

Taking a Darker View

The conspiracy theories reflected in JFK may not be persuasive, but they churn up a murky underside of America

Three weeks after its release, Oliver Stone's film JFK continues to stir passions and debate, and to prompt calls for the release of secret government files on the Kennedy assassination. Last week the controversy drew a response from President Bush, who said while traveling in Australia that although he had not seen the movie, he had no reason to doubt the Warren Commission's finding that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in shooting Kennedy. While no new evidence has emerged, the film has focused attention on the band of mostly self-appointed experts who zealously pursue theories of a wider plot. This subculture is explored here by Ron Rosenbaum, a contributing editor of Vanity Fair and the author of Travels with Doctor Death, who has written extensively on conspiracy theories.

By RON ROSENBAUM

Some years ago, during a telephone interview, I finally succeeded in badgering Jim Garrison into naming the Name. For years Garrison had been telling people he had the whole case cold: he knew who gave the orders, who fired the shots and from where. Still, though he had talked a lot about the Big Guys behind the plot—intelligence agencies, the military-industrial complex and the like—he had never publicly named the name of the man he believed fired the fatal head shot from the grassy knoll.

I won't tell you that name, because Garrison didn't give me any evidence for singling out this person for historic infamy. On another day, I felt, he might have picked another name out of the hat.

Still, for one guilty moment I had the kind of thrill that assassination buffs live for: I had the Name everyone else was looking for and no one else had. Of

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Analysis

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COVERS

History to interpret in new film

By Jefferson Graham

Stone's movie re-creation of the assassination: a legacy of three decades of revisionism

course, it wasn't an entirely unknown name. Garrison told me the person had been questioned extensively by Warren Commission investigators, and when I looked him up in the Warren Commission testimony, I found he plays a kind of Rosenkrantz-and-Guildenstern-level role in the Warren Report, that of a peripheral figure in a key place: he was a live-in manager and janitor at Jack Ruby's sleazy strip joint, the Carousel Club. There's no doubt that the commission investigators were interested in his story—the transcript of his testimony runs more than 200 pages—but mostly because he was a source who might shed some light on the peculiarities of Jack Ruby's character (investigators repeatedly pressed the Name on whether Ruby had any sexual interest in his beloved dog Sheba).

Though reading the testimony didn't give me much intimation of an assassination revelation, it was a revelation of another kind. In telling his life story, of how he wound up in the Carousel Club in 1963, the Name was telling a story of an American life—of an America—far different from the one I'd known in my suburban hometown.

It was a story of a guy who made his living in the carnival world; he worked as a barker with small-time freak-show acts like "the two-headed baby" and "the snake girl," he told the Warren Commission. He bummed around looking for roustabout jobs, met his first wife at a Salvation Army mission. When she left him in the summer of 1963, he hitchhiked all the way from the West Coast to Dallas looking for her. Picked up some work at the Texas state fair in a carney sideshow called "How Hollywood Makes Movies," which featured some of Jack Ruby's strippers. Made some connections and soon found himself living in the back room of the Carousel Club in the midst of Ruby's strange ménage, which included strippers, burlesque comics, stage hypnotists and, of course, the dog Sheba.

I remember reading this testimony, mesmerized by my sudden immersion in a carnival-sideshow underbelly of American life. (The 26 volumes of Warren Commission testimony are like a vast, inchoate Great American Novel in that respect.) I didn't feel I was any closer to solving the Kennedy assassination, but I did feel I had learned more about the America that pro-

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pens to be the truth—is almost never shown to the public. Certainly, it is not shown in the Oliver Stone-Kevin Costner film, reputedly produced at a cost approaching \$40 million.

Like the A&E series, "JFK," alleges a conspiracy supposedly including elements of the ultimate proof of the conspiracy the ultimate proof of Oswald's fantasy

Ruby shooting Oswald in 1963: a sleazy, carnival-sideshow vision of the nation's leaders

duced both Kennedy and his assassin than was conveyed by the bland, complacent sitcom image of the nation and its institutions that prevailed in November 1963.

And that, I believe, is the real legacy of nearly three decades of revisionist Kennedy-assassination investigation. We may not ever know with certainty the Name or the Names. But we do have a much darker, more complex, less innocent vision of America, produced by the murk that has been churned up by the dissidents.

Consider the FBI. In 1963 few dissented from the view that its director, J. Edgar Hoover, was a peerless, incorruptible leader, a gangbuster nonpareil. He said so himself. Now, we may not want to agree with the conclusion of the latest FBI-centered conspiracy-theory book *Act of Treason: The Role of J. Edgar Hoover in the Assassination of President Kennedy*. The author, Texas attorney Mark North, accuses Hoover of deliberately withholding knowledge of a Mafia assassination plot against J.F.K. because he hated the Kennedy brothers and had enough dirt on L.B.J. to control him. But North's accumulation of documentary evidence of the ugly blackmail intrigues Hoover was weaving in the cellars

of Camelot is perhaps even more damning than the allegations of treason.

