

Oliver Stone and the appetite for conspiracies

IN THE seasonal contest for cinema hype, innocence and whimsy have proved no match for politics and paranoia. Despite spending \$70m to make a saccharine-sweet, nostalgic sequel to the Peter Pan story called "Hook", Steven Spielberg has found himself badly beaten by Oliver Stone's incendiary, revisionist docudrama, "JFK". Mr Stone and his film are ubiquitous: the cover of *Newsweek*, splashy profiles on the network news, even a think-piece by a pundit in the *New York Times*.

Few are complimentary. Mr Stone's film, which contends that John Kennedy was the victim of a grand conspiracy involving virtually everyone then in the American government save Lady Bird Johnson (and maybe even her), has been savaged as recklessly irresponsible; as a distortion of history and an attempt to exploit a national tragedy; and, not least, as plain crazy. Mr Stone himself has been called morally repugnant. According to one Stone-basher, "people who sell sex have more principle."

Mr Stone has been here before. His previous political films—including "Platoon" and "Born on the Fourth of July", both about Vietnam—were attacked by the right as the ravings of a self-righteous, left-wing fantasist. Talking of "JFK", Mr Stone is prone to accuse journalists who disagree with him of being (albeit unwittingly) part of the conspiracy that "JFK" purports to uncover—a conspiracy involving the CIA, the FBI, the army and navy, anti-Castro Cubans and the whole of the "military-industrial complex".

The criticisms will not stop people flocking to see the film. Americans have a fascination with conspiracy theories, especially those that surround the assassinations of the 1960s. A survey in the *Washington Post* in May found that 56% thought there was some sort of conspiracy behind the president's murder. Only 19% agreed with the Warren commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. In the preface to a new book by James Earl Ray, the convicted assassin of Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson calls for a special prosecutor to reopen Mr Ray's case and look for a government conspiracy.

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Some of America's enthusiasm for conspiracy theories is easy to understand. In the case of John Kennedy, the Warren commission's report is indeed full of inconsistencies and apparent impossibilities. In 1979 a House select committee on assassinations, citing the report's shortcomings and its own investigation, said there was a 95% probability of such a conspiracy. Many critics of "JFK" acknowledge this. Their complaint against Mr Stone is that he has chosen to present as fact one of the less plausible theories cobbled together from sources of dubious credibility. The presumed motive is even more dubious. To claim, as Mr Stone

does, that Kennedy was ordered to be killed by hawks within his own government because he was about to withdraw all Americans from Vietnam is at once impossibly paranoid (about military men) and hopelessly naive (about Kennedy).

Yet to criticise the details of Mr Stone's "theory" misses why it is so seductive. The barely stated premise of "JFK" is that the assassination of Kennedy was a historical watershed. Had he not been killed, everything would have been different. No Vietnam. No race riots. No drug culture. Instead, Camelot. It is a view Mr Stone has expressed again and again in interviews. It is also a view shared, more or less consciously, by millions of Americans.

If the assassination changed so much, the argument continues, it seems all the more implausible that it could have been the work of a lonely fool like Oswald; an event so big surely deserves a big villain, such as the military-industrial complex.

What is more, people learnt from the 1960s and 1970s that giving the establishment the benefit of the doubt does not always prove wise. The CIA did infiltrate the student anti-war movement; the FBI did spy on civil-rights leaders; a sitting president did ride roughshod over the constitution to cover up the Watergate burglary; another did allow a freelance foreign policy of selling arms to Iran as ransom and using the profits to circumvent laws against arming Nicaraguan contras.

The fact that these scandals are now public is testament to the relative openness of America's government. With its (again, relatively) adversarial press, lack of anything like Britain's Official Secrets Act and plethora of

leakers, the American system makes it hard to keep a big conspiracy secret. But rarely do revelations come without pressure from outside. To the extent that government fails to take seriously its role as its own watchdog, conspiracy theories will flourish.

By the look of things, Mr Stone and company will stay busy. In December the planned investigations in both the House and the Senate into the "October Surprise"—the theory that Ronald Reagan's campaign team in 1980 made a deal with Iran to delay releasing American hostages until after the election—were quietly stopped. Neither body is likely to resurrect them in the next session. The Democrats know it is safer not to try to find a conspiracy than to risk ridicule if they fail. The Republicans, who fought the investigations tooth-and-nail despite George Bush's public "welcome" of them, would prefer the truth to remain untold in case there was a conspiracy. One of them, Senator Mitch McConnell, says that—like Mr Stone's sources—those who claim to know of the October Surprise are "liars, felons and flat-out flakes". That may be. But without a proper probe, their suspicions will linger and later re-emerge. Hollywood is already planning a film about the October Surprise.

