

Review/Film

Oliver Stone's 'J. F. K.': When Everything Amounts to Nothing

By VINCENT CANBY

In one of the dizzying barrage of images with which Oliver Stone begins "J. F. K.," President Dwight D. Eisenhower is seen on television not long before he left office in 1961. It is one of Ike's finer moments.

There he is, the former five-star general, the man who salvaged the Presidency for the Republican Party, warning the American people to beware of the military-industrial complex, a vested interest that, one might reasonably suppose, was oriented more toward the Republicans than the Democrats.

"J. F. K." goes on for another three hours or so. Yet as busy and as full of exposition as it is, it never becomes much more specific than Ike. The conspiracy that, "J. F. K." says, led to the assassination of Eisenhower's successor, John F. Kennedy, in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, remains far more vague than the movie pretends.

According to "J. F. K.," the conspiracy includes just about everybody up to what are called the Government's highest levels, but nobody in particular can be identified except some members of the scroungy New Orleans-Dallas-Galveston demimonde. That the subject is hot is apparent from all the criticism the movie received even before it was completed. The ferocity of that outrage should now subside, in part because "J. F. K.," for all its sweeping innuendos and splintery music-video editing, winds up breathlessly but running in place.

The movie will continue to infuriate people who possibly know as much about the assassination as Mr. Stone does, but it also shortchanges the audience and at the end plays like a bait-and-switch scam.

"J. F. K." builds to a climactic courtroom drama, the details of which it largely avoids, to allow Kevin Costner, the film's four-square star, to deliver a sermon about America's future with an emotionalism that is completely unearned.

What the film does do effectively is to present the case for the idea that there actually was a conspiracy, rather than the lone gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald, specified by the Warren Commission report. Beyond that "J. F. K." cannot go with any assurance. This is no "All the President's Men." The only payoff is the sight of Mr. Costner with tears in his eyes.

The film's insurmountable problem is the vast amount of material it fails to make coherent sense of. Mr. Stone and Zachary Sklar, who collaborated on the screenplay, take as their starting point Jim Garrison's book, "On the Trail of the Assassins."

Mr. Garrison, played in the film by Mr. Costner, is the former New Orleans District Attorney who, five years after the assassination, unsuccessfully prosecuted Clay Shaw, a New Orleans businessman, in connection with the Kennedy murder.

To give the film something resembling conventional shape, Mr. Stone has turned Mr. Garrison into what he describes as "a Frank Capra character," that is, a plain, dedicated down-home fellow called Jim, someone who represents "the best American traditions."

Like millions of Americans, the movie's Jim admires President Kennedy and mourns him when he is murdered. But Jim also comes to see Kennedy as the 20th century's great fearless dove, whose death might be traced, if only the facts were allowed to come out, to everyone who benefited from his

death. These would include corporations profiting from the Vietnam War, members of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Secret Service and, by clever indirection, even President Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy's Vice President.

Acting in concert with them or at their behest, though in ways that remain undetermined, are ultra-right-wing fanatics represented in the movie by Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones), some unidentified Cuban exiles and a former F.B.I. man named Guy Bannister (Ed Asner). Also involved are various fringe types like David Ferrie (Joe Pesci), a pilot for hire; the small-time mobster Jack Ruby (Brian Doyle Murray), and Oswald (Gary Oldman), whose place in the conspiracy has become utterly mysterious by the time the movie ends.

"J. F. K." begins with a promise of intrigue and revelation, though it soon becomes clear that Mr. Stone is Fibber McGee opening the door to an overstuffed closet. He is buried

Kevin

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under all the facts, contradictory testimony, hearsay and conjecture that he would pack into the movie.

What is fact and what isn't is not always easy to tell. Though one character is officially listed as having committed suicide, the movie allows us to see him being forced to take lethal pills. This is not speculation. Anything shown in a movie tends to be taken as truth.

The movie sees everything through the bespectacled eyes of the tireless Jim. "J. F. K." suffers with him when the Donna Reed character, Jim's wife, Liz (Sissy Spacek), says, "Honestly, I think sometimes you care more about John Kennedy than you do your own family!"

Jim has missed a luncheon at Antoine's with Liz and the children. Some things, such as Presidential assassinations, require terrible sacrifices from those who would investigate them.

"J. F. K." is suitably aghast when Jim goes

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to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington to meet a man who identifies himself only as X (Donald Sutherland) but who is obviously high in the military-industrial complex. X is the one who, in a very long omnibus sort of monologue, accompanied by images that jump all over the world, suggests that Jim check into the participation in the conspiracy of everyone who stood to gain from Kennedy's death.

Says Jim in his golly-gee-whiz manner, "I never realized that Kennedy was so dangerous to the Establishment!"

The movie rushes frantically on, its unsubstantiated data accumulating while Jim becomes a victim of a caustic press and a vicious, self-serving Establishment. Little by little Mr. Stone seems to identify Jim with John Kennedy. When X says of the conspiracy, "It's as old as the Crucifixion," it suddenly appears that the film maker would elevate Jim and John to an even higher pantheon.

By the time "J. F. K." reaches the Clay Shaw trial, most uninformed members of the movie audience will be exhausted and bored. The movie, which is simultaneously arrogant and timorous, has been unable to separate the important material from the merely colorful. After a certain point, audience interest tunes out. It's a jumble.

"J. F. K." rivets in the manner that was intended in two sequences: its presentation of the evidence about the number of bullets fired at the Kennedy motorcade and its presentation of the so-called Zapruder film, the record of the assassination itself. But even in these latter sequences, the movie remains an undifferentiated mix of real and staged material.

Mr. Stone's hyperbolic style of film making is familiar: lots of short, often hysterical scenes tumbling one after another, backed by a soundtrack that is layered, strudel-like, with noises, dialogue, music, more noises, more dialogue. It works better in "Born on the Fourth of July" and "The Doors" than it does here, in a movie that means to be a sober reflection on history suppressed.

Some of the performances are good, all by actors who get on and off fairly fast: Mr. Jones, Mr. Pesci, Mr. Asner, Jack Lemmon (as a feckless crony of one of the New Orleans suspects) and Kevin Bacon, who plays a male hustler.

When Walter Matthau turns up for a brief, not especially rewarding turn as Senator Russell B. Long, "J. F. K." looks less as if it had been cast in the accepted way than subscribed to, like



Warner Brothers

Sissy Spacek

J. F. K.

Directed by Oliver Stone; screenplay by Mr. Stone and Zachary Sklar, based on the books "On the Trail of the Assassins" by Jim Garrison and "Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy" by Jim Marrs; director of photography, Robert Richardson; edited by Joe Hutshing and Pietro Scalia; production designer, Victor Kempster; music by John Williams; produced by A. Kitman Ho and Mr. Stone. Running time: 188 minutes. This film is rated R.

Jim Garrison.....	Kevin Costner
Liz Garrison.....	Sissy Spacek
David Ferrie.....	Joe Pesci
Clay Shaw.....	Tommy Lee Jones
Lee Harvey Oswald.....	Gary Oldman
Lou Ivon.....	Jay O. Sanders
Bill Broussard.....	Michael Rooker
Jack Martin.....	Jack Lemmon
Senator Russell B. Long.....	Walter Matthau
Colonel X.....	Donald Sutherland
Willie O'Keefe.....	Kevin Bacon
Guy Bannister.....	Edward Asner
Jack Ruby.....	Brian Doyle Murray

a worthy cause. The cause may well be worthy; the film fails it.

"J. F. K." is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It has some scenes of violence and bloodshed and a good deal of vulgar language.