Much of this has been reported earlier: the way Hoover pressured the Kennedys into letting him bug the bedrooms of Martin Luther King Jr.; how he subtly blackmailed the Camelot kids over their bedroom sports, including J.F.K.'s romps with the girlfriend of godfather Sam Giancana and (probably) with Marilyn Monroe. We know that while Hoover was passing around tapes of creaking bedsprings, he was letting the Mob grow unchecked and was going easy on deep sewers of Washington corruption like the Bobby Baker case to protect patrons like L.B.J.

Or consider the CIA. To those who knew of it at all in 1963, it was still living off the glamour of its wartime OSS (Office of Strategic Services) legend—the dashing blue-blooded oh-so-social spies, American James Bonds. Even the black eye of the Bay of Pigs fiasco could be attributed to Kennedy's failure of nerve rather than to the Harvard and Yale ole boys who drew up the plans. From almost the very beginning, the CIA has been a focus of Kennedy-assassination conspiracy theories (bitterness by some agents over

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Kennedy's Bay of Pigs "betrayal" was an obvious motive). This year the first and most relentless conspiracy theorist of them all, Mark Lane, has come out with a book, *Plausible Denial*, which targets high-level CIA figures as the plotters behind the assassination. Lane presents what he calls new and conclusive evidence that the CIA was setting up Oswald in the months before the assassination by having an Oswald impersonator meet with Soviet and Cuban agents in Mexico City, the better to frame him as a Commie assassin.

Again, even if we don't buy Lane's conclusion about CIA complicity in the Kennedy assassination, 20 years of investigations have shown that the CIA was no stranger to complicity in assassinations. We know how the best and brightest blue bloods bonded with the bloodiest and dirtiest Mafia hit men in plots to kill Castro. We know the freak-show side of the agency that used damaging mind-control drugs on unsuspecting citizens; we know that the agency's own top counterspy, James Angleton, paralyzed the place with his paranoid suspicions that KGB moles and false defectors had penetrated the CIA in order to, among other things, conceal the Soviets' true role in the J.F.K. assassination. Even David Belin, the former Warren Commission staff member who is fighting what he calls a "David and Goliath battle" to defend the Warren Commission's lone-gunnerman conclusion, declares in his book *Final Disclosure* that the CIA blatantly deceived his beloved Warren Commission—specifically that it "deliberately withheld evidence" of the CIA-Mafia plots against Castro.

Now consider the Kennedys themselves. Inevitably the darker, carnival-esque vision of America that has emerged in the wake of post-assassination investigations has not exempted them. Curiously, otherwise skeptical assassination buffs are among the last misty-eyed believers in Camelot. They still hold to the primal scenario sketched in Oliver Stone's *JFK*: a Galahad-like John Kennedy gallantly battling the sinister right-wing military-industrial complex to bring the troops home, ban the Bomb and ensure racial equality on the home front—a Kennedy killed because he was just too good to live.

You can hear other echoes of this naive vision in such conspiracy-theory compendiums as Jim Marrs' *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy*, which was a key source for Stone. Marrs sums up his account of the Bad Guys in the plot, laboring to leave no one out: "Who done it? . . . Powerful men in the leadership of the U.S. military, banking, government, intelligence and organized-crime circles ordered their faithful agents to manipulate Mafia-Cuban-agency pawns to kill the chief."

But what's more interesting is Marrs' arcadian vision of what America might be

History

like today if J.F.K. had lived: "No divisive Vietnam war . . . [no] Watergate, no other political assassinations, or the Iran-contra-Pentagon-CIA attempt at a secret government. Détente with communist Russia and China . . . [would have saved defense dollars] that could have been put to use caring for the needy and cleaning up the environment . . . no organized-crime control over drugs, gambling . . . even toxic waste . . ." One feels Marrs believes that if Kennedy had lived the toxic waste just wouldn't have been as toxic *anyway*, because of all the fine, purifying Camelot vibes in the air.

By now, of course, an accumulation of sordid revelations has made J.F.K.'s Washington seem less like Arthur's Camelot than Capone's Chicago. J.F.K. himself, we know, was almost literally in bed with the Chicago Mob, sleeping with the godfather's mistress, for God's sake; his minions used Chicago mobsters as hit men against a rival head of state. He was enmeshed in sordid blackmail intrigues with Hoover; he was implicated in bugging King's bedrooms. Far from a noble peacemaker, he was a hawkish enthusiast for dirty tricks and covert ops, so Machiavellian that—according to Michael Beschloss's new book, *The Crisis Years*—he may even have given his blessing to Khrushchev's building of the Berlin Wall. In retrospect, J.F.K. resembles Marrs' Galahad less than a gang leader like *The Godfather's* Michael Corleone—the well-meaning son of a shadowy godfather (Joe Kennedy, with his bootlegging connections to the Mob), who can't escape his father's legacy or his family's cutthroat character.

