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Shots heard 'round the weird

Conspiracy theorists whose ideas range from almost mainstream to bizarre get another chance at the spotlight

By Paul Galloway

On Nov. 22, 1963, John Judge was a 16-year-old junior in high school in Falls Church, Va., a suburb of Washington. He wept that afternoon when he heard that John F. Kennedy had been shot to death in Dallas.

Today, at 44, Judge, a typesetter and fundraiser, is among a legion of amateur sleuths who have devoted hundreds of hours to studying the Kennedy assassination, a coterie that ranges from obsessive cranks to credible researchers.

He has read the 26 volumes of the Warren Commission report, the minutes of the commission meetings, thousands of articles and between 300 and 400 books on the subject. (Life magazine recently estimated that the book total on the assassination exceeds 600; only a few endorse the Warren Commission.)

Even though the commis-

Oliver Stone's film "JFK" resorts to cheap emotional appeals, Dave Kehr says. Review inside.

Mark Lane makes a persuasive case against the CIA. Book review, pg. 3.

sion concluded otherwise, Judge has decided that the 35th president of the United States was the victim of a conspiracy.

This means he is often described in a way that rankles.

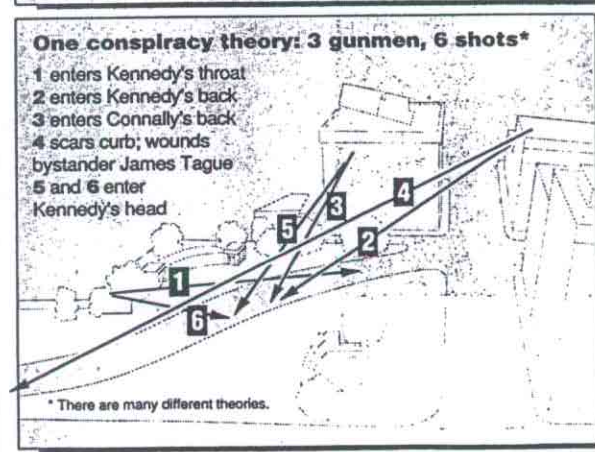
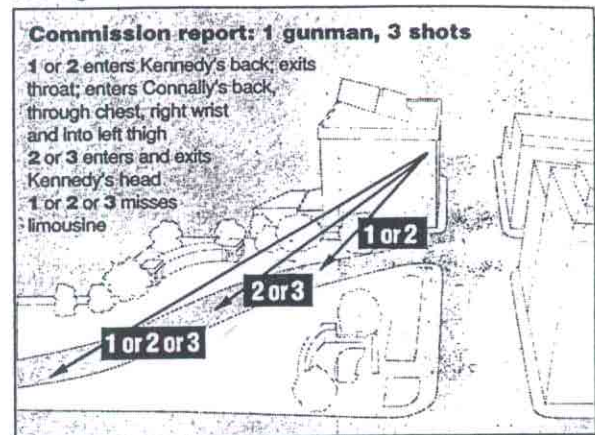
"Because I make connections between certain facts and certain events, I'm called 'a conspiracy theorist,'" he said in a telephone interview from his home in Washington. "That's better than 'assassination buff' or 'conspiracy nut,' which I've also been called."

"But notice that people who support the Warren Commission are usually called historians. If you're going to be fair, either they

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The great debate: How many shots?

Some Americans question the Warren Commission findings about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. The commission, appointed to investigate the murder, reported that Lee Harvey Oswald, a lone assassin, fired 3 shots from the Texas School Book Depository. Some independent researchers disagree, basing a case for other gunmen and/or shots on some of the following information:



Conspiracy

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should be called 'coincidence theorists' or all of us should be historians."

By whatever name they are known, you can bet all are aware they have a conspicuous new member in the club, namely Oliver Stone with his \$40 million movie "JFK."

John Judge is among those pleased that Oliver Stone has joined the ranks.

For one thing, the two mesh on most major points.

Both believe that the Warren Commission investigation was a coverup and that its finding that 24-year-old Lee Harvey Oswald killed Kennedy, "acting alone and without advice or assistance," was a lie.

For another, Judge thinks "JFK" is likely to reach an audience too young to know much about the assassination or the controversy surrounding it, which will enable Stone "to move them along from thinking the crime was committed by a lone gunman to understanding it was an organized conspiracy."

It shouldn't be an overwhelming challenge. Polls indicate that a majority of Americans are already convinced.

