

Oliver Stone, Returning the Fire

In Defending His 'JFK' Conspiracy Film, the Director Reveals His Rage and Reasoning

By Phil McCombs
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The CNN makeup room is crowded. Oliver Stone drops happily into a chair to make his face wiped. He's just done "Larry, King Live," and King has called his new film, "JFK," which revisits every grisly detail of the assassination just in time for the holidays, "a full-blown operatic conspiracy tale" that has critics "raving and historian-raving mad." Stone is elated. One of his worst nightmares—and he has many—is not being taken seriously in Washington, but this seems to be fading somewhat as he glares at the public relations blitz arranged by Frank in the Kevewicz of Hill and Knowlton, who was once Bobby K. Mandy's press secretary and who now stands in the doorway wearing a white shirt and bow tie and with a huge grin hanging over his belt like a guy who's just stacked a belly wheeler and walked into an all-night truck stop in Kansas.

But there's a hitch. In the chair next to Stone is a columnist and commentator Robert Novak, a conservative, unintentionally known around town as the Prince of Darkness, perhaps for his dark-eyed glances, who knows. In any case, Novak is wearing a bright red Christmas vest and doesn't seem to be in a great mood. "How come you wouldn't let us in the screening?" he snarls at Stone. Stone winces visibly. Actually manages to crouch down in his chair. He has no idea who Novak is. "How come we didn't let this gentleman into the screening?" he implores of Mankiewicz in his soft wounded little-boy voice. "Cause you're only making trouble!" Mankiewicz growls directly into Novak's face. "Well, I'll make trouble anyway—I'll be worse now," snaps Novak. "I thought you were smarter than that, Frank. I really did." He exits in disgust. Silence. Then Stone smiles. "That was a good moment," he says.

Stone has been working Washington hard on this one. Heel here several times in the past few months. Off-the-record lunches with the tweedier editors and correspondents. Deep-background chats with folks on the Hill. Op-Ed pieces. Appearances on "Nightline." National Public Radio's "Weekend Edition," this and that. And yesterday, a private screening for a bunch of mass media types deemed acceptable by Mankiewicz, followed by a press conference and luncheon. "It's not the normal procedure," admits Stone, settling on the couch in his suite at the Four Seasons the other day for a quickie interview before taking off for a benefit opening of the film in Dallas. "But it seemed to have to be done, because there was so much being written that was destroying the credibility of the movie before it was made, and it's wrong. When Dan Rather editorializes against you on 'CBS Evening News,' you know you have a problem." Stone's problem is this: The film's hypothesis, based on former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's unsuccessful prosecution of businessman Clay Shaw, is that a huge conspiracy—including the CIA, FBI, Dallas police force, the Mob, the military, LBJ and possibly the Tooth Fairy—brought off the murder of President John F. Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, as his limousine, having slowed for a curve, entered the carefully prepared "killing ground" at Dealey Plaza in Dallas at a speed of 11 mph.

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Director Oliver Stone

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In this view, there were three shooters, a deadly triangulation of fire. The perfect ambush, with the marksman on the grassy knoll having time for a couple of leisurely flat, straight shots right into Kennedy's face—"he didn't even need a scope," as Stone puts it. And the motive? It was political. Not just because Kennedy was going to get out of Vietnam (a view that most scholars say is simply unsupported speculation), but also because "he was trying to wind down the entire Cold War. In Kennedy we see a form of an early Gorbachev, a sort of a political conformist politician becoming more of a statesman, reaching out for a detente."

In Stone we see a form of a brilliant, passionate filmmaker reaching for larger and larger themes, who flunked out of Yale and signed up for heavy combat in Vietnam because he was so "unhappy" and filled with "self-loathing" that he "had a strong suicidal wish [but] I didn't want to do it myself." Who then transmuted his "rage" into art—the scripts for "Midnight Express" and "Scarface," then his direction of the Oscar-winning "Platoon" and "Wall Street," "Born on the Fourth of July," "The Doors." And now "JFK." Here's a 45-year-old filmmaker who has taken much of the rage and disillusion of the '60s, ripped it out of his own guts, put it on the screen.

And everybody's quibbling! At least that's what Stone thinks. Heck, he says, he hired 15 or 16 "experts" to study the assassination, keep the movie straight. So when Newsweek comes out with a cover story calling the film "Twisted Truth" and warning that "Oliver Stone's New Movie Can't Be Trusted," he is deeply hurt. The criticism, he tells Larry King, "comes from older journalists, political journalists who have a stake in their version of reality."