In this respect the assassination theorists who seem most prescient, or at least realistic, are the odd couple of Malcolm X and L.B.J. It was Malcolm who provoked a storm of obloquy in the aftermath of the Dallas shooting when he said J.F.K.'s killing was "a case of the chickens coming home to roost." And it was L.B.J. who 10 years later gave a kind of gritty geopolitical substance to Malcolm's metaphor when he told an ex-aide that J.F.K. was "running a damned Murder Incorporated in the Caribbean"—all those CIA assassination plots—and that he believed one of these plots must have backfired, or doubled back on Kennedy, in Dealey Plaza.

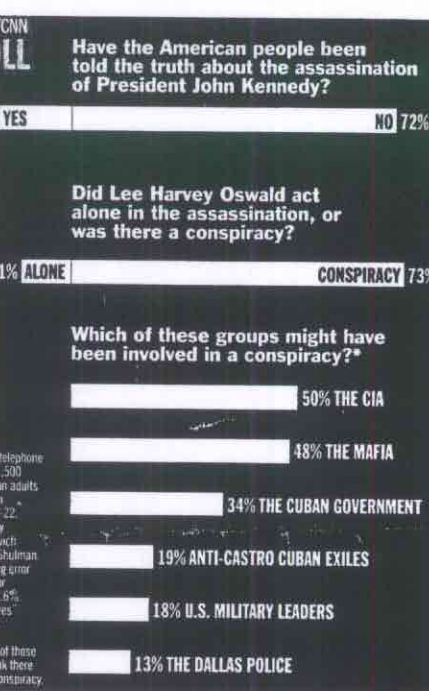
Perhaps this gets a bit too close to blame-the-victim. But could it be that the cumulative blackening of the sepulchers of Camelot is responsible for one of the most curious new trends in conspiracy-theory history—the increasing number of people coming forward not merely to

claim they know who did it but to *confess* they did it?

One of the first to try this gambit was Charles V. Harrelson, the Texas hit man who happens to be the father of *Cheers* star Woody Harrelson. Cornered by cops seeking to arrest him for assassinating a federal judge in Texas, Harrelson, according to Marrs, told lawmen that he was the guy who killed Kennedy. By the time he backed off the story, assassination buffs had already convinced themselves that they had photographic evidence of Har-

relson's presence in Dealey Plaza that day.

They had "positively" identified him as one of the mysterious "tramps" arrested near the crime scene after the assassination—conveniently forgetting they had previously "proved" that two of the tramps were actually Watergate burglars E. Howard Hunt and Frank Sturgis.



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Next to confess was Robert Easterling, a Mississippi ex-con who told journalist Henry Hurt in 1985 that he killed Kennedy on behalf of Fidel Castro. And then, in 1989, there was the son of a Dallas policeman who pushed his own (now dead) father forward as the grassy-knoll assassin, introducing some curious confessional documentation he claimed to have found in an attic. (The credibility problem of assassination buffs has not been enhanced by the double standard with which they seem to accept indiscriminately every self-proclaimed assassin or grassy-knoll eyewitness who comes forward, but tear to shreds any evidence or testimony that

might support the lone-gunner theory.) Recently, after seeing *JFK*, I found myself curious about what had become of the man Jim Garrison once named as the hit man. I consulted some of the assassination buffs still speaking to me (though an agnostic on whether there was a conspiracy, I had written skeptically about the methodology of some of them), and one told me of a buff in Canada who made a specialty of tracking down lesser known figures in the case who might otherwise disappear into the mists of history.

Yes, the Canadian researcher told me, he had traced the still wandering whereabouts of the Name. And he wasn't the only one interested, he said. A former Warren Commission attorney had told him he still couldn't figure out why the Name made such a hasty exit from Dallas: 36 hours after the assassination, he left town and hitchhiked 2,000 miles north to Michigan. Another buff had theorized that the Warren Commission was interested in the Name because he bore an eerie physical resemblance to Oswald—which might have been an innocent explanation for some of the "Oswald" sightings in Ruby's Carousel Club. Other buffs wondered if he might not be one of the mysterious "Oswald impersonators" who was setting up the real, innocent Oswald to be the assassination patsy.

Declining to be led into this labyrinth of suspicion, I nonetheless asked the Canadian buff what had become of the Name's life after he fled Dallas. It seems he couldn't really escape—Nov. 22 continued to haunt him. The FBI followed him to Michigan and questioned him repeatedly; he had to go back to Dallas for Ruby's trial; he never found the wife he'd lost. And then in the early '80s, just when his life seemed to have settled down, renewed interest in the J.F.K. case made his name an object of speculation again: it appeared in a book on the organized-crime connections to Ruby and the assassination. His new wife read the book and began to get a little paranoid. She wondered about the serious car accident they had had: Was it really an accident? Eventually, things began to go awry: his marriage broke up, he lost his job. Last thing the Canadian buff heard, the Name was working as a night security guard in a mill, "boarding with some people," without a traceable phone number of his own.

Looking back, it doesn't seem that much of a mystery why the poor guy fled Dallas so abruptly. His life took a wrong turn down there and never recovered. So did ours. We're all still fleeing Dallas, but it's too late to escape. ■