

HOWARD ROSENBERG

A Ratings Conspiracy

J.F.K.'s TV Connection? No Commission Needed

The Warren Commission's finding that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in assassinating President John F. Kennedy launched a cottage industry of skeptics and conspiracy theorists that Oliver Stone's "JFK" and its attendant publicity have upsized into a Fortune 500 conglomerate.

On the NBC morning series "A Closer Look" this week, host Faith Daniels polled her studio audience on the multiple hypotheses on the assassination. No surprise: A big majority believed that "the government" did it.

Attribute that result to the loud, echoing resonance of Stone's persuasively crafted, only partially truthful film, which leaves the distinct impression that elements of the government,

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including even then-Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, were behind Kennedy's 1963 murder in Dallas.

The media and this story are now joined at the hip, the coverage and speculation having fused so completely that one is indistin-

guishable from the other. And not surprisingly, the aroma of TV ratings is in the air.

Wednesday—the first day of the crucial February ratings sweeps—found a whopping five programs featuring various kinds of Kennedy assassination parries. It started with NBC's "Today" program (whose weeklong "Who Killed JFK?" series was to conclude today with the inevitable interview of Stone), continued with "A Closer Look," followed that evening with the syndicated series "Inside Edition," the CBS

Please see **KENNEDY, F24**



Associated Press

President and Mrs. Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connally on the fateful day in 1963: A cottage industry becomes a conglomerate.

LATimes
2/7/92

KENNEDY

Continued from F1
 News program "48 Hours" and the
 KCBS-TV Channel 2 newscast at
 11 p.m.

"Have you made up your mind
 on the J.F.K. assassination?" an-
 chor Bree Walker asked during a
 station break advertising the local
 newscast. "We have another point
 of view you'll want to hear."

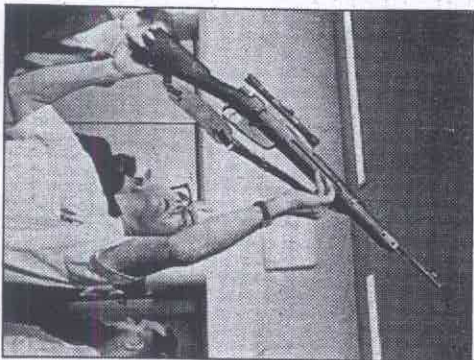
It sounded like Cal Worthington,
 selling conspiracy theories now
 instead of cars.

The Channel 2 story was a thin
 tie-in with "48 Hours," which—
 while getting its highest ratings
 ever (reaching 15.5 million
 homes)—met its goal of separating
 "concrete evidence from conjec-
 ture" principally by rehasing past
 CBS investigations of the assassi-
 nation ("When the bullet passed
 through the President's neck
 . . .") and reviewing the contro-
 versy over the validity of Stone's
 film.

It was "Inside Edition"—consis-
 tently the most honest and journal-
 istically responsible of TV's syndi-
 cated, tabloid-style series—that
 weighed in the noisiest Wednesday,
 promising an "exclusive" peek
 "inside the sealed J.F.K. assassina-
 tion files the government didn't
 want you to see!"

What anchor Bill O'Reilly
 claimed to be reporting were ex-
 cerpts of files from the 1976-78
 probe of the J.F.K. slaying by the
 House Select Committee on Assas-
 sinations. Those files were said to
 have been ordered sealed until
 2029.

The "explosive" material report-
 ed included a charge by "House
 investigators" that "high-ranking
 officials of the Central Intelligence



Dallas Sheriff J.C. Day checks
 Lee Harvey Oswald's rifle in "No-
 va" documentary airing Feb. 25.

Agency" lied to the public about
 Oswald and that a now-deceased
 CIA official named David Albee
 Phillips—who purportedly resent-
 ed Kennedy's handling of the Bay
 of Pigs invasion—met with Oswald
 two months before the assassina-
 tion.

O'Reilly also cited other material
 from the files that he said estab-
 lished a "criminal link between the
 CIA and Oswald."

Phillips' name has surfaced be-
 fore in assassination probes. If
 "Inside Edition" did see these files,
 however, that in itself is news.
 O'Reilly gained access through a
 source who is "quite knowledgeable,"
 said "Inside Edition" execu-
 tive producer Av Westin, a former

top executive at ABC News. "He
 walked O'Reilly through it, point-
 ing out what was in it and what he
 thought was significant."
 Astonishingly, Westin said that

as of midday Thursday, no news
 organization had called "Inside
 Edition" about its claim to have
 seen files that are presumably
 off-limits to the rest of the media
 and that—motivated by "JFK"—a
 growing number of Americans has
 been demanding be declassified by
 the government.

"If it had been NBC News or
 ABC News, I suspect it would have
 gotten more attention," said Wes-
 tin, who protests "Inside Edition"
 began lumped together with law-
 dry series such as "Hard Copy" and
 "A Current Affair." "We are rele-
 gated to the dust heap," he said.

Meanwhile, cable's Arts & En-
 tertainment network re-enters the
 fray with a Feb. 24-28 slab of
 J.F.K. assassination programming
 that includes a rerun of the five-
 part 1986 Showtime production
 "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald"
 and a repeat of a documentary,
 "Who Killed JFK? On the Trail of
 the Conspiracies." And on "Open
 Mind" (at 12:30 a.m. Monday on
 KCET Channel 28), Stone gives his
 zillionth interview about "JFK,"
 this time with Richard Heffner.

I have to take dramatic license,"
 Stone told Dan Rather on "48
 Hours" Wednesday night. The
 filmmaker was severely critical of
 the Warren Commission report and
 called his own account a "counter-
 myth." Facts, he added, "only take
 you so far."

Stone insisted that when his film
 inserts fiction, "We say *maybe*."
 Many who have seen it, though,

come away with the opinion that it
 says *absolutely*.

Not necessarily is what you get
 from a 1988 edition of the PBS
 science series "Nova" that is being
 rerun at 8 p.m. Feb. 25 on KCET
 Channel 28.

Although the title—"Who Shot
 President Kennedy?"—now
 sounds trite, this is a formidable
 program that, through use of so-
 phisticated photo enhancement
 and three-dimensional computer
 modeling, methodically makes a
 case for the single-bullet/single
 assassin theory that "JFK" at-
 tacks.

The hour is meticulously fair,
 using only physical evidence, not
 politics, to examine all the argu-
 ments that have been made against
 the Warren Commission's conclu-
 sions. With Walter Cronkite as
 host, this is a sterling piece of
 journalism from producer Robert
 Richter, one that establishes only
 scientific plausibility, not certain-
 ly.

Better than speculation is a-
 beled as truth.