Public needs no persuading

A Washington Post survey conducted in the spring found 56 percent of respondents believed in a conspiracy and only 19 percent went along with the Warren Commission. A Gallup poll commissioned by Stone found those percentages to be 73 and 16, respectively.

And though some details may differ, Stone and Judge share similar visions about this conspiracy, which, in their view, is astonishingly vast.

According to the Time magazine review, "JFK" incriminates "high officials in the CIA, the FBI, the Dallas constabulary, all three armed services, Big Business and the White House."

Judge also indicts the Mafia, former Nazis and anti-Castro Cubans.

Both were prompted to study the assassination by books, Judge in 1968 by lawyer Mark Lane's "Rush to Judgment" and Stone in 1988 by "On the Trail of the Assassins," by Jim Garrison, whose character would be central to "JFK."

Even their bleak outlooks jibe.

"We have a fascist security state running this country," Stone told the Los Angeles Times.

"We live in a police intelligence state," Judge said.

"The assassination was America's first coup d'etat," Stone writes in the current issue of Premiere magazine.

"My analysis was that the assassination was the result of a covert military coup d'etat organized at top levels by the Joint Chiefs of Staff," Judge said.

He believes that ever since, the country "has been in the death grip" of the "military-industrial complex that Eisenhower warned us against. They didn't just kill Kennedy; they killed hundreds of others. They have mounted genocidal wars across the world for profit. They see the population here as the enemy and expendable."

The oligarchy that runs the country, he further believes, is composed of two main groups of wealth and power on the East and

West Coasts, which usually cooperate but sometimes contend. He believes George Bush and the Eastern group mandated the assassination attempt against President Ronald Reagan by John Hinckley Jr. "Reagan quickly got the message the Bushes were behind it. The families represent different money sources and positions on issues."

The implications are that this is an ... Evil Empire.

Judge laughed. "That's right," he said, "this is the *real* Evil Empire."

So why don't "they" rub out Stone? Stone told the Texas Monthly, "I got a lot of light on me. To kill me would point the finger at something a little bizarre, wouldn't it?"

Focus on Stone

Indeed, there has been a lot of light—and heat—on Stone. Since beginning production of "JFK," the filmmaker has been the focus of numerous newspaper and magazine articles.

In some instances, he has seemed more a target. Perhaps the harshest criticism has been aimed at his decision to make former New Orleans District Atty. Jim Garrison (played by Kevin Costner) the hero of his movie and to embrace a collection of conspiracy theories, from the plausible to the weird.

Washington Post reporter George Lardner Jr., who covered Garrison's unsuccessful attempts in the late '60s to prove a conspiracy, read the first draft of the script for "JFK," observed filming of assassination scenes on location in Dallas, then rebuked Stone in a May article in the Post headlined "On the Set: Dallas in Wonderland, How Oliver Stone's Version of the Kennedy Assassination Exploits the Edge of Paranoia."

By using Garrison, Lardner wrote, "Stone is chasing fiction. Garrison's investigation was a fraud."

Also in May, Tribune columnist Jon Margolis, informed that the original script suggested President Lyndon Johnson had been involved in the assassination of his predecessor, weighed in:

"Simple-mindedness has always been Stone's weakness. ... There is a point at which intellectual

myopia becomes morally repugnant. Stone's new movie proves that he has passed that point."

The combative Stone cried foul. He said the script had been revised several times and many objectionable scenes cut.

"There's a thousand and one vultures out there crouched on their rocks [waiting for me]," he told Texas Monthly. "They want to come down and peck out my eyes and rip my guts out. ... I think the press is motivated, in part, by fear. Fear of new facts."

But Garrison remained the champion of "JFK," a concern also for Hugh Aynesworth, who covered the Kennedy assassination for the Dallas Morning News and the Garrison investigation for Newsweek.

"I don't think a normal guy could be around Garrison without realizing what he was doing, that he's crazy, a strange man, a megalomaniac," Aynesworth said. "I personally discredited 60 or 70 of his witnesses. He could change his theory in a moment. He made six or seven major changes. When better stuff came along, he'd abandon the witnesses he had been hanging the old theory on."

Rosemary James, who covered Garrison's inquiry for the New Orleans States-Item, told Newsweek, "He went from a highly intelligent eccentric to a lunatic in the period of a year."

Stone acknowledges that Garrison has flaws but says his intention in "JFK" is to portray him as an underdog, an Everyman who fights the system to seek the truth.

"In the end," Stone writes in

Premiere, "the importance of a historical truth is not just its factual content but its emotional and ethical significance as well."

