

26 JANUARY 1992 • THE SUNDAY TIMES

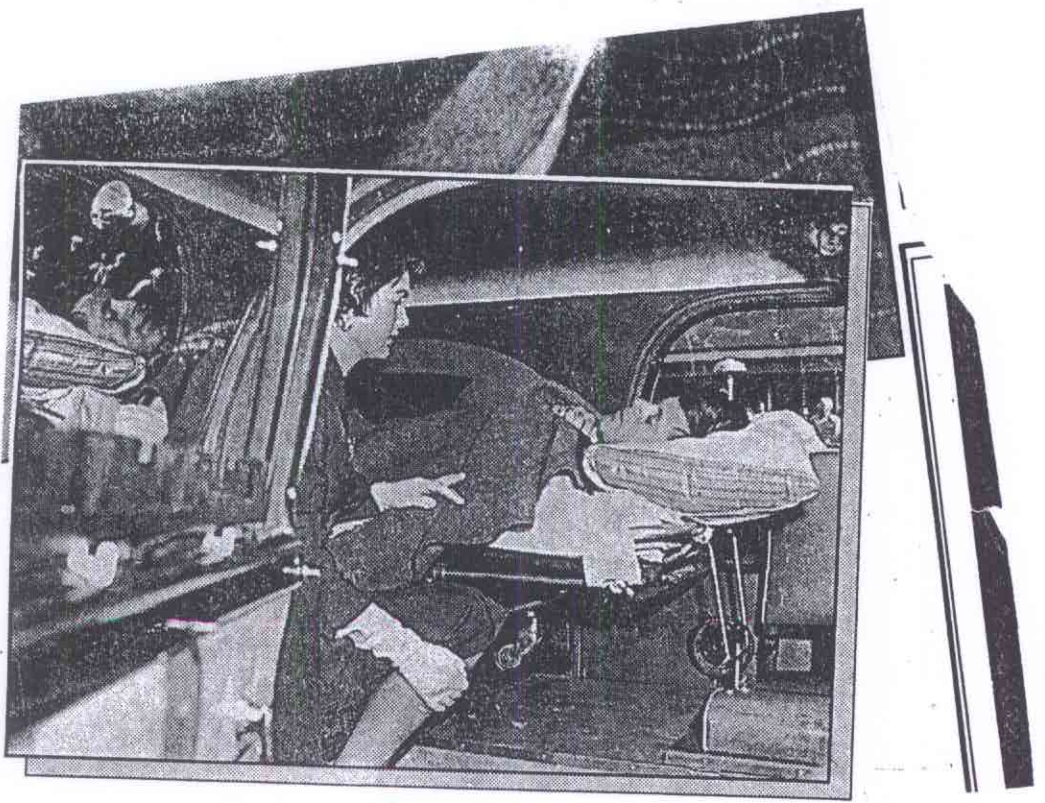
TRAGEDY

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AND

TRICKERY

Photo: Graham



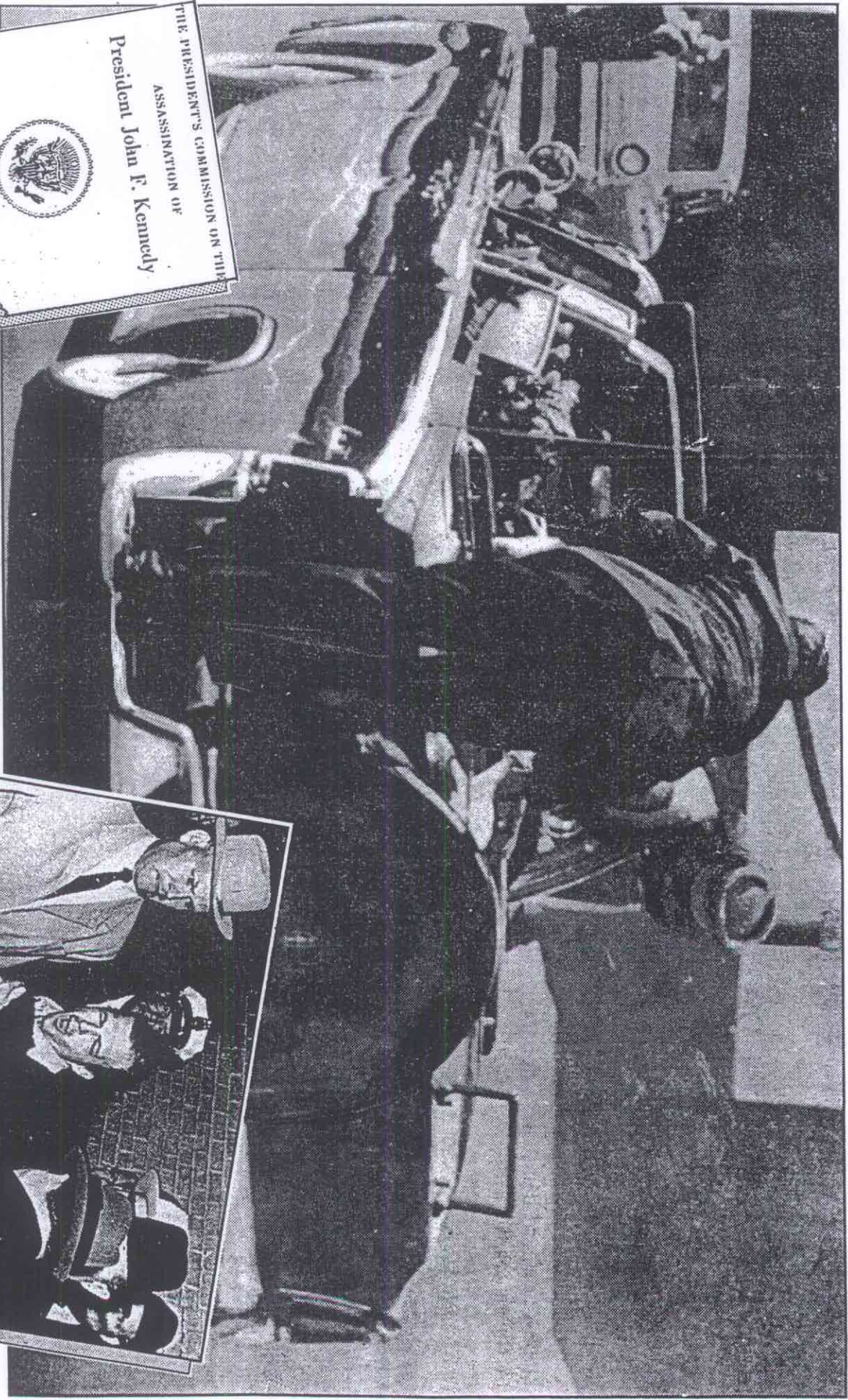


FICTION: The Kennedy myth is so powerful that truth has given way to illusion. In a TV film, actors (right) recreated a tableau the public never saw: a distraught Jackie watching over her stricken husband

THE PRESIDENT'S COMMISSION ON THE
ASSASSINATION OF
President John F. Kennedy
REPORT



FACT: after John Kennedy was assassinated (above) in Dallas, his alleged killer, Lee Harvey Oswald (right), was murdered by local nightclub owner Jack Ruby in front of police in the city jail



Bob Jackson



10 FOCUS



Nearly three
decades after
he died, the
assassination
of President
John Kennedy

still haunts America. Oliver
Stone's film JFK, now opening
here, revives the worst fears
and has provoked a furious
row. **Tom Wicker**, who reported
on the killing and is now a New
York Times columnist, says the
film is not to be believed

More than halfway into JFK, Oliver Stone's three-hour film, which opened in Britain last week, about the assassination of President Kennedy, Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney, and his wife, Liz, are seen watching a television documentary about Garrison's investigation of the events of November 22, 1963, in Dallas.

The documentary's anchorman is heard alleging that the district attorney used improper methods to get witnesses to support his case against Clay Shaw, a New Orleans businessman, for his part in a supposed conspiracy surrounding the murder of John F. Kennedy. Kevin Costner, portraying Garrison, suggests by facial expression and dialogue that the charge is unfair and rigged to destroy his credibility — thus attacking the credibility of the documentary.

Frequently in JFK the district attorney alleges that the media are engaged in a cover-up of a monstrous conspiracy, which Stone confidently depicts as having resulted in the assassination of a president, the war in Vietnam, the later

murder of Robert Kennedy, perhaps even the murder of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

It is a measure of Stone's heavily-weighted storytelling that he gives only a fleeting glimpse of that one-hour documentary, which was broadcast by NBC on June 19, 1967. Its evidence — the script is available — establishes without doubt that Garrison and his aides threatened and bribed witnesses, who then lied in court, and that they concealed the results of a polygraph test that showed one witness, Vernon Bundy, to be lying.

