

# Twisted History

Oliver Stone's 'JFK' is not just an entertainment, it's a piece of propoganda for a huge conspiracy theory of the Kennedy murder

**H**ere we go again. The school-book depository. The sixth-floor window. The grassy knoll. The umbrella man. The fourth shot. The pristine bullet. The eternal flame.

Re-create Dallas as it was on Nov. 22, 1963. Prune trees so they are the same height they were that day. Send an identical open limousine into the tight turn onto Elm Street, headed for the triple underpass. Roll the cameras on an event that stunned America and seared its heart. Follow the script:

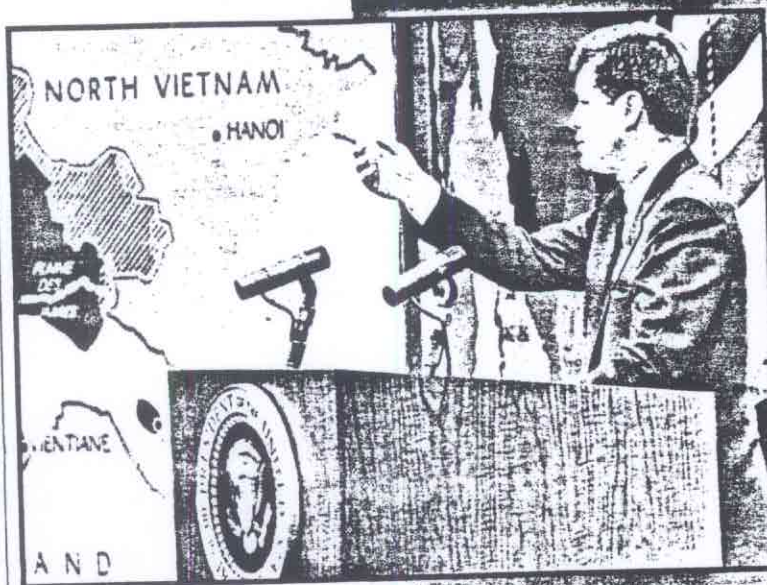
*Then the SHOTS: A volley sounding like a motorcycle backfire. A GLIMPSE of a MUZZLE FLASH... smoke.*

*Looking up from the TEXAS SCHOOL BOOK DEPOSITORY—all in line with the "official" version of events... PIGEONS by the hundreds suddenly shoot off the roof. But the SCREEN (our screen) GOES GRAY as did the CBS-TV first bulletins to the country.*

**CBS BULLETIN (FULL SCREEN)**

*... we interrupt this program to bring you this flash bulletin. A burst of gunfire! Three bursts of gunfire, apparently from automatic weapons, were fired at President Kennedy's motorcade in downtown Dallas...*

But this is definitely not the "official" version of events. This is the movie "JFK" as brought to you by Oliver Stone, creator of "Platoon," "Wall Street" and "The Doors." In this version, Lee Harvey Oswald certainly does not act alone, may never even have fired a shot. The assassination, as seen through the eyes of Stone and his protagonist Jim Garrison, at the time the real-life New Orleans district attorney, was a grand conspiracy involving the CIA, the FBI, the Army and Navy, anti-Castro Cubans, New Orleans lowlifes and the Dallas police force. The motive: to thwart the dovish tendencies of John F. Kennedy who, if he had lived, would have pulled all American troops out of Vietnam, settled the cold war with the Soviet Union and patched up relations with Castro's Cuba. The shooting was, as Garrison (played by Kevin Costner) keeps insisting, a coup d'état that continues to gnaw at the American body politic.

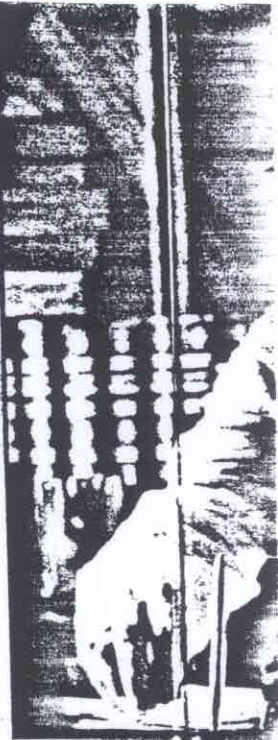


Stone makes plain his hope that the film will cause the investigation to be reopened. It ends with this message on the screen: DEDICATED TO THE YOUNG, IN WHOSE SPIRIT THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH MARCHES ON. The producers are preparing a "study guide" to the movie for use in schools.

In effect, Stone is inviting America to adopt an alternative version of history. His film categorically rejects the report of the Warren Commission, the imperfect but painstaking government investigation that concluded that Oswald murdered Kennedy acting on his own. That conclusion has never satisfied a great part of the American public: a Washington Post survey last May indicated that 56 percent believe there was some sort of conspiracy to kill JFK, and only 19 percent agree with the Warren Commission findings. And a vast network of conspiracy buffs has flourished ever since the assassination, tracing tangled lines of connection between obscure figures and erecting baroque palaces of supposition (page 52). This

## FACTS AND FICTION

In "JFK," New Orleans D.A. Jim Garrison (played by Kevin Costner, top right) figures that Kennedy (the real one, above) was assassinated by a right-wing/CIA/military conspiracy because he wanted to pull out of Vietnam. The movie re-creates the horrific moment in Dallas (right), down to Jackie's pillbox hat.



movie draws on many of these old notions—and will doubtless stir up a new wave of them.

