

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

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'JFK': The Movie

In case anyone hasn't heard, impresario Oliver Stone is hyping a movie on the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Before dealing with political grotesqueries, we'll let weekend moviegoers in on the main secret: Mr. Stone's flick is a bore.

In fact, "JFK" is three hours and a half of kaleidoscopic frenzy and mind-numbing dialogue, attributing the assassination to the U.S. Army, Navy, CIA, Cuban exiles and a circle of New Orleans homosexuals. In two movie theaters we know of people dozed off or wandered out. It's hard to think of another reasonable response from anyone sentient at the time of the assassination and its aftermath.

What Mr. Stone is basically selling, in other words, is political grotesquery itself. Thus former New Orleans D.A. Jim Garrison—played by Kevin "Dancing With Wolves" Costner—becomes a relentless truth-seeker. We have to say we admire Mr. Stone's brass, and particularly his skill at finding advantage in attacks on the film's historical veracity; he suggests this is further proof of a plot. In a CBS interview Monday, he unleashed a line reminiscent of that other master conspiracy theorist—Inspector Clouseau—"I smell a rat!"

The keystone of this publicity campaign is an imprimatur of seriousness from the op-ed page of *The New York Times*, on which Mr. Stone argued his script with a straight face. No surprise, since the *Times* op-ed page also launched Gary Sick's movie deal for "October Surprise." Sony's Columbia Pictures subsidiary paid, *The Washington Post* reported, "in the neighborhood of \$500,000."

To *The Times'* credit, its entertainment department did raise the question of whether the distributor of Mr. Stone's movie, Time Warner Inc., bears some responsibility to the truth. On our own part, we understand the pressure to get Time Warner stock somewhere within shouting distance of the blocked \$200-a-share bid from Paramount. But given the general reaction of the critics, even we wouldn't make too much the blurb leading the movie's new ads: "Electrifying. A Knockout. Breathless. Enthralling.

Sensational. Terrific.—Richard Corliss, *TIME*."

Now, since not all of today's moviegoers were around at the time of the assassination, about the politics: We agree that the Warren Commission report is not a final answer. It was less intent on truth than on unifying the nation, and now the nation pays a price in Mr. Stone's hype.

We further agree that November 1963 was a turning point in the American commitment to Vietnam. But the key was not the assassination of JFK

but the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem three weeks earlier. Once President Kennedy gave the go-ahead for a coup against an allied government in the name of winning the war, the U.S. was deeply committed indeed. Lyndon Johnson, who had opposed the coup, was left to pick up the pieces.

Anyone who wants to know what rocks the Warren Commission left unturned, though, should not turn to Mr. Garrison. Instead, read Edward Jay Epstein, author of "Inquest," a critique of the commission, "Counterplot," a critique of Mr. Garrison and finally "Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald."

Lee Harvey Oswald, as even "JFK" is forced to acknowledge, was a former Marine who defected to the Soviet Union and returned to Dallas. Mr. Epstein fleshes out this information: Oswald disappeared from sight during a year of his Moscow visit. His wife married him after a month's acquaintance, and Oswald was also befriended by her uncle, a colonel in the secret MVD. In Mexico City eight weeks before the assassination, Oswald met with a Soviet intelligence officer, and also with Cuban officials in seeking a visa. While in Dallas, Oswald was befriended and helped by George De Mohrenschildt, a shadowy figure with intelligence connections around the world. De Mohrenschildt agreed to a series of interviews with Mr. Epstein, but after the first was found shot, an apparent suicide.

It's too early to draw any real conclusion from these facts, which are not inconsistent with Oswald being simply a lunatic. But there is reason enough to hope that with the changes in Russia, someday we will be able to see the KGB files on Oswald, and even more intriguingly, De Mohrenschildt. Maybe someday the Cuban files, too. After all, the Kennedy administration toyed with the idea of assassinating Castro, who at the time issued a public warning that "they themselves will not be safe."

Pending more definitive evidence, the bare facts of the Epstein revelations would make a corking movie. But somehow no one wants to make a movie speculating that the KGB killed Kennedy. Instead, inevitably we suppose, Oliver Stone makes a movie about the CIA killing Kennedy, the *New York Times* turns the script into an op-ed article, the critics rave, and the talk shows are overwhelmed by the media blitz.

What sells, it seems, is precisely the hatred for the U.S. government and institutions that saturates "JFK." All this somehow reminds us of a great book by the late Richard Hofstadter entitled, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics."