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CONTROVERSY

Director Oliver Stone's 'JFK' movie is causing quite a big stir

By Bernard Weinraub
The New York Times

Twenty-eight years after the killing of John F. Kennedy, a film by Oliver Stone about the assassination has touched off a wave of controversy and accusations involving both the movie's conclusions and the way the film was made.

Film executives say the three-hour "JFK" movie, which is scheduled to be released nationally on Dec. 20, will be the most widely discussed movie of the Christmas season. The movie stars Kevin Costner.

Hollywood is nervous about the season because an array of expensive films, like "JFK," are being released, while box-office receipts have plummeted over the last year. The film's producers are plainly uneasy about the audience reaction to "JFK."

At issue in the film, written by Stone and Zachary Sklar, is the contention that the assassination was the result of a conspiracy and that the Warren Commission was wrong in its conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.

The fact that the movie, budgeted at $35 million to $40 million, features Costner, one of the top stars in Hollywood, and is supported by one of the more prestigious studios, Warner Bros., adds considerable weight to the impact of the film's thesis, which presents the killing as a conspiracy but does not pinpoint the conspirators.

Costner plays Jim Garrison, the district attorney of New Orleans in the late 1960s, whose investigation and assertions about a conspiracy were, critics said, fraudulent and driven by a desire for publicity.

"We describe the forces at play at that time," Stone said in a telephone interview. "From those forces you can draw your own conclusion. We deal to a large degree with why Kennedy was killed and the policy splits then about Cuba, Vietnam and Laos."

Stone said the conspirators were left ambiguous.

"I hope people will respond," he said. "I think people smell a rat in the Warren Commission. My film certainly opens the floorboards and looks into the vipers' nest and raises serious questions about the Warren Commission. Whether you accept my conclusion is not the point. We want people to examine this."

Asked if he was nervous about the impact of the film on the country, Stone replied: "Am I scared? Yes, I'm scared."

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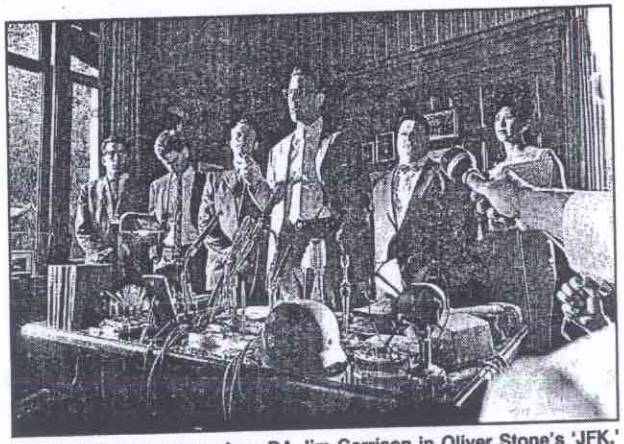
Beyond the questions about the film's assertions, which have been criticized for months in The Washington Post, Time magazine and other publications, are controversy about what Stone's critics call the use of muscle to thwart potentially competitive films about the assassination from appearing at the same time as his own movie.



Kevin Costner, center, plays DA Jim Garrison in Oliver Stone's 'JFK.'

For Stone, who relishes controversy but prides himself for his tolerance for freedom of expression, the accusations rankle.

The main allegation is that Stone and his agents, the Creative Artists Agency, tried to thwart production of "Libra," a film based on the Don DeLillo novel about Oswald. Stone and the agency strongly deny any such efforts were made.

"Oliver Stone wanted to make sure he had the only movie coming out on the assassination, and he did what he had to do to insure that," said Dale Pollock, president of A&M films, which owns the film rights to the critically acclaimed DeLillo book, which is a fictional exploration of Oswald.

After considerable turmoil over the production of "Libra," the film is expected to start production in April.

It is the contention of Pollock and several others at the independent company that the "Libra" film was virtually in place when it unraveled under pressure.

Pollock said that after the film's original director, Jonathan Demme, dropped out, a second director, Phil Joanou, a rising 29-year-old filmmaker, became involved in the project.

But after Stone had a conversation with Joanou — the two men are clients of the Creative Artists Agency — the young director dropped out.

At the same time, Home Box Office, which expressed interest in the project, also dropped out, largely because HBO is owned by Time Warner, HBO said. Warner Bros. is producing "JFK."

Stone and CAA deny that any pressure was put on Joanou. And Joanou said: "This whole thing has been blown way out of proportion. I was sent the script of 'Libra.' I found the subject matter interesting. I was toying with the idea."

But after reading a rewritten version of the screenplay, Joanou said, "I felt this wasn't the right film for me."

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