It has also stirred up a torrent of outrage. Well before its release, the film had already set off a barrage of articles and even cover stories (Life, Esquire, Texas Monthly), mostly denouncing Stone for twisting the facts. Stone in turn has been stung into angry suggestions that the establishment media are simply subscribing to the Great Warren Commission Cover-up. Garrison, who was much ridiculed in the press for his



handling of the case, thought journalists had turned into coconspirators, witting or unwitting, in an official scheme to conceal the dark truths of Nov. 22, 1963. This is beyond-the-looking-glass stuff: anyone entering the assassination debate is instantly transported into a frenzied fantasy world, in which the same evidence can be used to bolster either side (Oswald was the killer, Oswald was framed) and analysts are assumed to be agents with secret motives of their own.

The problem with "JFK"—write very

large because it's a big movie with big stars about a big event—is the problem of the docu-drama. A movie or a television show that re-creates history inevitably distorts history. It has to compress things into a short span; it has to extract clarity out of the essential messiness of life; it has to abide by certain dramatic conventions: major scenes, major characters, major speeches. All this makes for exaggeration. "It's like writing history with lightning," exclaimed Woodrow Wilson when he saw the first docu-

drama, "Birth of a Nation," in 1915.

In "JFK" all these problems are compounded by taking a highly speculative version of events—the Garrison/Stone conspiracy theory—and grafting it onto real events. Only the alert viewer will be able to distinguish real documentary footage from reconstructed scenes, shot in black and white, that often represent Garrison's suppositions about what might have happened. In presenting Kennedy's autopsy, for example, what appear to be genuine still photographs are intercut with dramatized footage. And these black-and-white re-creations abound. A police officer brings the murder rifle to Oswald's corpse and presses his palm print onto the barrel. A mysterious figure deposits the "pristine bullet" (the one supposed to have wounded both Kennedy and John Connally) on what seems to be Connally's gurney in Parkland Hospital. A second "Oswald" appears at a rifle range in Dallas. Assassins gather behind the fence on the grassy knoll. This is a

film in which the real and the imagined, fact and fiction, keep shading into one another. As Leonard Garment wrote after seeing "The Final Days," the TV film on Nixon's fall, "A viewer watching a well-done docudrama will find it near impossible to keep in mind the difference between its factual basis and the dramatic embellishments. It is all there, right before his very eyes, occupying the same level of reality." That's particularly true of young audiences who weren't alive in 1963. "We live in a media age," says film critic Leonard Maltin. "If a television or theatrical movie can paint a vivid enough picture for young people, they'll believe that's the way it was."

That's clearly what Oliver Stone is hoping will happen. "JFK" is not just an entertainment, it's a work of propaganda. In some prerelease screenings, Stone has personally asked those who write about the film not to discuss its thesis,

so that audiences can make up their minds for themselves. That request is out of bounds. Of course people should make up their own minds about the Kennedy assassination. But in doing so they should be aware of some information that "JFK" leaves out and some dubious material that it includes. What was the evidence that Oswald acted alone? Is it true that Kennedy was planning a pullout from Vietnam? Was Jim Garrison a brave and lonely battler for truth?

## The Evidence Against Oswald

The Oswald of "JFK" is even more bizarre than the angry loner portrayed by the Warren Commission: an anti-Castro activist who distributed pro-Castro literature as a cover, a hanger-on in a seedy New Orleans set of homosexuals and anti-Castroites who talk wildly of killing Kennedy. He may have known enough about the plot to try to warn the Feds about it in advance but seems to take no part in the shooting. When he realizes JFK has been shot from the building where he works, it suddenly dawns on him that he's the "patsy," set up to take the rap. So he leaves the building, goes home to get a gun, maybe (or maybe not) kills Officer J. D. Tippit, then winds up in a movie theater where the police have been tipped off to find him.

Some findings of the Warren Commission that do not appear in the movie:

- He was the owner of the Mannlicher-Carcano 6.5-mm rifle found on the sixth floor of the Depository building. Ballistics tests show that the bullets that struck Kennedy and Connally came from that rifle.

- The morning of the assassination, Oswald carried to work a long, thin paper parcel—"curtain rods," he said. Paper wrapping consistent with that seen on the parcel was found on the sixth floor, along with the rifle.

- The autopsy on Kennedy's body produced the unanimous medical finding that all the shots that struck him came from the rear. A House Select Committee on Assassinations investigated further in the late '70s, calling in a wound ballistics expert to evaluate the sudden backward movement of the president's head, which some take as proof that the final shot came from in front. The committee determined that the rearward movement of the head could have come from nerve damage and was not "fundamentally inconsistent with a bullet striking from the rear."

- A number of eyewitnesses identified Oswald as the man who shot Officer Tippit. The shell casings that the gunman tossed away at the scene were identified as having come from Oswald's revolver, which he had when he was arrested in the movie theater.

And if there was a conspiracy—particularly the massive conspiracy posited in this movie—is it imaginable that not a single member of it has cracked? The tug of conscience, the lust for notoriety, even greed for money (for such a story would be worth many thousands of dollars as well as immunity) would surely have brought someone forward in the past 28 years.