Still, the finished movie has drawn fire.

In last Sunday's New York Times, Tom Wicker declared that "JFK" was marked by "wild assertions," paranoia and fantasy, and treated "matters that are wholly speculative as fact and truth, in effect rewriting history."

The cover of Newsweek blared, "The Twisted Truth of 'JFK'—Why Oliver Stone's New Movie Can't Be Trusted."

"What Stone has done is irresponsible," Aynesworth said. "People will think this movie is real."

Getting the facts

Yet one can sympathize with anyone who tries to unravel the conundrums attached to, in the commission's words, "the tragic developments of Nov. 22-24, 1963."

Stone has called the case a "labyrinth," and author John David, who wrote a book on the Kennedy assassination, sees it as "a swamp" ("you get sucked into it and you never get out").

One must become familiar with a host of sites, events, witnesses, exhibits and hypotheses:

The window on the sixth floor of the orange-brick Texas School Book Depository where the commission said Oswald fired his Mannlicher-Carcano rifle three times, missing one shot, striking Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connally with one round and blowing Kennedy's head open with another.

Dealey Plaza. The grassy knoll. Badge Man. The Babushka Lady. The Zapruder film. The Three Tramps. CE-399, the so-called pristine bullet that wounded Connally and Kennedy. Oswald's kill-

ing of Dallas Police Officer J.D. Tippit. The arrest of Oswald in the Texas Theater. The killing of Oswald on Nov. 24.

Questions. Why did the head shot, if it came from behind him, cause Kennedy's body to jerk rapidly backward? Were there only three shots? The House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1978 said a police Dictabelt tape showed four, which "probably" suggests a conspiracy. A re-examination of the committee's tape by the National Academy of Sciences said there was no fourth shot.

Dave Perry, a Dallas insurance man who has researched the assassination since the '70s, said that if one combines all theories, there were 33 assassins in and around Dealey Plaza, where Kennedy was shot.

Perry predicted that "JFK" will have people who claim to have knowledge of the assassination storming TV talk shows for exposure.

Aynesworth concurred: "The assassination makes people come out of the woodwork to say anything to get them publicity. I've never seen anything like it."

Was there a conspiracy? "You can't prove a negative," Aynesworth said. "I think the Warren Commission got it right. Its report is the same as any report of a crime that's put to the scrutiny the assassination was."

"In any case this big, you'll get conflicting statements from witnesses, ineptitude and jealousies among investigative agencies. The report has all kinds of holes, but in one way, that's its strength. If they wanted to cover up, they'd throw out the inconsistencies and disagreements. But they dumped everything in, and all the conspiracy theorists begin there."

"I think some researchers are truly honest. Some aren't too bright. Some are opportunists. The problem with some theories is you have to go farther than 1 and 1 is 3. You have to believe 1 and 1 is 16 or 17."

Newsweek lists the Warren Commission findings that do not appear in Stone's movie: Physical evidence linked the weapon that killed Kennedy to Oswald; the autopsy found that Kennedy's wounds came from the rear; several witnesses "identified Oswald as the man who shot Officer Tippit"; and the shell casings found at the scene came from Oswald's handgun, which he carried when arrested.

The Warren Commission tried to address the loose ends in Appendix XII, "Speculations and Rumors."

It began: "Myths have traditionally surrounded the dramatic assassinations of history. ... Where-

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ever there is any element of mystery in such dramatic events, misconceptions often result from sensational speculations."

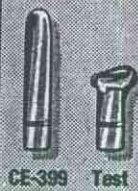
Perhaps what has stimulated much disbelief that Oswald acted alone is the reluctance to believe that nobodies can kill kings.

Dr. James W. Pennebaker, professor of psychology at Southern Methodist University, has researched the assassination.

"People desperately need to understand their world," he said. "There's nothing more threatening than chaos or random violence, and here was this mammoth event with this piddling explanation. A seriously disturbed guy, a loser, who did it by himself, transforming history. We can't handle this. We need a cause commensurate in size with the effect. Conspiracies are much more comforting."

CE-399: The magic bullet

Commission Exhibit 399 or "magic bullet" was found on a stretcher at Parkland Hospital. The commission contends that this bullet, virtually undamaged, passed through Kennedy and Connally, causing 7 separate wounds. Researchers contend the zig-zagging flightpath, shown below, was impossible:



■ CE-399 was found to be in near-perfect condition so a test was performed. Same type of bullet, fired once through a cadaver's wrist, was severely deformed

Path of CE-399 (Warren Commission)

