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'JFK' film distorts role of Kennedy

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When President John F. Kennedy is hit by the fatal shot, the audience packing the theater for Oliver Stone's latest movie gasps. It doesn't matter that the shot was no surprise, that everyone knows what happens next. The November 22, 1963, assassination rocked the United States and the world.

Film maker Stone argues in *JFK* that Kennedy was the "hope of humanity" and a friend of the struggle of Blacks; that if he had lived the course of world history would have been changed. Kennedy wanted to end the cold war, one of the picture's characters argues. The movie suggests Kennedy would have lessened hostility with revolutionary Cuba, reined in the CIA and the military, closed down U.S. bases, and stopped the war in Vietnam.

According to the movie a vast conspiracy involving the CIA, the FBI, right-wing Cuban exiles, the mafia, the U.S. Army Chiefs of Staff, Vice-President Lyndon Johnson, and owners of arms corporations decided to assassinate the president. The movie

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calls Kennedy's death a coup d'état.

But there is a fatal flaw to the movie's premise: Stone's portrayal of Kennedy is false to the core.

The Bay of Pigs invasion

JFK opens with Kennedy promising, "I will be devoted to freedom." Showing scenes from the failed, U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, an anonymous narrator states that Kennedy refused to provide air cover for the attackers. The president, the narrator reports, "privately complained" that the CIA had deceived him.

Was Kennedy an opponent of military action against Cuba? Were the actions he authorized based on a lack of knowledge on the truth about the Cuban revolution?

A quick look at the events of 1961 are necessary to any serious appraisal of Kennedy's 1,000 days in office.

On April 17, 1961, 1,500 mercenaries — trained and armed by the CIA — invaded Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in an attempt to overthrow the government led by Castro. They were met by revolutionary militias. Two days later the invaders surrendered.

Washington had misjudged. The measures taken by Cuba's workers' and farmers' government, including providing land to the peasants, nationalization of factories, a literacy campaign, and arming the people, were tremendously popular. The revolution could not be overthrown without a massive military intervention.

Cuba began to be looked to by millions in Latin America and the world. The political price for direct U.S. involvement was higher than the rulers in Washington were willing to pay. They had to put their plans for more military action on the back burner.

But their hostility continued. Kennedy instructed the CIA to find ways to assassinate

Fidel Castro. The CIA looked around and found that Mafia hit men would be ideal candidates for the mission.

According to one of Kennedy's close associates, the president was concerned not with the morality of the assassination plots, but with the reaction throughout Latin Amer-

ica if an attempt "could be pinned to the U.S."

It was the Kennedy administration that strengthened the economic embargo against Cuba, which continues to this day. In October 1962, Kennedy provoked the so-called Cuban missile crisis, threatening to attack Soviet ships headed for Cuba and bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war.

Beginning the Vietnam War

JFK promotes another fable: that Kennedy was getting ready to end U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

But in Vietnam, as in Cuba, Kennedy's main concern was how to best defend U.S. imperialist interests. He increased the number of U.S. "military advisers" there from 700 in 1961 to more than 16,000 by 1963, paving the way for the sending of large numbers of combat troops.

"I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw from Vietnam," Kennedy stated September 2, 1963. "That would be a great mistake. We must be patient. We must persist."

Much is made of National Security Action Memorandum 263, which Kennedy issued a month before his death, projecting the withdrawal of 1,000 of the so-called advisers.

Most officials viewed the memo, not as a form of disengaging from the war, but as a means of pressuring Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem to carry out the war the way Washington wanted.

The threatened pressure was not enough, Kennedy decided. He instructed the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, to encourage a coup d'état against Diem. On November 2, 1963, Diem was killed by the U.S.-backed plotters.

What the Diem assassination showed was that not only was the president of the United States willing to use the dirtiest of tricks against enemies like Castro, he was willing to use them against allies who did not follow U.S. dictates to the letter.

The fight for civil rights

Perhaps the biggest myth around Kennedy is his supposed positive role in advancing the fight for Black rights and ending Jim Crow

segregation in the south.

In one of the most famous cases in 1963, Blacks demonstrated for weeks in Birmingham, Alabama, to demand desegregation. They were bitten by police dogs, knocked down by fire hoses, and arrested by the thousands simply for demonstrating peacefully for their rights.