## If Kennedy Had Lived

It's an essential part of Stone's thesis that Kennedy was planning to pull out of Vietnam once he was re-elected. Not only that, but he would have healed relations with America's communist rivals. That's why the conspiracy was hatched: the military-industrial complex wanted their war, and Kennedy was going to take it away from them. Vice President Lyndon Johnson was much more their kind of guy.

Does that notion seem plausible? Stone's interpretation draws heavily on the work of a young Army major named John Newman, who will soon publish (with a boost from Stone) a book called "JFK & Vietnam," based on his Ph.D. thesis. He is persuaded that by the spring of 1963 Kennedy had decided to get all American troops out of Vietnam, even if it meant losing the war, but to wait until after the 1964 election for fear the withdrawal would hurt him politically. Newman's evidence: two antiwar senators, Mike Mansfield and Wayne Morse, remember Kennedy telling them as much, and so does his friend and assistant Kenneth O'Donnell. Also, shortly before he died, he ordered that 1,000 U.S. advisers (out of a total of more than 16,000) be withdrawn from Vietnam by the end of the year.

This really does not seem terribly compelling. JFK's statements to the senators, even if not colored by wishful memories, could have been tinged with politics. And the 1,000-man withdrawal, around 6 percent of the total, was just a token that might never have been repeated. McGeorge Bundy, who was Kennedy's special assistant for national-security affairs, doesn't believe it signified any shift of policy, nor does he know of any evidence that Kennedy had a private plan for pull-

ing out of Vietnam. "I don't think we know what he would have done if he'd lived," Bundy said last week. "I don't know, and I don't know anyone who does know." What's more, he added, "Kennedy didn't hide his views: his public statements were what he believed." And his public statements were about bearing the burden and staying the course. In the speech he was scheduled to deliver at the Dallas Trade Mart just minutes after he was killed, he was going to say: "Our assistance to these nations can be painful, risky and costly, as is true in Southeast Asia today. But we dare not weary of the task... We in this country, in this generation, are—by destiny rather than choice—the watchmen on the

walls of freedom." Newman argues that all this was just politically motivated deception.

If there was no clear sign that Kennedy was going to pull out of Vietnam, there was no clear motive for Stone's grand conspiracy to kill him.

## The Real Jim Garrison

In the movie, Jim Garrison is an all-American hero—how could he not be, with Kevin Costner in the part? Beseated by doubters on all sides, stymied by the FBI, ridiculed by the press, he pushes on regardless, a lonely seeker after truth, justice and the American way. In New Orleans, they remember Garrison a little differently.

Rosemary James covered his investigation for the now defunct New Orleans States-Item. "He went from a highly intelligent eccentric to a lunatic in the period of one year," she said last week. "Every time press interest in the case would start to wane, he would propound a new theory. One week it would be 14 Cubans shooting from storm drains. The next week, it would be H. L. Hunt and the far right in Dallas. This was no Robin Hood—no Untouchable either."

Charles Ward, now a judge on the state court of appeals, was one of Garrison's assistants in the case. "Most of the time you marshal the facts, then deduce your theories," he told The Times-Picayune in 1983. "But Garrison deduced a theory, then marshaled his facts. And if the facts didn't fit, he'd say they had been altered by the CIA."

Some of his staff became alarmed about his behavior. He would call meetings, then disappear into the men's room for a while, emerge with a new theory and send

aides to try to prove it. Former investigator William Gurvich, who defected to Shaw's defense team, told of him spreading out a road map on his desk and drawing circles around places where Oswald or some of his friends had lived in New Orleans. Then he'd order background checks on people who lived in the same neighborhoods.

The climax of "JFK" is Garrison's long, impassioned closing argument in the Clay Shaw trial. In fact, Garrison did not deliver the main closing argument in the

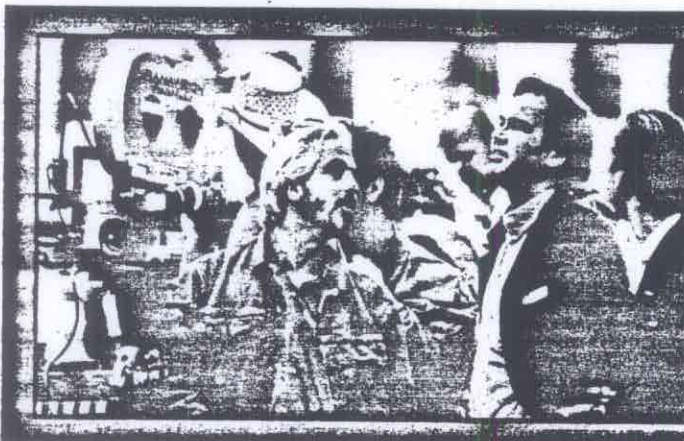
case; Assistant D.A. James Alcock did. And Garrison did not even stick around for the verdict—not guilty, after less than an hour's deliberation by the jury.