So much for the advertising for the Stone film, which proclaims of Garrison: "He will risk his life, the lives of his family, everything he holds dear for the one thing he holds sacred — the truth."

In fact, of all the numerous conspiracy theorists and zealous investigators who for nearly 30 years have been peering at and probing the assassination of Kennedy, Garrison may be the most thoroughly discredited, and not just by the NBC documentary. His ballyhooed investigation ended ignominiously when his chosen villain, Shaw,

was acquitted; and the whole Garrison affair is now regarded, even by other conspiracy believers, as having been a travesty of the legal process.

Despite all this, Garrison is clearly the film's hero. He is played by Costner, one of Hollywood's hottest box-office attractions, fresh from his triumph in *Dances with Wolves*. Sissy Spacek plays his wife, and in an

arrogant bit of casting against type, the real-life Garrison makes a cameo appearance as Chief Justice Earl Warren.

JFK stirred controversy last summer when a draft of Stone's and Zachary Sklar's screenplay found its way to the press. Based chiefly on Garrison's 1988 book, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, it adopts his argument that Lee Harvey

Oswald — the lone presidential assassin according to the Warren Commission — was merely a patsy put forward to shield the actions of an immense body of conspirators involved in the murder and cover-up.

The controversy arose over fears that the film would develop a web of speculation and fiction around a tragic event of considerable historic significance. And indeed it

ound a tragic event of considerable historic significance. And indeed it does treat matters that are wholly speculative as fact and truth, in effect rewriting history.

Stone built into his film an all-encompassing defence. As in the scene of the television documentary, the film's Garrison repeatedly says that any critics of his thesis are either part of the great conspiracy he has conceived or are helping to cover it up. The only one of his assistants who argues and disagrees with him is shown to have been coerced by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, a primary participant in Garrison's sprawling conspiracy.

Of course, any article critical of the film — this one included — can be dismissed in the same way, as part of the alleged conspiracy or its continuing cover-up. Stone has already called himself a target for "one thousand and one vultures out there, crouched on their rocks". These were not just "the usual Hollywood vultures", he said, but "a lot of these paid-off journalist hacks that are working on the East Coast with their recycled [sic] political theories . . ."

But there is a gaping hole in the film's advance counter-attack: if a conspiracy as vast and consequential as the one claimed could have been carried out and covered up for three decades, why did the conspirators or their heirs allow Stone to make this film? Why not murder him, as they supposedly murdered others? Why, for that matter, didn't they knock off Garrison himself when — as Stone tells it with so much assurance — the New Orleans district attorney began so fearlessly to follow their trail?

JFK begins with real footage of President Eisenhower's farewell address, in

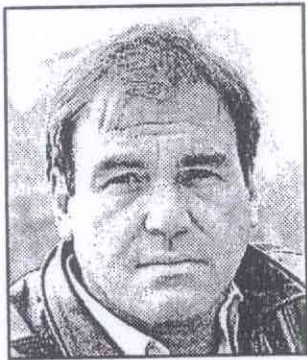
which he eloquently warned of the dangers of the "military-industrial complex". This sets up Stone's contention — borrowed, or swallowed whole, from Garrison — that generals, admirals and war profiteers so strongly wanted the war in Vietnam to be fought and the United States to stand tall and tough against the Soviets that when Kennedy seemed to question these goals, he had to be killed so that Vice-President Lyndon Johnson could take office. Stone clearly implies that this was

SEE TABLE IN MIRROR PAGE.
(Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau and Ed Asner provide others.) Sutherland, playing an unnamed former military officer who sounds like any of a number of hawkish fanatics hanging around Washington, specifically names such beneficiaries as Johnson and the Bell Corporation, which supplied helicopters for Vietnam.

Kennedy, historian Stone asserts, was considered "soft on communism" after the test-ban treaty with the Soviet Union and a conciliatory speech at an American university, both in 1963. No doubt some in the military and the ultra right-wing John Birch Society held that paranoid view; but to anyone active in

Washington at that time it is ridiculous to suggest that such an opinion was widely shared.

Stone's film nevertheless insists that Kennedy had so enraged the nation's hawks that the military-industrial complex, with the help of the Central Intelligence Agency and the FBI, actually planned and carried out the assassination, then covered it up through the Warren Commission (ostensibly set up to investigate the assassination and headed by Chief Justice Warren), with the aid of the Dallas police and



Phrases like 'what if' make it clear that even Stone cannot be sure that all the 'facts' he throws out so relentlessly in JFK are facts

the nation's press and television.