Like Tom Wicker of the New York Times, who called the Garrison/Stone thesis "paranoid and fantastic," and George Lardner of The Washington Post, who quipped that its "baseless

claims come like fastballs." Stone, faced with criticism from people like these, who have spent their careers in the gritty journalistic search for truth, is able to take refuge in the age-old mandate of the artist. In the Dallas Morning News he compared himself to Shakespeare shaping for all time the image of Henry V, and it is quite possible that years from now, when the work of Wicker and Lardner has gone to fish-wrap, Stone's film will be viewed as just about all anyone knows or cares of the truth.

"The artist's obligation, in my opinion, is to his conscience only," Stone says. "If he accepts the concept of social responsibility, it smacks of censorship. The Soviets told their artists that they had a social responsibility to realism. What is realism? It becomes social realism. The Nazis told their artists you have an obligation to fascism, and they had to represent Nazi art. You cannot tell an artist what to do. It's the First Amendment."

So why did he hire all those experts? Why Frank Mankiewicz?

"I believe an artist has to do his homework, but that's my personal belief. Another artist may not have to do his homework. I did my homework. . . . We did a lot of fact-checking. We openly admit that the film has quite a bit of speculation in it."

Which is exactly why a lot of folks are so upset about it.

Yet who's to say? A Washington Post poll shows that the American people, by an overwhelming 56 percent, with 24 percent undecided, believe that a conspiracy of some sort was behind the killing, and not the lone, crazy gunman Lee Harvey Oswald, as the Warren Commission concluded. And in the summer of 1979, the House Assassinations Committee reported that Kennedy was "probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy" involving an assortment of gangland figures and anti-Castro activists.

All Stone is doing, he claims, is pointing out a possibility. "I'm not making this movie to yell fire in the theater," he insists. "I'm not. It's too taboo a subject and it's too sacred a

subject. It doesn't do me any good to make a movie that stirs and boils everybody's passion up, because that doesn't necessarily lead to critical and financial success. Controversy can hurt you, it can backfire. You're playing with fire here."

Not a first for Stone.

In fact, this whole media battle is reminiscent, for him, of Vietnam. His adrenalin is up. "I feel like an infantry unit," he says, "where I'm basically low in the bunker and the bullets are flying over."

The thought makes his dark eyes twinkle, and he laughs aloud.

A State of Rage

Stone is a charmer, there's no getting around it. A teddy bear, boyish and moody, with bushy dark eyebrows. That soft voice. He wears one of those Hollywood sport coat combinations where the jacket is just—perfectly—a little too big, so that when he sits at a table with his hands folded, for example, you can't see much of his hands. And when he moves he sort of flops around, gracefully though. You don't automatically think of him as a family man, though he and his wife, Elizabeth, are the happy parents of two young sons. Not infrequently he's been known to drink a lot, and at breakfast one day with some journalists at the Jefferson Hotel he begins the conversation by moaning melodramatically, "Oh God, I'm so hung over!"

He says he's very worried about being discredited as just another crazy Vietnam veteran, and yet the portrait he paints of himself is of a man full of terrible pain and angst, who is ultimately "saved" through his art in the classical and familiar romantic scenario. The son of a stockbroker who married his French sweetheart during World War II, Stone was a child of privilege—the Hill School, vacations in France, Yale.

He hated it all. In 1965, still a teenager, he went to Saigon as a teacher. "I wanted to change my reality," he says. "I had a turbulent adolescence. My mom and my father were divorced and there were a lot of social problems and family problems, and I wanted to get out of this country. I didn't like Yale. I felt that there was another world out there. I felt

like I was being processed like a socioeconomic product into a world that I had no interest in."

His literary heroes were Jack London and Joseph Conrad, who painted "this vision of the Far East as a salvation, as a second world, an orphan world in a sense. So I went out there, I saw it, I was really mesmerized and sucked up into it." Then he went into the merchant marine, wrote a book, went to Yale, dropped out. "Emotionally distraught" and with "suicidal tendencies," he enlisted in the Army as a private, frantic that the Vietnam War would be over before he could get into combat there.

"As the Charlie Sheen guy says in 'Platoon,' he recalls, "I wanted to experience the bottom of the barrel. . . . I can't respect myself—if I can go to the bottom of the barrel, I can start over. I didn't want any privileges. I wanted to be anonymous. I wanted infantry, and I wanted 'Nam.' He got it all, serving with the 25th Infantry Division out of Cu Chi and then Dau Tieng, seeing heavy combat, getting wounded, seeing the "disgusting" corruption in Saigon, "the PX system, these fat cat sergeants with their liquor, the prostitution of the Vietnamese people."