But Kennedy refused to send in federal marshalls or troops to protect the demonstrators from "Bull" Connor's cops and from state troopers. He claimed he couldn't violate state rights.

Kennedy and his brother Robert, then U.S. attorney general, became agitated when some Black leaders pointed out that the administration was willing to use troops to invade foreign countries like Cuba, but not to protect Blacks in Alabama.

Thousands demonstrated around the country demanding that federal troops be sent to Birmingham. The demand that Blacks arm themselves to defend their rights became more and more popular. It was only as a result of this pressure that Kennedy took more decisive action.

Kennedy was not so reticent about using federal agents against leaders of the civil rights movement. At the urging of J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, the Kennedy brothers authorized the planting of bugs in the bedroom of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The radical right

Kennedy, under the cover of liberal rhetoric, did his best to advance the interests of U.S. capitalism at home and abroad.

But as revolutions in the colonial world and the civil rights movement in the United States both advanced, some right-wing sectors viewed Kennedy's policies as inadequate for their goals. They wanted to turn the clock back and destroy the Cuban revolution whatever the political price. They dreamed of a return to the Jim Crow South, which was crumbling under their feet. Fascist-like groups, such as the John Birch Society, were strong in Dallas.

Dallas, in the weeks before Kennedy's assassination, echoed with threats and violence. Rightists accused Kennedy of being "pro-communist" and a traitor. Adlai Stevenson, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, was mobbed by a crowd who spat at him.

Kennedy's assassination shocked the world. Joseph Hansen, a leader of the Socialist Workers Party, wrote at the time, "What odd minds these rulers have to imagine that fostering and practicing violence abroad on a rising scale for two decades, after a war that closed with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, would not finally have its reflection in do-

mestic politics."

Warren commission discredited

The conclusion of the Warren Commission, which investigated the Kennedy assassination, are now widely disbelieved. Few people give its hypothesis of a single bullet from a lone madman much credit.

The *Wall Street Journal* is upset at the popularity of *JFK*. "What sells it seems," the paper complains, "is precisely the hatred for the U.S. government and institutions that saturate" the movie.

The *Journal* has a crackpot theory of its own: that Fidel Castro ordered the assassi-

nation in revenge for Kennedy's orders to kill the Cuban leader.

This mouthpiece of retrograde capitalism ignores one of the facts that is well documented and clearly brought out in *JFK*: that Lee Harvey Oswald, played up after the assassination as a supporter of the Cuban revolution, was actually tied to right-wing Cuban groups. The leaflets he passed out calling for "U.S. Hands Off Cuba" had the address of an anti-Castro group stamped on them.

The paper, however, put its finger on the reasons for the movie's popularity. Thousands have viewed *JFK* in the hope of finding out more about the workings of the inner chambers of power; to find out why the truth behind Kennedy's assassination has been covered up. Significant numbers of people just don't trust the government anymore.

But they won't find much of an answer in Stone's misty-eyed — and distorted — view of the life and death of Kennedy, nor in his implausible grand conspiracy theory.

Especially after the massive movement against the war in Vietnam, the Watergate affair, and the further exposures of U.S. government dirty tricks, such as in Counter Intelligence Program (Cointelpro) documents, distrust of Washington is widespread. The Vietnam syndrome and all it entails is still alive.

At the end of *JFK*, the main character, Louisiana district attorney Jim Garrison, makes a call to the jury hearing his charges of conspiracy. He urges them, "Do not forget your dying king."

As the crisis of capitalism deepens, the rulers will seek to promote Kennedy-like liberals to sidetrack the struggle.

But no liberal "king" will lead the way against the imperialist order. The road to fighting racism, women's oppression, attacks on democratic rights, the drive to war, and the advancing economic depression lies along the same road the Vietnamese people took to expel the U.S. invaders; the road taken by the Cuban people; the road taken by the civil rights movement to end Jim Crow.

Only working people can take power out of the hands of the warmakers forever.



John F. Kennedy meeting with military advisors during the Bay of Pigs invasion. Kennedy instructed the CIA to find ways to assassinate Castro.