Stone may be on firmer ground when he claims that the assassination prevented Kennedy from carrying out a planned withdrawal from Vietnam. That Kennedy might not have expanded the war as President Johnson did in 1964 is a plausible, if not conclusive, argument; I made it myself in 1968, in a speculative passage of my book, JFK and LBJ. It seems less likely that Kennedy had already decided, at the time of his death, to extricate the nation from the quagmire of Vietnam after his reelection. Still, it is arguable

that he had so decided, or soon would have.

Stone not only depicts these debatable possibilities as facts; his film claims that for these reasons, Kennedy was killed — though I know of no reputable historian who has documented Kennedy's intentions, much less found them the motive for his murder.

It is true that this motive, among numerous others, has been speculated upon before, in more or less responsible terms, depending on who was doing the speculating.

But this film presents itself as more than speculation; it claims truth for itself. Among the many Americans likely to see it, particularly those who never accepted the Warren Commission's theory of a single assassin, even more

particularly those too young to remember November 22 1963, JFK is all too likely to be taken as the final, unquestioned explanation.

FLASHILY put together under Stone's famous imprimatur and using much film footage of actual events and real people, starring the Hollywood idol Costner, and confident of its own rightness and righteousness, JFK may prove persuasive to audiences with little knowledge of the events presented.

Asserting that the future of justice in America depends on the exposure of Stone's nightmarish visions of conspiracy, as discovered through the depicted heroism of Garrison, the film is also presented — especially in a long and weepy courtroom summation by Garrison — as a call to courage and idealism, which may appeal to a people apparently hungry for both.

But if JFK and its wild assertions are to be taken at face value, Americans will have to accept the idea that most of the nation's big institutions, private as well as governmental, along with one of its presidents, conspired together and car-

ried out Kennedy's murder to pursue the war in Vietnam and the cold war, then covered up the conspiracy until Garrison and Stone unearthed and exposed it.

In an era when mistrust of government and loss of confidence in institutions (the press not least) are widespread and virulent, such a suggestion seems a

dubious public service, particularly since these dark allegations are only unproven speculations, and the "evidence" presented is often a stacked deck.

Kennedy, for instance, is pictured in real footage being interviewed by Walter Cronkite on the first 30-minute broadcast of television evening news by CBS, a few weeks before the assassination. The president's remarks indicated that he was becoming disillusioned with the war in Vietnam, thus seeming to support Stone's insistent thesis.

But the film does not even mention Kennedy's interview with David Brinkley a week later, when NBC began its 30-minute news programme. Then the president confirmed his belief in the "domino theory" — which suggested that the fall of Vietnam to communism would precipitate collapses in the surrounding countries in southeast Asia — and added: "China is so large, looms so high . . . that if South Vietnam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for a guerrilla assault on Malaya but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in southeast Asia was China and the communists."

There is no suggestion of withdrawal in that later interview; and even if Kennedy may have been balancing his earlier remarks owing to protests from Saigon and from American hawks, it is misleading for Stone to cite only one of two equally verifiable texts, the one favourable to his case.

Again, when Garrison watches the shooting of Robert Kennedy (in 1968) on television, he tells his wife that now he's "really scared". Liz Garrison, who has been doubtful of her husband's case, suddenly believes in him. This turnaround leaves the extraordinary impression that Robert Kennedy's murder somehow proved that Garrison was right about John

◆ continued from page 10

Kennedy's murder and the great conspiracy. Just what this "proof" consists of, the film does not attempt to explain.

The depiction of the Robert Kennedy assassination, though using real news footage, includes two bits of trickery. Adroit cutting makes it appear as though he was shot while concluding his speech to an applauding audience on the night of his victory in the California primary; actually, he had left the stage and was departing through a hotel kitchen when he was cut down. Garrison not only sees the shooting on television; he immediately tells his wife that Robert Kennedy has been killed — when in fact, Kennedy lived until the following night.

An alert listener will also pick up, in many of the speeches by Garrison and his dedicated aides, a number of phrases like "has something to do with", "what if", "a possibility", "may well have been", "possibly". Such hedges make it clear that even Stone cannot be sure that all the "facts" he throws out relentlessly are facts.