When he returned through Fort Lewis, Wash., he realized that "the country was booming. The vast majority of people were totally indifferent to the war. I started to hide my uniform right away, tried to disappear into the crowd." He split for Mexico, "to escape. I couldn't stand it. California seemed like Mars. I went to Mexico and got into some trouble right away. I was in jail eight or nine days after I got back from Vietnam."

Drug charges. "The jail immediately told me what was going on in America—with a capital K. . . . There were 5,000 kids in a 2,000-bed jail in San Diego. I saw right away the problem, the civil war. . . . I saw the potential for revolution and the brewing underside, that the war was not just in Vietnam."

The next few years were "a very dark period" for Stone. He lived in New York and worked on screenplays, went to film school, married his first wife, who managed to keep

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'JFK's' Filmmaker

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him somewhat glued together. "I had a very hard time in terms of my mental state," he recalls. "During that Woodstock thing, I felt like a rage, I felt like, an anger inside that they were not serious about this counterrevolution, that if they really meant it, they had to get serious in order for it to work, that it had to be militarized and politicized."

"I felt like, stop screwing around with Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Yuppie or whatever his name is, Jerry Rubin. . . . If the war is being fought in Vietnam, then let's bring the war home, because you know, power comes from the barrel of a gun. I was into that concept. If you're going to do it, do it! Get together a cadre of tough soldiers, people who had been over there, and the jail population, and try to make the revolution."

He was "serious" about all this at the time, but realizes now that it was "an internal state of rage. Eventually, I mellowed, and it was integrated . . . and I went to New York University film school, where I had the good fortune to be able to really funnel my anger and my rage into movies."

Whew!

Of course, the anger—whatever it was—kept smoldering away in Stone as he read, and listened, and watched. The Pentagon Papers helped him "understand the degree

of duplicity of the government, with the fake body counts, the corruption, the immorality of the way we fought the war." There was Watergate. The revelations about the Phoenix program. Deception after deception by the government.

"By the time the mid-'70s rolled around," he says, "my screenplays were 'Platoon,' 'Born on the Fourth of July.' They took on an increasingly political tone." The eventual success of these two movies, he told Larry King, in a sense "gave me permission to attack another taboo subject," the Kennedy assassination.

But is "JFK" fact, or is it fiction? "The conclusions that we reached may seem to some to be hyperbolic," he says, "but I think once you grant that there may be a political motive for Kennedy's murder—the winding down of the Cold War—if you accept that assumption, then my conclusions about who and how are not so hyperbolic."

How come he doesn't help the viewer distinguish between the archived footage (the Zapruder film etc.) and the fictional, speculative scenes? "What am I supposed to do," he answers, "put a disclaimer before each scene, like a prescription drug label? . . . I think people are very smart. I think the point of the movie is to get you into the movie, get you past that looking glass so that you're part of the event, so that you can feel it and understand our hypothesis. You're free to walk out of that

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movie and say this is baloney. You don't have to accept it."

How could such a big conspiracy hang together—hundreds of co-conspirators? "I see a cellular organization, much like the battle of Algiers," he answers. "Two or three hundred people can give silent assent, or 20 people. I never got up to 200 or 300. I mean, it says clearly in the movie, 'It's in the wind, it's in the air. Nothing is on paper . . .' A lot of people hated this president, a lot of people in powerful positions. That doesn't necessarily mean that they all meet in one place and say we're going to cut the head off the snake at such-and-such a place."

"No, I don't think it happens that way. I say it's in the air. It's in the wind. Calls are made. Discussions are had. At one point, at one secret point—the most secret point—a call is made. And there is a shot of a call being made to a man in silhouette. That person, whoever he be, is a technician. So there's one call, to one technician. One technician activates. How does he activate? Same cellular structure, moving down! . . . You don't know who you're working for. . . . You have no evidence."

Stone, leaning back into the sofa, talks on and on, apparently mesmerized by his inner vision. And given what we've seen these last few decades, who dares call him crazy?

Working Washington

Meanwhile, Stone has apparently enjoyed his lesson in How to Work Washington. Has even learned a thing or two. Maybe there's a movie in it somewhere, or a scene anyway.

After the King show, he crowds into the elevator with Mankiewicz and others at CNN headquarters downtown.

"Novak," mutters Mankiewicz without completing the thought, "is sort of becoming the Robin Hood of . . ."

"I didn't know, I called him Mr. Evans!" says Stone.

"That's even better," says an aide. Stone: "Is it Rowland and Evans? Novak and Evans?"

Aide: "Evans and Novak."

Stone: "And they're both on the right, is that correct?"

Mankiewicz: "Oh yeah."

Stone continues the questioning, about their column, their television appearances. Then, as the elevator door opens, he says brightly, "You missed the grimace he gave me!"