

About two-thirds of the way through the three-hour diatribe that is Oliver Stone's *JFK*, crusading New Orleans D.A. Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) holds a secret meeting with a military official who calls himself "X." After briefly summarizing much of the (actual) circumstantial evidence linking government agencies to the Kennedy assassination, X counsels the overwhelmed Garrison on how to survive as a pygmy among the increasingly implicated giants of the military-industrial complex. "Ride the shitstorm," X says. Keep stirring up trouble in the hope that the truth will shake loose.

X's advice serves as a statement of purpose for the entire movie, which has simultaneously been riding a self-generating storm of advance editorial publicity and

JFK

starring
Kevin Costner, Tommy Lee Jones, Laurie Metcalf, Gary Oldman, Michael Rooker & Sissy Spacek

directed by
Oliver Stone

screenplay by
Oliver Stone & Zachary Sklar

Warner Bros.

(citywide)

A Stone's Throw

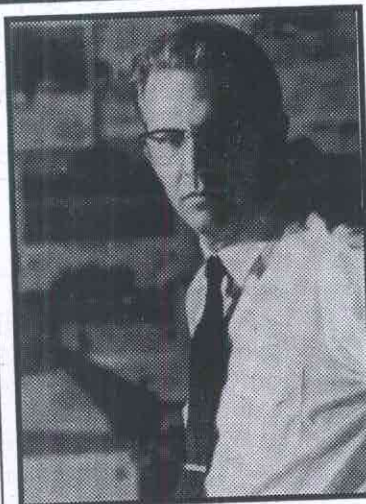
With *JFK*, Oliver Stone Proves He's Still a Rider on the Storm

BY RAY GREENE

trying to reawaken public interest in the great scar at the heart of modern American politics. Stone's thesis comes straight from the twilight zone of the political intelligentsia's lunatic fringe: that Kennedy was killed by Cold Warriors in the CIA and the Pentagon for formulating conciliatory policies towards Vietnam, Russia, and Cuba, and that Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby were the predetermined fall guys for a far wider conspiracy.

Historically, the idea isn't nearly as outrageous as it sounds. With Kennedy out of the way, proposed cutbacks in both the international role of the CIA and American troop deployments never occurred. The Johnson Administration, as its *first* official act after the assassination, reversed Kennedy's policies by widening U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Utilizing his well-honed skills as a director *provocateur*, Stone makes a structurally complex and persuasive case for the assassination-as-right-wing coup hypothesis. Though constructed around Garrison's controversial investigation of Oswald's alleged CIA connections, *JFK* is no more a movie about Garrison than *Citizen*



Costner as Garrison

Kane is a biography of the anonymous reporter investigating Kane's death.

The infamous lone gunman theory formulated by the Warren Commission Report has been steadily unraveling since the day it was released. Gathering up all the loose threads uncovered by Garrison and subsequent conspiracy theorists, Stone weaves a complicated visual tapestry, blending documentary and archival materials, dramatic re-enactments, and speculative sequences of his own devising. In the process, *JFK* incontrovertibly dis-

proves the official version of the president's killing, while raising troubling questions about government complicity no movie has the resources to answer.

Though the decision to give cameos to virtually every out-of-work liberal in Hollywood at times gives *JFK* the queasy appearance of a hip *Around the World in 80 Days*, Stone's performers are almost uniformly excellent. (Ed Asner, Donald Sutherland, Jack Lemmon, and Walter Matthau all appear briefly, as if to legitimize Stone's exploration of what many believe are crank suppositions.) Joe Pesci stands out with his Donald-Duck-on-speed rendition of a gay paramilitarist.

The unfortunate exception is Costner's unconvincing Garrison. The box-office clout Costner brings to the project seems like too high a price for his startling ineptitude; Costner even manages to bungle his supposed-to-be-rousing courtroom summation speech, the kind of lowball acting challenge the generic talents on a hack TV series such as *Superior Court* slam into the bleachers five times a week. It's time to stop comparing Costner to Gary Cooper and Jimmy Stewart, and to draw anal-

ogies more suited to his minimal dramatic range—wax fruit, for example.

Like every film Stone has made since *Platoon*, *JFK* is feverishly overdirected, which is both an asset and a weakness when handling such combustible material. Stone's technical prowess, while spectacular, rushes along so relentlessly he often seems to gloss over his most damning evidence. In *JFK*'s jacked-up, data-heavy presentation, equal visual emphasis is given to fact and speculation, a major tactical error which has already enabled Stone's conservative foes in official media to throw the documented baby out with the conjectural bathwater.

Perhaps that's the price of admission for a film that goes ferociously where a more self-consciously "responsible" filmmaker would fear to tread. In what may be the most famous capsule review of a movie, President Woodrow Wilson once called D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* "like writing history with lightning," a phrase that could equally apply to *JFK*. While lightning is notoriously inaccurate, Stone's incandescent rage savagely showers necessary (if at times diffuse) light on one of the darkest corners of our national past.

Though character assassins helped destroy Jim Garrison and are already lining Stone up in their slanderous cross-hairs, the achievement of *JFK* is ultimately

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more important than the issue of whether Garrison was an ambitious publicity hound, or whether the man he tried as a co-conspirator in the assassination was unjustly accused (there is evidence to suggest he was not). If the only thing Garrison accomplished was the liberation by subpoena of

the Zapruder film, an amateur 8mm movie of Kennedy's shooting buried for over five years in a Time-Life vault, the trial he mounted would have been worth it.

Nothing in Stone's flashy, tour de force approach matches the awful power of Zapruder's crude, eyewitness footage, which functions as the smoking gun in Stone's filmic *J'accuse*. The raw, visceral immediacy of actually witnessing the death of a president is so overpowering, it takes

an effort of will to realize the political importance of what's being shown, for Zapruder's film demonstrates conclusively that the killing bullet struck Kennedy frontally, destroying forever the myth that Oswald could've delivered the ballistic *coup de grace* from behind the presidential convoy. In that terrifying instant, even *JFK*'s wildest suppositions become possible.

The gritty magnification of fluid, bone, and brain when Kennedy's head explodes

is the brutal but necessary blunt instrument *JFK* uses to beat back the false assumptions underlying the most scandalous political coverup of modern times. Even those viewers predisposed to dismiss *JFK* as a liberal tantrum will have trouble washing the reality of blood and tissue from their half-closed eyes. The cataclysm unleashed during those six nightmarish seconds in Dealey Plaza makes Stone's shitstorm seem like a summer breeze by comparison. □