Through frequent, detailed discussions of their investigation by Garrison and his assistants, Stone is merciless in his assault on the Warren Commission — not merely the report's errors of omission and commission but the group's alleged complicity in the conspiracy and the cover-up.

At one point in the film, Garrison refers to Arlen Specter, who as a member of the commission staff had devised its controversial "single bullet" theory, as one of the "grossest liars" in the nation. Some who watched Specter, now a

Republican senator from Pennsylvania, during the Clarence Thomas hearings may be tempted to agree, but the reference is another attempt to picture the commission report as a deliberate falsehood and part of a widespread cover-up.

The Warren Commission was under pressure of time; its report was hurried and it contains errors, omissions and debatable interpretations. Its conclusion that Oswald acting alone killed John Kennedy is widely disbelieved. The commission is a fair target for criticism of its procedures and findings, but you have to be paranoid indeed to believe that the chief justice and his colleagues deliberately framed Oswald for a crime he didn't commit, while covering the tracks of the many who were actually responsible.

WHEN the Warren Commission report began to be widely questioned, I discussed it in the late 1960s with Edward Bennett Williams, a renowned criminal lawyer. He defended the report in the following manner.

In every crime to which there are no credible witnesses, the prosecution (in this case the commission) examines available evidence and presents a theory of what may have happened. The defence presents an opposing theory. Neither theory is likely to be airtight, without flaws or questionable assertions; even physical evidence, let alone circumstantial, is not likely to be that indisputable. But in the end, a jury usually believes one theory

or the other, and convicts or acquits on that basis.

The commission report, Williams said, was a prosecution theory and, as such, did have holes and deficiencies. But he believed a jury would accept it in preference to *any other theory* that at that time had been presented. Considered by itself, the commission report might be picked apart by its critics; but what, Williams asked, did they present in its place? Was any other theory of what happened in Dallas as plausible? Until a more believable theory was brought forward, the commission report seemed to him the most reasonable explanation of what had happened.

I agree with that, although my opinion is not held dogmatically. I'm willing to believe that Oswald did not act alone, or that he was innocent of the killing, or that there was a conspiracy, or that the Mob did it in response to Robert Kennedy's actions as attorney-general, or that Fidel Castro was or was not involved as a result of the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Cuban missile crisis, or any combination of the above. I'm willing, *but only if someone presents an explanation of what happened that's believable and reasonable* — not paranoid and fantastic.

After many years of consideration, I doubt that the truth about the Kennedy assassination has yet been told. It may never be. So to question what happened, to doubt the commission's or anybody's

version, is legitimate, perhaps even necessary, but in my opinion not conclusive.

My dissent with Stone's film is not that he believes that Oswald was a patsy, or that there was a conspiracy, or even that he depicts the conspiracy as fascist, a corruption of constitutional government so far-reaching as to threaten the end of the democratic system in America. He has a right to believe those things, even to believe against the evidence that Garrison's shabby investigation was a noble and selfless search for truth.

But I and other Americans have an equal right not to believe such things, a right to our own beliefs. Stone insists on one true faith about November 22 1963 — as though only he and Garrison could discern the truth, among the many theories of what happened that terrible day. Moreover, he implies that anyone who doesn't share his one true faith is either an active part of a cover-up or passively acquiescent in it.

Finally, he uses the powerful instrument of a motion picture, and relies on stars of the entertainment world, to propagate the one true faith — even though that faith, if widely accepted, would be contemptuous of the very constitutional government Stone's film purports to uphold.

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Hollywood shoots JFK:
Arts Review, section 6

Billion dollar conspiracy industry that thrives on Kennedy's death

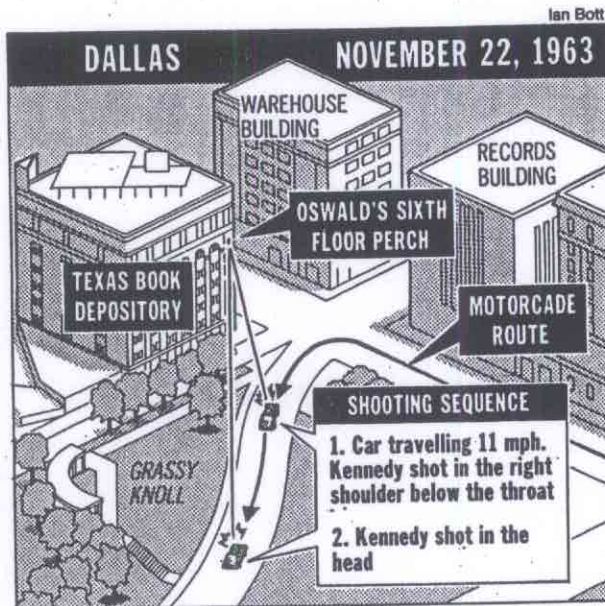
It is enough to excite the most jaded of conspiracy theorists: the president's brain is missing. Among the truckload of records produced for the Warren Commission, set up to investigate the assassination of John F. Kennedy, a stainless steel canister containing his brain should have pride of place. In fact, it has disappeared.

