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In the mesmerizing 'JFK,' everyone is guilty — especially Oliver Stone

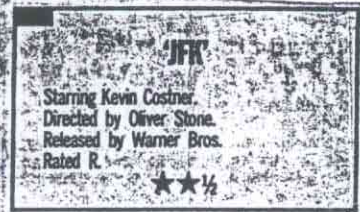
By Stephen Hunter
Sun Film Critic

Oliver Stone is the Elmer Gantry of the American left, selling that old-time religion of conspiracy and victimization by dark forces. But even as he's booming so majestically from the pulpit, he's stealing your wallet and trying to make time with your wife. — Thus his new movie "JFK" is a work that's easy to like — defy anybody to deny the hypnotic grace and slickness of its 3 hours and 10 minutes — but hard to trust. In fact, I don't trust it any farther than I could throw it.

Who killed JFK? According to Stone, it was everybody with initials: the CIA, of course, and the FBI; but also the JCS (Joint Chiefs of Staff) and the ONI (Office of Naval Intelligence). And, of course, the SS (Secret Service) and the DPD (Dallas Police Department), to say nothing of ABC, NBC and CBS, UPI and AP. And LBJ. And what about BSA (Boy Scouts of America) and CFG (Camp Fire Girls)? Guilty, guilty, guilty. There's enough guilt to go around for a thousand years.

Stone uses the the works of the generally discredited New Orleans district attorney and noted publicity hound Jim Garrison — impersonated by Kevin Costner with about as much charisma as a Republican secretary of agriculture — as his line into the material. He "uncover[s]" the massive plot that resulted in a "triangulation of fire" in Dealey Plaza on Nov. 22, 1963, with three hit teams firing a total of six to 10 bullets from three sites, while Lee Harvey Oswald sipped a Coke in the employees lounge of the Texas Book Depository. The act was committed at the behest of the "Military-Industrial Complex" (MIC) which feared that secret peacenik Kennedy would pull out of Vietnam and generally stand down from the very profitable war business.

It doesn't seem to bother him that not a whiff of physical evidence of such a plot exists or that those things he takes as bedrock are themselves subject to considerable interpretation and revision.



To name two such, upon which is built the full church of his argument: President Kennedy's backward head-snap when struck and the strange trajectory of the "magic bullet." Though it is taken for granted by assassination theorists that Kennedy's head would have snapped forward if hit from the rear, forensic researchers firing bullets into human skulls filled with brain tissue have documented that a rearward snap, propelled by the hydrostatic evacuation of brain tissue from the exit wound, is more characteristic of a rear brain shot.

And the PBS television program "Nova" used sophisticated computer analysis to demonstrate that the movement of the "magic bullet" (which, according to the Warren Commission, went through the president, changed course, and then went through

Governor John Connolly, thus explaining how Oswald could fire so many shots in such a short time) was well within ballistic parameters and the movements of the two men. And it remains a fact that every single shred of ballistic evidence, including fragments in Connolly's arm, was atomically identical to the bullets

fired by Oswald and that no other bullets or bullet fragments have ever been found.

But then Stone isn't arguing, he's preaching. "JFK" must be seen as a sermon condemning America for all her sins. It is therefore loaded with impressive if empty rhetoric and progresses in an almost biblical cadence, never pausing to distinguish between that which is known fact and that which is mere speculation. It is a rush to bad judgment.

The movie is ultimately incoherent — Stone never makes any sense out of the New Orleans angle to the conspiracy — and seems to veer in strange direc-

tions to accommodate all sects of assassination dialectic. For one, there's a bizarre side trip to Washington where Donald Sutherland, as "Col. X," lays out the case for Pentagon complicity. Assassination scholars will be somewhat dumbfounded at the cavalier method by which the movie credits all "discoveries" to Garrison and his team, though much of the information was developed later by others.

Yet still and all, "JFK" is entertaining, if only because the cast of characters in the New Orleans underground is so bizarre. Joe Pesci has a great turn as the extremely weird David Ferrie,

who mysteriously died before he could testify against his mentor, the also weird Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones), though Stone comes dangerously close to homophobia in his insistence of camping up the sexual orientation of these two men.

Oddly enough, Lee Harvey Oswald, as portrayed by Gary Oldman, is the only character who emerges with some sense of reality and pathetic dignity.

The movie is curiously at its worst when it needs to be at its best — and it's also at its most

reprehensible. It offers up as heroic and admirable Garrison's decision to prosecute Shaw, though even on the evidence the film itself offers, he had no case at all.

The case, of course, was dismissed in two hours. When a prosecutor ruins a man in order to get himself his own day in court, and a film director canonizes him for it, that seems to me the biggest proof of an American coup d'etat and evidence that indeed, the fascists have taken over.