Fact and fiction—the Kennedy assassination is an inexhaustible mine of both. Oliver Stone would have us believe that the truth is still elusive, that there are sources still untapped, leads unpursued, villains on the loose. It's not impossible. But it's also fair to say that this may be the most exhaustively investigated event

in history—which paradoxically accounts for many of the loose ends still dangling at its edges. Officially and unofficially, professionally and amateurishly, the occurrences of Nov. 22, 1963, have been sifted and resifted and doubtless will be sifted again. So much so that this is no longer just an episode in American history—it's a cult. The movie "JFK" is not history; it's an act of devotion, a declaration of faith.

KENNETH AUCTIONCLOSS with GINNY CARROLL in New Orleans, MAGGIE MALONE in New York and bureau reports

## What Does Oliver Stone Owe History?



**OLIVER STONE**  
My responsibility is to myself. I have to live with my conscience and if I have done wrong, it's going to come back on me.

**A**s Oliver Stone was putting the finishing touches on his epic "JFK" last week, he sat down with NEWSWEEK's David Ansen to defend the highly controversial perspective of the film. Some highlights from the interview:

**ANSEN: What's your responsibility to history? What if you're wrong?**

**STONE:** I would live with that. I think the artist's obligations are to interpret history and reinterpret it as he sees fit. If I did my homework, I don't feel I have a responsibility to Clay Shaw [the New Orleans businessman tried by zealous prosecutor Jim Garrison for conspiracy to kill JFK] because he was proven innocent in court. Clarence Darrow lost the Scopes trial, but that doesn't make what he did any less right.

Filmmakers make myths. They take the true meanings of events and shape

them. D. W. Griffith did it in "Birth of a Nation." In "Reds," Warren Beatty probably made John Reed better than he was [but] was truthful in a mythic sense. I made Garrison better than he is for a larger purpose.

Is Clay Shaw violated by my work? Is he going to come haunt me at night, drive me to the edge of madness? I have to live with my conscience and if I have done wrong, it's going to come back on me. John Kennedy might be in my dreams, too, saying, "Do it, go out there, find my assassins, bring them to justice."

**You've said that it's a mistake to idealize Kennedy. Yet the movie does just that.**

Again, it was a question of do I have time in this three-hour scenario to really get into Kennedy stealing the election in '60? Or that he said one thing to the public and did

another behind their backs? Those are valid points and I stand faulted on both Garrison and Kennedy. But my defense would be that there is a larger issue at stake. Ultimately, they were good guys.

**Are you hoping that this film will reopen the case?**

No, I don't think it will because most of the participants are dead. But the American public should demand access to the files of the House Select Committee [sealed until 2029]. And a public inquiry should get underway about the CIA. They should be reined in. They were supposed to gather intelligence originally, not practice covert operations and destabilize governments. As an intelligence-gathering apparatus, they have been sorely remiss recently on the Soviet Union as well as in Iraq and Iran. Maybe the movie can contrib-

ute to a climate for reform.

**And you truly believe that if Kennedy had lived this would have been a very different world?**

Totally. It would have been a much healthier place. The massacre in Southeast Asia would not have occurred. The cycles of poverty and recession were fueled by the war economy by Johnson. Inflation resulted on a massive scale. The whole economic world shifted as a result of the Vietnam War.

And it wasn't like we went over there and just lost 58,000 lives—we killed 2 million people. The CIA practiced what they had been doing in the '50s on a much larger level in Vietnam. The covert mentality continued right into the '90s. You go from Vietnam into Watergate and into the '80s with Irangate.

The forces that killed Kennedy did not operate in a vacuum. That parallel covert government has existed through the last 28 years. Lawrence Walsh couldn't bring Oliver North and that bunch to justice. It's a mentality that won't go away. One hopes the movie would make people want to strip away the lies and covert operations.

A couple of lunatics like Jim Garrison keep saying, hey, wake up, something happened. People like me, sons of Jim Garrison, promulgate the theory. I think people are more on my side than the government's. If they don't believe me this go-round, they'll believe me when another shocking thing happens.

# A Troublemaker for Our Times

Oliver Stone's heretical history is a stunner



## OSWALD

Is it real, or really well staged? Is it Oswald or actor Gary Oldman? And most vital: was Oswald a psychotic killer or simply a pathetic patsy?

It's only a movie," Alfred Hitchcock once said, calming the concerns of Kim Novak and putting his scarifying visions into tidy perspective. Hitch was right, of course, and wrong. No movie is only a movie, and least of all Oliver Stone's *JFK*, which is destined to become fodder for every op-ed writer in the country. Stone's movie puts the critic—and the audience—in a strange, indeed absurd, position: we are asked not only to pass judgment on its virtues as an entertainment but to hand down a judgment on history, which in this case means rendering a verdict on the CIA, the FBI, military intelligence, anti-Castro Cubans, Lee Harvey Oswald, Clay Shaw, LBJ and everyone else who is in one way or another implicated in the conspiracy that, Stone argues, resulted in the murder of our 35th president in Dealey Plaza.

My advice is: don't trust anyone who claims the movie is hogwash. And don't trust Stone either. Movies are, almost by definition, a demagogic art form: they can emotionally persuade you of just about anything, which is precisely why Stone's movie will be dissected with vehemence. An entire generation of filmgoers is hereafter going to look at these events through Stone's prism. If history is a battlefield, "*JFK*" has to be seen as a bold attempt to seize the turf for future debate.

