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Historical liberties in 'J.F.K.' put Warner Bros. in cross fire

By Bernard Weinraub The New York Times

What is the responsibility of a studio that produces a major film depicting a huge governmentwide conspiracy surrounding the killing of President John F. Kennedy?
With the release of Oliver Stone's movie "JFK," the film community is asking about the ethical, artistic and even legal responsibility of the studio, Warner Bros., which released the \$40 million film that asserts Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone and may not have even fired a shot in the not have even fired a shot in the Kennedy assassination. Instead, the movie, which opened Friday around the nation,

opened Friday around the nation, implicates, directly and indirectly, the White House, the CIA, the FBI, the U.S. military, big business, anti-Castro Cubans, the Dallas police force and an assortment of fringe figures in New Orleans. Hollywood is vexed by the film, and no movie in recent years has stirred the kind of discussion that "JFK" has.

*UNITED ARTISTS WARNER CENTER MODERAND HELS - IN THE PAGE 2120



New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) confers with the judge (John Finnegan) in Oliver Stone's new film, "JFK."

At issue is whether Warner Bros., in helping finance and dis-tribute the movie, adheres to Stone's provocative point of view, which has been attacked by critics in newspapers and magazines as a distortion of the facts.

Or does Warner Bros., like any studio, produce its films for one reason — to make money — brushing aside the artistic, political, moral and ethical implications of any film?

It did not so without notice that

of any film?

It did not go without notice that
"JFK" had the substantial input
of the most powerful agency in
Los Angeles — Creative Artists
Agency — which represented
Stone; the film's star, Kevin
Costner, and numerous other ac-

One of the top producers in One of the top producers in Hollywood, who would speak only on condition of anonymity, said political and ethical questions about a film like "JFK" are simply dwarfed by money considerations: "All these guys sit in a room, look at what a picture will cost, look at that a picture will cost, look at that a picture will cost, look at the fact that they!"

look at Oliver's talent and track record, look at the fact that they'll get Costner and they say, 'This is a good roll of the dice for us.' All the rest really doesn't count." At the moment the issue con-fronting Hollywood is, does a stu-dio—or for that matter it's par-rent company. Time Warner dio — or for that matter it's par-ent company, Time Warner — view its role as merely giving free reign to a prominent director and, in the process, hope to turn the movie into a financial success? Or at what point does a studio ex-ercise its leverage and blunt the highly charged message of a film-maker like Stone?

Warner's is plainly delighted at Stone's promotion of the movie among the press, which he also attacks for accepting the report of the Warren Commission, the offi-cial investigation that concluded that Oswald acted on his own in the assassination. On the other hand, the studio was caught off

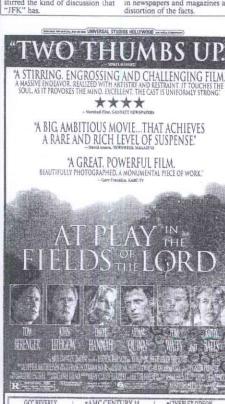
hand, the studio was caught off guard by the firestorm over the film.

Robert A. Daly, chairman of the board at Warner, and company president Terry Semel did not re-spond to phone calls about the studio's responsibilities. Neither did John Schulman, senior vice

president and general counsel.

But Semel told a Los Angeles
newspaper before the film was released that when Stone made his

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.oposal, "My immediate reaction was 'Wow! What a powerful and great idea for a movie." Over the weekend, the film's

Over the weekend, the third box-office grosses proved somewhat disappointing — \$5.2 million — placing the move fifth behind "Hook," "Father of the Bride," "The Last Boy Scout" and "Star Trek VI."

Warner Bros. officials said, however, that the three-hour

however, that the three-hour length of the film diminished the number of shows at movie houses, and that audience exit polls had proved highly favorable. Time Warner said the issue of a

studio's responsibility was up to Warner Bros.

Warner Bros.
"Our operating divisions have total creative freedom," said Tod Hullin, senior vice president for communications at Time Warner, in a statement. "This movie is a creative product and we do not interfere or comment on the results of the meative process."

of the creative process."

And Robert G. Friedman, presi-And Robert G. Friedman, president of Warmer Bros, advertising and publicity, in a statement to The New York Times, said that "controversial films raise a lot of questions and stimulate a lot of debate," and, "We endorse and continue to endorse the right of responsible filmspakers, to make sponsible filmmakers to make their ideas heard, and are proud to be part of such an outstanding motion picture.

motion picture."
Film executives and movie makers have responded with uncertainty about the film. In the past numerous critically acclaimed films based on fact, like "Gandhi," "Lawrence of Arabia" or "All the President's Men," have altered fact in shaping a coherent drama. But the historical basis of

the story remained intact.

And few major films have, like
"JFK," involved such a divergence of opinion from the official

Dawn Steel, former president of Columbia Pictures, said: "An artist paints a picture the way he or she sees it, Filmmakers are artists. But when it comes to historical ac-But when it comes to historical ac-curacy there may be a moral ques-tion here. I don't know what the answer to this is, We're making a documentary. A movie can't be judged by the same standards that journalists judge a newspaper story. It's Oliver Stone's vision. It's called freedom of speech." Frank Price, a motion picture executive who is a former presi-dent of Columbia Pictures, said, "I don't think you, as a studio, have to be in agreement with the statement the artist is making. You're just (financially) backing the artist. But if a statement is one you find so unacceptable, that's where the dividing line comes. "Here you're dealing with a re-

"Here you're dealing with a re-spected filmmaker and you cer-tainly give him every benefit of the doubt. Let's face it; everyone know's it's only a movie. He has actors and there's a premise. If you start to censor people's political point of view it's a real

swamp."

In defense of Stone, Bert Fields, one of the most powerful enter-tainment lawyers in Los Angeles, whose law firm represents the director, said. "If you are doing

what purports to be a book or film about history, it's hardly rare for an author or filmmaker to take a

"Look at 'Richard III.' There was a violent controversy between those who believed Richard was a Ihose who believed Richard was a tyrant who murdered his two nephews and those who think he was a wonderful king. Shakespeare represented one view, the view that was acceptable to his Queen. Nobody faulted Shakespeare. One has a right to take a view and pre-sent it as fact."

But several studio chiefs, who would speak only on condition of anonymity, said they were dis-turbed about the way Warner's

There is a difference between Oliver Stone presenting this as truth, and the studio presenting this as truth; it's a fine line but it's there and the studio has made no differentiation," said the head of one major studio.

Because the film deals with one of the most traumatic moments of U.S. history — the Kennedy assassination — some producers say the studio bears a special responsi-bility in releasing a movie that

makes such sweeping allegations.
"The First Amendment, which is often cited in these circumstances, has nothing to do with the relationship of the studio and the filmmaker," said Thomas Buer, a movie producer and formerly a

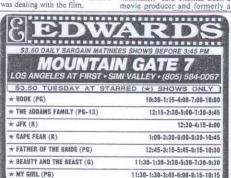
U.S. attorney in the Southern Disct who was appointed by Robert Kennedy, then attorney gener-

'It relates only to the relationship between the government and individuals. Accordingly, there is greater opportunity for studios to control filmmakers than there is for the government to control citizens. In this particular instance, since a living family's nightmare and a nation's torment are per-

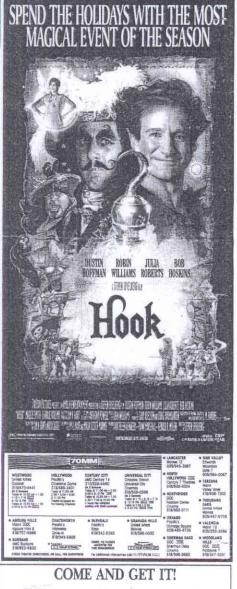
ceived by one person's skewed imagination, I would have hoped more control would have been exercised.

Warner Bros. strongly defended its decision to produce the film.

"We accept that controversial films raise a lot of questions and stimulate a lot of debate. We be-lieve debate is healthy. One of the most important foundations of our country is its defense of the right to free speech."









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