For nearly 20 years Kennedy buffs have claimed that a fresh examination of the president's brain would prove that he died not from an attack by a lone assassin but after being hit by at least two different bullets. The knowledge that a secretary of Robert F. Kennedy, the president's younger brother, removed the brain from the archive in 1965 only adds to their conviction that there has been a huge cover-up.

The sequence of events after the shots rang out in Dealey Plaza in Dallas on November 22, 1963, were tailor-made for the conspiracy industry. Lee Harvey Oswald, a former marine, Marxist and Soviet sympathiser who had spent time in Moscow, was arrested but shot by Jack Ruby, a Dallas nightclub owner, before he could stand trial. As a result, anyone can chance an opinion on *modus operandi* and motive.

The police maintained that Kennedy had been killed after three bullets were fired by Oswald, who was concealed in the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository. Others have argued that more than four bullets were fired by at least two people, and that Oswald was part of a much wider conspiracy of which he himself was a victim.

The Warren Commission's conclusion that Oswald had acted alone and was not part of a wider conspiracy did little to dampen debate. Kennedy was raised to the



Official view: is this really how the president was killed?

status of martyred American hero by a nation unwilling to believe that their president could have been gunned down by a single man who dodged the security cordons. The simplest theory was just too prosaic.

Kennedy became a symbol for a principled and optimistic era before the defeat in Vietnam and the cynicism bred by the Watergate scandal. Many of those who were inspired by his presidency wanted to believe that Kennedy had died for his crusades against communism, organised crime and the political and military establishment. There was certainly no shortage of suspects.

Conspiracy theorists argued that Kennedy was killed by the mafia; by Fidel Castro because he had ordered a covert war against Cuba; by renegade CIA agents who thought he was too soft; and by the Soviets because he was too tough. Finally, Oliver Stone, the director of the new film JFK, believed that most of these bodies con-

spired because Kennedy was a threat to everyone.

In an attempt to clear up the mafia allegations in 1976, the House Select Committee on Assassinations produced another truckload of printed records. It concluded that Kennedy "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy" and that the mafia had the "motive, means and opportunity" to kill Kennedy. But the committee failed to name the guilty men.

Two weeks ago, Frank Ragano, a mafia lawyer, said he had delivered a message from Jimmy Hoffa, the Teamsters' boss, to two mafia capos to kill the president. "They didn't laugh," said Ragano. "Their looks scared me."

Like many of the apparently plausible witnesses for the conspiracy theorists, Ragano's testimony looks suspicious on close examination. He was not questioned by the house committee as he was considered too insignificant, and

he has decided to come clean only on the publication of his autobiography.

His story is likely to find a ready market. A new generation has become obsessed by the assassination and has given a new lease of life to the conspiracy industry. Jim Lesar, the director of the Assassinations Archives and Research Centre in Washington, says that calls for information have risen five-fold since the release of Stone's film.

Publishers are delighted to supply yet more smoking guns for their readers. On the Trail of the Assassins, a paperback by Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney, on which Stone based his film, tops the New York Times bestseller list. Two others are also soaring up the non-fiction charts. A fourth book, arguing that Kennedy's wounds were altered after his death as part of a cover-up, has sold 75,000 copies in two months.

More than 200 books have been published about the assassination. There will be others. New legislation will be introduced in the House of Representatives to allow the release of all the house committee's papers relating to the investigation. It seems likely, too, that some of the remaining 2% of the Warren Commission documents that have remained sealed may be opened as well.

That could prove to be a stumbling block for the committed researcher. The volume of material is now so great that it is doubtful whether any single author can master the literature to re-examine all the issues.

This is the single greatest strength of the conspiracy theorists. So muddy have the waters become that nobody will ever know the truth of what happened that day in Dallas.

James Adams