It is also "just" a movie, and one that for three hours and eight minutes of dense, almost dizzying detail, is capable of holding the audience rapt in its grip. If Stone was

just a clumsy hack "*JFK*" could be as easily dismissed as Hollywood's first, long-forgotten conspiracy movie, "*Executive Action*" (1973). But Stone's work is, on many levels, stunning. Using as a base Jim Garrison's "On the Trail of the Assassins" and Jim Marrs's "Crossfire," Stone and coscenarist Zachary Sklar structure their film as a thriller, with New Orleans D.A. Garrison (Kevin Costner) as the beleaguered investigator who stumbles upon links between Oswald (Gary Oldman) and local right-wing, anti-Castro zealots that implicate those in the highest corridors of power. It is, quite deliberately, a "Mr. Smith Goes to the Assassination," complete with a climactic courtroom peroration that is a 90-proof Capraesque barn raiser, down to the Jimmy Stewart catch in Costner's throat.

**A true believer:** At this, a lot of people are going to cry foul. By turning Jim Garrison—a troubling, shoot-from-the-hip prosecutor whose credibility has been seriously questioned—into a mild-mannered, four-square Mr. Clean, Stone is asking for trouble. "*JFK*'s" Garrison is perhaps best viewed more as a movie convention than as a real man. Stone has always required a hero to worship, and he turns the D.A. into his own alter ego, a true believer tenaciously seeking higher truth. He equally idealizes Kennedy, seen as a shining symbol of hope and change, dedicated to pulling out of Vietnam and to ending the cold war.

But it is possible to remain skeptical of "*JFK*'s" Edenic notions of its heroes and

still find this movie a remarkable, necessary provocation. Real political discourse has all but vanished from Hollywood filmmaking; above and beyond whether Stone's take on the assassination is right his film is a powerful, radical vision of America's drift toward covert government. What other filmmaker is even thinking about the uses and abuses of power? The first footage we see is Eisenhower's farewell address in 1961, in which he presciently warned the nation to guard against the growing threat of the military-industrial complex, and everything that follows is an illustration of that thesis. That "*JFK*" comes out in the reign of our first ex-CIA president is an irony that hangs unstated over the movie.

Anyone who's ever dipped into the contradictions of the assassination knows what a spellbinding, crazy-making story it is—and Stone does it justice. He manages to pack in an astonishing amount of information while maintaining suspense and narrative clarity. Quasi documentary in style, "*JFK*" shifts between color and black and white, fact and speculation, newsreel and staged re-creation, so that you can't always tell what's real footage and what's not, never mind what's true and what's not.

Charged as Stone's style is, he mercifully discards the strong-arm tactics of "Born on the Fourth of July." Costner's understated integrity gives the film a steady anchor. He's playing an icon and he plays him with unfussy grace. The flamboyant roles go to the villains, a fascinating gallery of shady characters, none more bizarre than Joe Pesci's David Ferrie, the hairless, chain-smoking mercenary pilot whose untimely death crippled Garrison's case. Tommy Lee Jones is a powerful, if too overtly sinister, presence as Clay Shaw, and Kevin Bacon shines as the fascist hustler/convict (a composite character) who claimed to be privy to Shaw and Ferrie's plotting. (That all three are homosexual has made the gay community understandably nervous, but the film itself shouldn't be charged with homophobia.)

The cast, studded with star cameos (Garrison himself pops up, ironically, as Earl Warren), is too huge to single out. But mention must be made of Oldman's creepy Oswald, and Donald Sutherland's mesmerizing turn as the mysterious X (based on L. Fletcher Prouty, former aide to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and an adviser on the film) who functions as the film's Deep Throat.

What X tells us may be more than many people can, or want, to swallow. No one should take "*JFK*" at face value: it's a compellingly argued case, but not to be confused with proof. But my hat is off to the filmmaker—and Warner Bros.—for the reckless chutzpah of the attempt. Make no mistake: this is one very incendiary Hollywood entertainment. Two cheers for Mr. Stone, a troublemaker for our times.

DAVID ANSEN

# Bottom Line: How Crazy Is It?

Unequivocal answer: it all depends. Welcome to the world of conspiracy.

In the opening minutes of Oliver Stone's "JFK" a man collapses, twitching, on a city sidewalk; a woman mumbles about the president's murder from a hospital bed. Most moviegoers will see these simply as surrealist omens. But a few people will instantly see that Stone did his homework. A man named Jerry Belknap really did have a seizure in Dealey Plaza minutes before President Kennedy's motorcade arrived. He was rushed to Parkland Memorial Hospital by the same drivers who were later to load the president's body into their ambu-

footnote to a footnote in the byzantine annals of the assassination.) In September 1965, a motorist outside Big Sandy, Texas, found her lying dead in the highway.

