But I would think that most have seen so much hyped-up speculation, surmise and invention in docudramas that they take these pseudo-historical exposures *cum grano salis*.

Still, for a people that prides itself on robust common sense, Americans have

shown from the start an uncommon susceptibility to conspiracy theory. We've gone through panics over plots allegedly hatched by the Bavarian Illuminati, the Masonic Order, the Catholic Church, the slave power, the abolitionists, the international bankers, the anarchists, the Elders of Zion, the Comintern. Historian Richard Hofstadter wrote memorably about "The Paranoid Style in American Politics."

Of course, as the saying goes, even paranoids may have real enemies. The more enduring residue of "JFK" will be the questions the film raises about the ade-



quacy of the Warren Commission inquiry. These questions are legitimate. There is no reason to regard the Warren Commission report as sacred. We now know that both the CIA and the FBI withheld vital information from the commission. I think these agencies withheld the information for reasons of bureaucratic self-protection; but, whatever the motive, the result was an inadequate investigation.

Whether a more adequate investigation would have produced a different conclusion is a separate question, on which I remain agnostic. A powerful case can be made against the theory that the same bullet struck both President Kennedy and Gov. John Connally. This argues for a second gunman. "JFK" both makes that case and impairs it, since the viewer can never tell at any point in the movie where fact ends and fiction begins.

I find it difficult to exclude the conspiracy theory—or to accept it. Were the bumbling of the Dallas Police Department in the great conspiracy? the hospital's medical staff? the Secret Service? How far did the conspiracy extend? The wider the conspiracy, the more likely in this publicity-mad age that some survivor on the conspiracy's fringe would sell his memoirs to *People* magazine for \$10 million. Nothing like this has yet happened.

#### **RFK and Garrison**

Robert Kennedy had his doubts about the Warren Commission. On Oct. 30, 1966, as we talked till 2:30 a.m. in P.J. Clarke's saloon in New York, he wondered how long he could continue to avoid comment on the report. He regarded it as a poor job but was unwilling to criticize it and thereby reopen the whole tragic business.

The next year Oliver Stone's hero Jim Garrison started making his sensational charges. RFK told me that he thought Garrison might be on to something. NBC, he said, was sending Walter Sheridan, a trusted investigator who had worked with him on the Jimmy Hoffa case, to New Orleans to find out what Mr. Garrison had. Robert Kennedy said to me some weeks later, "Sheridan is satisfied that Garrison is a fraud."

When I told this story to Oliver Stone, he replied rather sharply that Mr. Sheridan had come to New Orleans with his mind made up, almost implying that Mr. Sheridan too was part of the conspiracy. Conspiracy theory makes it dangerously easy to explain away all objections.

Mr. Stone is an earnest, appealing man. He fought bravely for his country in the horror of Vietnam. He has earned the right to brood and agonize over the reasons he and so many others were sent to kill and die in that war. He is an artist, and artists are often hopelessly loyal to their fantasies—and their fantasies often hopelessly abuse the truth. History will survive.

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