People who carry such information around are usually dismissed as assassination buffs. True, some are hobbyists, like rotisserie leaguers who buy Bill James's books of baseball stats. Others are careerists, like Mark Lane, whose 1966 "Rush to Judgment" was a best-selling attack on the official version of the assassination. But there's also a network of serious free-lance researchers who think the govern-

ment is a vast, intricate web of lower-profile researchers socialized and swapped leads, Lane threatened from the dais to sue researcher Jim Moore for libel. Moore, a onetime believer in a conspiracy, has become a maverick among mavericks: he now believes, as the Warren Commission said in 1964, that Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone nut who killed Kennedy and Jack Ruby was a lone nut who killed Oswald. He even defends the much-ridiculed "single bullet" hypothesis, made necessary by Abraham Zapruder's famous home movie, which serves as a clock for the assassination. Oswald had time to fire only three

shots. One missed, one hit the president in the head. Ergo, one passed through Kennedy, broke Texas Gov. John Connally's wrist and one of his ribs. (This bullet is surprisingly little the worse for wear.) Critics say there's no "ergo" about it, and that the commission that Oswald was the lone nut who forced the commission to force the commission's scenario out of Rube Goldberg.

Folks at the symposium admired Moore's pluck, but they were more ready to listen to David Lifton reprising his grisly conclusions—that Kennedy's body was spirited away and tampered with to make it appear he was shot from behind. The symposium's real zinger, though, was a presentation by a Houston police artist named Lois Gibson in which she provided names and rap sheets for each of the famous three "tramps," mystery men photographed in police custody on Nov. 22.

Exactly how crazy is this stuff? Not especially, compared with what we've already found out to be true, like the loony Mafia-CIA schemes against Fidel Castro back in the early '60s—which ranged from outright assassination to giving Castro a scuba suit permeated with LSD. Lyndon Johnson, who appointed the Warren Commission, said in 1973 that he had never believed its report. His candidate for Mr. Big: Castro. This has never been a popular theory: Castro himself said it would have been suicidally stupid.

Most dissenters from the Warren Commission would agree to something like the



## MYSTERY TRAMPS

These three unidentified men were picked up after Kennedy's assassination. Chalmers Holt (below) says he was one. And he's got a scary story.



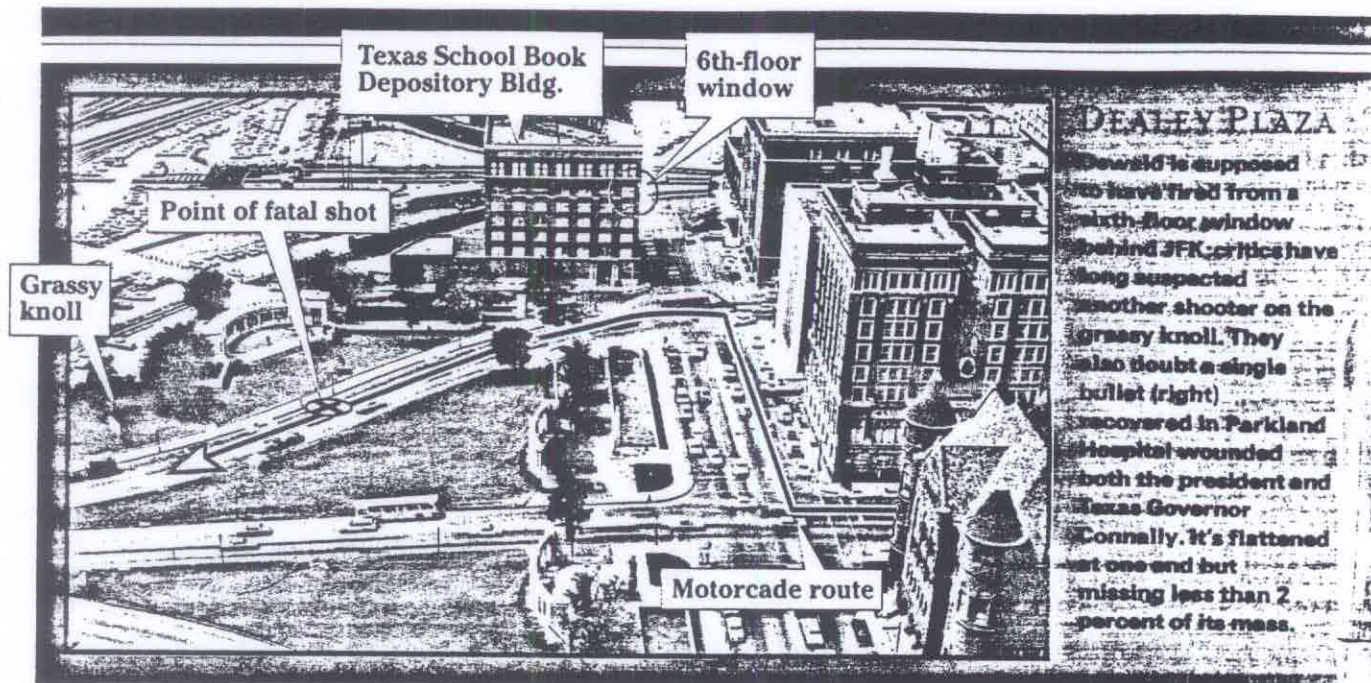
MICHAEL GRECCO

lance for the trip from Parkland to the airport. It was probably not a staged distraction as plotters moved into place. Why didn't the hospital have a record? Belknap said he'd wandered out during the confusion when Kennedy was brought in.

The mumbling woman is something else again. Rose Cheramie, a prostitute and junkie, warned a doctor and a Louisiana state cop about the assassination in Dallas two days before it happened. She claimed she had been abandoned on the road by two men driving from Florida to Dallas who said they were going to shoot the president. She said she worked for a Dallas strip-joint owner named Jack Ruby. Stone doesn't tell the end of her story. ("JFK" is only a three-hour movie, after all, and Rose Cheramie is only a

ment dropped the ball on the Kennedy assassination; they have become citizen investigators, with overstuffed Rolodexes and overdue phone bills. They're the people for whom Stone's improbably virtuous Jim Garrison is the paradigm: ordinary folks fighting the Power.

Last month in Dallas, the Assassination Symposium on John F. Kennedy drew specimens of all these types—plus a few hardcore zanies. (First Prize: the theory that Kennedy was shot by LBJ himself, who concealed his six-guns under a cape.) As



following: (1) Kennedy was killed by a conspiracy involving figures from the murky underground in which anti-Castro exiles, the Mafia and the CIA made common cause; (2) Lee Harvey Oswald was, as he claimed, a "patsy," and (3) the mob-connected Jack Ruby was sent to silence him. In a note to his lawyer, Ruby claimed another attorney put him up to saying he'd merely wanted to spare Mrs. Kennedy the ordeal of a trial. Larry Houston, the CIA's general counsel for more than 20 years, says that after the Warren Report, "I went through every one of these stories in detail and knocked them all out." Robert Tannenbaum doesn't buy it. "I'm not saying the CIA was involved," says Tannenbaum, deputy chief counsel of the Kennedy investigation for the 1976 House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA). "But there's no doubt in my mind that the CIA knows exactly what happened."

If conspiracy theorists seem paranoid about the CIA, the agency is partly to blame. In the late '60s, for instance, the CIA sent its agents a detailed memo explaining how to counter skepticism about the Warren Commission. It was accompanied by a New Yorker article highly critical of New Orleans D.A. Jim Garrison's investigation of the Kennedy case and suggested agents "employ propaganda assets [that is, friendly journalists] to answer and refute the attacks of the critics. Book reviews and feature articles are particularly appropriate for this purpose." In 1978, the CIA agent assigned as liaison to the HSCA was reportedly fired from the agency after rifling the safe containing the Kennedy autopsy photos and X-rays. The agent claimed he had an innocent explanation but would not give it to the press. "There's other things that are involved," he told The

Washington Post's George Lardner, "that are detrimental to other things."

Despite its chronic suspicion of disinformation, the self-styled "research community" seems almost upbeat these days. "The case will break in one of three ways," says Dr. Cyril Wecht, distinguished forensic pathologist and colorfully intemperate Warren Commission critic. "Somebody will spill the beans, the technical analytical studies will be confirmed by appropriate experts, or we'll get into an appropriate legal forum." In fact, all these avenues have been tried over the years. Spilling the beans—assuming there *are* beans—seems to bring bad luck. John Roselli, who helped hatch CIA-Mafia assassination plots, was found, dismembered, in an oil drum after telling the HSCA he would testify that mob-connected Cubans were behind JFK's murder. And high-tech microanalyses of everything from Dealey Plaza photographs to police-radio recordings from a motorcycle in the motorcade have led only to experts duking it out with other experts.

**Dropped dead:** Jim Garrison provided the "appropriate legal forum," such as it was, in his disastrous 1967 prosecution of New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw. Shaw was acquitted of conspiring to kill Kennedy because Garrison (as he himself acknowledged) had no case—especially after Shaw's alleged coconspirator, David Ferrie, suddenly dropped dead. Garrison ran roughshod over fairness and common sense. He may also have been on to something, though God knows what. Shaw, it turns out, despite his denials, was a CIA "domestic contact"; Ferrie, a former airline pilot, spent the two weekends before the assassination conferring with Kennedy-hating Carlos Marcello, reputed New Orleans Mafia boss. The third supposed

conspirator (also dead), ex-FBI agent Guy Banister, was an anti-Castro right-winger; why did the pro-Castro leaflets Oswald handed out in New Orleans bear the address of the small building that housed Banister's office?

Since Garrison, the research community has been burned time after time. Comedian-activist Dick Gregory once claimed Watergate spook E. Howard Hunt Jr. was one of the three "tramps." (Bottom line: he wasn't.) Last year Ricky White, son of a Dallas cop, said he'd produce a diary his late father kept of his role in an assassination plot. (Bottom line: no way.) Hunt turns up again this year as the villain of Mark Lane's "Plausible Denial." In 1985, Lane successfully defended the far-right Liberty Lobby in a libel suit over an article implicating Hunt in the assassination. Lane humiliated Hunt on the witness stand; according to forewoman Leslie Armstrong, Lane convinced a Florida jury the CIA "was directly involved in the assassination." Another juror, Suzanne Reach, told The Miami Herald that wasn't the reason for the verdict. Armstrong says Reach is "in total denial."

Lane's star witness, Marita Lorenz, testified she had been with Hunt plus his future Watergate colleague Frank Sturgis plus the actual gunman in Dallas the day before the assassination—a story the HSCA had doubted. "I've met Marita many times," says well-respected researcher Gus Russo of Baltimore. "She's a nice person, but her stories are wacky, totally unverifiable." Other researchers are less printable; some suggest Marita is part of a disinformation scheme. Lane himself says the CIA has long attempted to discredit him.

Nobody at last month's symposium came right out and accused Lois Gibson of spread-

ing disinformation, but someone will probably get around to it. She says she's helped solve the old mystery of the three "tramps" police found in a boxcar in the railroad yards near Dealey Plaza after the assassination. We know about them only because of news photos; the police kept no record. Gibson has helped solve scores of cases. She says she'd "bet the farm" on her identifications: Charles V. Harrelson, a hit man (and, incidentally, the father of actor Woody Harrelson) convicted of assassinating federal Judge John Wood with a high-powered rifle in 1982; Charles Rogers, chief suspect in the unsolved 1965 murder and dismemberment of his parents, and one Chauncey Holt, a self-described forger and career criminal. If it could be proved, the presence of someone like Harrelson—not to mention the other two—would be, to say the least, suspicious.

Gibson's photo comparisons looked persuasive, though no rigorous scientific analysis has been done. At the symposium Jerry Rose, publisher of a researchers' newsletter, stood up and urged Dallas's JFK Assassination Information Center, which cosponsored the event, not to endorse Gibson's work. Mark Lane's associate Steve Jaffe called the identification of Harrelson—which researchers have made before—"the most irresponsible and inaccurate in my experience." Harrelson reportedly once told police he had shot Kennedy, then claimed he'd been skyrocketing on cocaine when he said it. He's now in a federal penitentiary in Illinois and couldn't be reached for comment. Rogers has been missing for years.

**Illegal chores:** But Chauncey Holt is glad to talk—and the more publicly the better. Holt says he was once an accountant for mob financier Meyer Lansky, but spent most of his career forging documents and doing other illegal chores for the CIA. He says he was ordered to Dallas before the assassination—of which he had no foreknowledge—to deliver fake Secret Service credentials. (Several people in Dealey Plaza said they'd encountered men claiming to be Secret Service agents of whom the Secret Service had no knowledge.) He says the men he traveled to Dallas with were both contacted by the HSCA in the '70s: one was killed before he could testify, another disappeared. He readily names them; he also names the man he says gave him his orders, the man who gave the man his orders, the gangster whose ranch he flew to when the

Dallas police turned him loose and the pilot who flew him. Who, he says, later died in a plane crash. He knew his picture had been taken; he says the law partner of a Warren Commission attorney told him not to worry.

Holt says he met Lee Harvey Oswald in New Orleans ("he wasn't any dummy"), as well as David Ferrie ("the weirdest guy you would ever want to meet") and Guy Banister ("an extreme right-wing type of individual, into just about everything"). It says something for Holt's credibility that he doesn't claim to have known Jack Ruby, too. "I never even heard the name," says Holt. "What he said was asinine. Someone might sympathize with Jacqueline Kennedy, but you can't tell me a guy who's run-

that they'll never straighten it out.'" Whether Chauncey Holt is the real thing or not, that's something like what happened. The police did scoop up and release several mysterious people in Dallas that day: a man with a leather jacket and black gloves, a Latin man, a crew-cut blond man in a hooded sweat shirt. A man named Jim Braden, with a long criminal record; Holt says Braden was with him on the plane out of Dallas.

If Holt's story could be verified, it would be pretty scary: the mob and the agency, cover-ups and rubouts. It could also be the product of a runaway imagination, or yarn-spinning for the sake of a little attention. What Holt says fits well with what researchers have long suspected. That's what makes his story at once persuasive and open to question. Should Holt be checked out? Certainly. Will that settle the question of conspiracy? Probably not.

**Random event:** The best argument against conspiracy theories is that if any moment in history were to be scrutinized with the obsessiveness focused on 12:30 p.m., Nov. 22, 1963, you could come up with weird coincidences, hidden connections, terrifying portents. People who believe the official version of the assassination—that Kennedy was shot by a lunatic whose motives were probably beyond even his own understanding—say that conspiracy theorists need to grow up, to come to terms with the fact that this was a random event, the moral equivalent of a bolt of lightning. Those who find a pattern here, it's said, are indulg-

ing in wishful thinking: to them, even sinister meaning is more comforting than no meaning at all.

"I have chosen to offer a way out of the madness," writes Jim Moore at the end of "Conspiracy Of One." "To believe that President Kennedy was killed by a conspiracy is not always to believe in zombie CIA assassins and Watergate burglars on the grassy knoll or in a Secret Service-FBI cover-up, but it is a path to personal doubt and disaster. Only when you and I come to grips with the fact that this mammoth tragedy can, in fact, be blamed on one man, can the personal growth and the healing process begin." In other words, get a life. It's a powerful altar call (assuming he's got his facts straight). What we'd give to be able to run it by Rose Cheramie.

DAVID GATES with HOWARD MANLY in Atlanta, DONNA FOOTE in Los Angeles, FRANK WASHINGTON in Pittsburgh and bureau reports



ning a strip joint and beating up women is worried that she'll have to come back to Texas for a trial. I think he was just a gofer for the syndicate down there."

Why would conspirators order Holt so unnecessarily to the scene of the crime? "Dallas that day was flooded with all kinds of people who ended up there for some reason," says Holt. "It's always been my theory that whoever was the architect of this thing—and no one will ever know who was behind it, manipulating all these people—I believe that they flooded this area with so many characters with nefarious reputations because they thought, 'Well, if all these people get scooped up it'll muddy the waters so much